Tea Flavour Words and Family Profiles

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Short version:** Tea flavour vocabulary covers 12 core words (malty, floral, vegetal, umami, astringent, smoky, earthy, tannic); the foundation for cup character.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in March 2026.

The vocabulary tea people use sounds intimidating until you realise it's mostly borrowed from wine, with a few additions for things wine doesn't do. Once you know what "muscatel" or "brisk" or "vegetal" actually mean, blind tasting two teas side by side becomes the most useful skill you can have as a buyer. You stop guessing from the box description and start trusting your own cup. This is the working vocabulary, plus a tour of what each tea family typically tastes like and why.

This guide covers everything about tea flavour: the essential vocabulary, family by family flavour profiles, the variables that change flavour at source, common flavour confusions, and how to develop tasting skills that let you assess teas confidently rather than relying on marketing copy.

The 12 words that do most of the work

- **Brisk:** bright, lively, slightly astringent. A wake you up quality. Most Indian and Sri Lankan blacks have it
- **Body:** how heavy the cup feels in the mouth. A thin tea evaporates; a full bodied one coats the tongue. Assam has body; Darjeeling rarely does
- **Malt:** the dark, biscuit and bread note in heavy black teas, especially Assam. Pairs with milk by design
- **Muscatel:** wine like, grape skin, slightly aromatic. The signature note in second flush Darjeeling and the most prized character in Indian tea
- **Vegetal:** fresh green, like spinach or steamed leaves. The defining character of Japanese green tea, especially gyokuro and high grade sencha
- **Astringent:** drying, mouth puckering. Caused by tannins. Mild astringency is desirable in black tea; heavy astringency means over steeped or over bagged
- **Floral:** aroma of flowers (orchid, jasmine, gardenia). Common in oolongs, white teas, and any jasmine scented green
- **Honeyed:** sweet, slightly thick, golden. Honeybush, some white teas, certain oolongs

- **Smoky:** wood fire, almost campfire. Lapsang souchong is the textbook example; some Keemuns have a faint smoke too. Smoky doesn't mean bad; it's a deliberate processing choice
- **Earthy:** damp soil, leaf litter, mushroom. The signature of pu erh, especially shu (cooked) styles. Once associated with "off" tea; now appreciated for what it is
- **Tippy:** a quality marker, not a flavour. Means lots of golden leaf tip in the dry leaf. Tippy black teas tend to be smoother and sweeter
- **Liquor:** what tea people call the colour and clarity of the brewed cup. Bright copper, dull amber, pale gold, ruby; these are liquor descriptions

Additional vocabulary worth knowing

Beyond the core 12, several other terms come up regularly:

- **Umami:** the "fifth taste" (savoury); particularly pronounced in shade grown Japanese green teas (gyokuro, matcha)
- **Mineral:** the "wet stone" character of Wuyi rock teas like Da Hong Pao; reflects the local soil chemistry
- **Aromatic:** a tea that's strong in nose detected character; aroma compounds dominate
- **Mouthfeel:** the texture of the cup; smooth, silky, viscous, watery, harsh, etc.
- **Finish:** the lingering character after swallowing; long sweet finish vs short clean finish vs lingering bitter finish
- **Top notes:** the first impressions on the nose and palate; usually the volatile aromatic compounds
- **Heart notes:** the body and main character of the cup
- **Base notes:** the deeper character that comes through in the finish and second sip
- **Sweet:** naturally sweet without sugar; the natural sweetness of the leaf chemistry
- **Mellow:** smooth, rounded, no harsh edges; often used for aged teas
- **Robust:** full bodied, strong, substantial mouthfeel
- **Subtle:** gentle character that requires attention to appreciate; common in white tea
- **Complex:** multiple distinct flavour notes layered together; the hallmark of premium tea

What each family typically tastes like

Family	Dominant flavour profile
Black tea	Malty, brisk, full bodied. Assam = malt + body. Ceylon = brisk + bright. Kenyan = strong + dark. Darjeeling = floral + muscatel (the outlier; light, almost like a heavy white)
Green tea (Japanese)	Vegetal, marine, sometimes nutty. Sencha = grassy + clean. Matcha = umami + thick. Gyokuro = sweet + savoury, almost broth like
Green tea (Chinese)	Lighter, often nutty or chestnut. Longjing/dragonwell = chestnut + smooth. Gunpowder = bold + slightly smoky
White tea	Honeyed, floral, very subtle. The most delicate of all teas; easy to over brew into nothing

Family	Dominant flavour profile
Oolong	Wide range. Lighter oolongs (Tieguanyin) = floral, orchid, butter. Darker (Da Hong Pao) = roasted, mineral, stone fruit
Pu erh	Earthy, woody, sometimes barnyard. Shu (cooked) is mellow; sheng (raw) starts harsh and sweetens with age
Rooibos	Sweet, slightly woody, vanilla honey. Naturally caffeine free
Honeybush	Honeyed, citrus tinged, lighter than rooibos. Cousin to rooibos from the same Cederberg region
Chai (spiced)	Warming spices: cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, cloves. Black tea base provides body; spices provide character
Lapsang Souchong	Smoky pine fire character; long warming finish; underlying malty sweetness
Earl Grey	Bergamot citrus over black tea base; perfumed character
Fruit infusions	Whatever fruit dominates the blend. Hibiscus = tart, ruby. Berry blends = jammy. Peppermint = clean + cooling
Chamomile	Apple like sweetness, gentle floral character
Ginger	Warming spicy bite, slightly sweet, citrus undertones

For more on each family see the black tea overview, the green tea overview, the white tea overview, the oolong overview, the rooibos overview, the pu erh overview, the matcha overview, the chai overview, the herbal tea overview, and the Earl Grey overview.

What changes the flavour at source

1. **Oxidation level:** the single biggest factor. Green = unoxidised. White = barely oxidised. Oolong = partial. Black = fully. Pu erh = post fermented (different process)
2. **Terroir:** soil, altitude, rainfall, sun, wind. Darjeeling tastes the way it does because of the Himalayan altitude. Assam tastes the way it does because of the monsoon fed lowland soil. You can't move the plant and keep the cup
3. **Plucking time:** first flush vs second flush vs autumn. The same garden produces noticeably different teas across the year. First flush Darjeeling and second flush Darjeeling are essentially different products
4. **Processing:** orthodox (whole leaf, gentler) vs CTC (crush tear curl, used for teabags). CTC produces a stronger, harsher cup with less nuance
5. **Cultivar:** the specific tea plant variety. Var. *sinensis* (China type) produces refined cups; var. *assamica* (India type) produces robust cups; specific cultivars within each variety produce distinct character
6. **Aging:** certain teas (pu erh, white tea) develop different character with age; freshly produced and aged versions of the same tea taste dramatically different

The single origin vs blend distinction

One important flavour distinction:

Single origin teas: from one specific estate, region, or harvest. Show distinct terroir character; vary year to year and harvest to harvest. Examples: Castleton Darjeeling first flush, Halmari Assam, Uji area sencha. The character is the character; you taste the specific place and time.

Blends: combinations of multiple sources designed for consistent character. Yorkshire Tea, English Breakfast, most supermarket teas. The character is consistent year to year because the blend adjusts to compensate for harvest variation.

For drinkers wanting to develop tasting skills, single origin teas provide more distinct character to engage with; blends are more consistent for everyday drinking. Both have their place; serious tasting practice benefits from both. See the Darjeeling overview, the Assam overview, and the Ceylon overview.

Common confusions worth clearing up

Smoky doesn't mean ruined. Lapsang Souchong is meant to taste of woodsmoke; it's been deliberately dried over pinewood fires for centuries. The smoke is the entire point of the tea, not a defect. See the lapsang souchong overview.

Astringent isn't bitter. Astringency is the dry mouth feeling, the puckering sensation on the inside of your cheeks. Bitterness is a taste on the tongue. A good black tea can be astringent without being bitter. A green tea brewed with boiling water is both.

Bitter doesn't mean strong. Strong = lots of leaf, properly brewed. Bitter = leaf brewed wrong. Use more leaf and shorter time if you want strength without bitterness.

Vegetal isn't bad. Japanese green tea is meant to taste of fresh cut grass and seaweed; this is the family's character, not a defect.

Earthy isn't dirty. Pu erh's earthy character is what makes it pu erh; the damp soil and mushroom note is a feature of properly fermented tea, not contamination.

Floral isn't perfumed. Tea floral character (orchid, jasmine, lilac) comes from natural compounds in the leaf or scenting process; it's different from synthetic perfume character.

Developing tasting skills

To develop tea tasting skills:

1. **Brew at the same conditions:** taste teas brewed identically (same water, time, temperature, leaf amount); differences then come from the tea itself
2. **Side by side comparison:** taste two teas next to each other rather than separately; the contrast reveals character differences clearly
3. **Use white cups:** the cup colour is part of the assessment; white cups don't bias the visual
4. **Smell first, taste second:** the aroma provides crucial information; train yourself to detect specific notes
5. **Notice the finish:** what the cup leaves in your mouth after swallowing
6. **Take notes:** write what you taste; this builds vocabulary and memory

7. **Try teas you don't think you'll like:** exposure broadens your palate and develops appreciation for character types you initially resist
8. **Drink a wide variety** only by tasting many teas can you develop comparison vocabulary

The water and temperature effect on flavour

Even the same tea tastes different brewed differently:

- **Hot water vs cool water:** hot extracts more tannins and stronger character; cool brewing produces smoother, sweeter cups. See the cold brew tea guide
- **Hard water vs soft water:** hard water dulls flavour; soft water produces brighter cups. See the hard water guide
- **Brewing time:** shorter brewing emphasises top notes; longer brewing emphasises body and base notes
- **Multiple infusions:** the character evolves across infusions; first infusion is brightest, later infusions show deeper character

For optimal flavour development see the water temperatures guide, the steeping times guide, and the loose leaf brewing guide.

Take it further

To put the vocabulary to use, the tea tasting guide and how to judge tea quality go further. Source varied leaf for flavour exploration from the loose-leaf range, the brand directory, or the full tea shop.

Where this fits in the wider range: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. More in the tea shop; UK delivery is free on baskets over £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Per-cup price is the only price that matters. Loose leaf usually wins; supermarket bags sometimes do too.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
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