Comparing Teas Side by Side

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Bottom line:** Comparing teas side by side is the fastest way to get better at choosing them: control the variables, cup properly, taste blind, and the pitfalls to avoid.

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Comparing teas solidly is the fastest way to get better at choosing them. Brewing one cup at a time, days apart, comparing the second to a memory of the first, that's how everyone starts and how nobody learns much. Side by side is where the actual information is. The only catch is that you have to control the variables, or you're not really comparing the teas; you're comparing the brewing.

This is the method tea importers, blenders and sommelier grade tasters use, simplified for a kitchen. This guide covers the cupping methodology, the practical setup, the comparisons worth starting with, the pitfalls to avoid, and how to develop tasting skills that let you make informed buying decisions rather than relying on marketing copy.

The setup: control your variables

Two cups, identical. Same kettle of water (one boil, one pour into both). Same amount of leaf (use scales; eyeballing is the single biggest source of error). Same temperature, same steep time. The only thing that should differ is the tea itself.

- **Cups:** identical white china or porcelain, ideally. The white background lets you see the liquor colour properly. Two of the same mug works; two random different mugs introduces too much visual difference
- **Leaf weight** 3g per cup is a good standard. If you don't have scales, 1 level teaspoon is roughly 2g of broken leaf black tea, 2g of fluffy green, 4g of dense pu erh. Scales are clearly worth the £6
- **Water:** the same source for both, freshly boiled. If you have hard water, that's fine; just both cups get the same water
- **Time:** set a timer. Both cups go in at the same moment, both come out at the same moment
- **Temperature:** controlled to within 5°C; particularly matters for green tea where 70°C vs 80°C produces meaningfully different cups

The cupping method (tasters' standard)

Used by professional tea buyers worldwide. Strict, but produces the most reliable side by side data.

1. **Weigh 3g of leaf into each cup**
2. **Pour 150ml of freshly boiled water** (cooled to family appropriate temp) onto each
3. **Steep for 5 minutes** (yes, longer than you'd actually drink; cupping deliberately over extracts to amplify any flaws)
4. **Strain**. Or use a cupping cup with a built in strainer
5. **Sniff the wet leaf first**. The dry leaf told you one thing; the wet leaf reveals more, including any musty or stale notes
6. **Slurp from the cup**. Loud, deliberate, aerating the tea across the tongue. Looks ridiculous, works
7. **Compare the wet leaf colour**. A bright, even green brown for a black tea is a good sign; dull, mottled or greyish is not
8. **Note the cup colour**. Bright, clear liquor is generally better than dull, cloudy

The 5-minute steep is deliberately longer than typical brewing; the over extraction amplifies any character difference between the teas being compared. This makes flaws (staleness, low grade leaf, processing issues) more visible than a standard brewing time would.

The simplified everyday comparison

For drinkers who don't want full cupping protocol, a simplified everyday comparison still works:

1. Two identical mugs
2. One bag (or 1 teaspoon) of each tea
3. Same temperature water, same brewing time
4. Brew, taste both side by side, take notes
5. If you take milk, add the same amount to both, taste again

This works for the casual "Yorkshire vs PG Tips" question without requiring scales or scientific cupping. The differences will still be visible, just slightly less amplified than full cupping protocol reveals.

Note taking: keep it short

You'll forget within a week if you don't write things down. Three lines per tea is enough:

- **First impression:** one or two of the words from the flavour guide: brisk, malty, vegetal, smoky, etc.
- **Body:** thin, medium, full. How heavy in the mouth
- **What it'd suit:** black tea breakfast, milk, sugar, none, with biscuits, after a curry. Practical

Add a star rating or your own 1 to 10 score if it helps. Add the date you tasted, because the same tea ages and your second tasting in three months will be different.

For drinkers wanting more detailed notes, expand to:

- **Aroma (dry leaf)**

- **Aroma (wet leaf)**
- **Liquor colour**
- **Body and mouthfeel**
- **Flavour notes (front, mid, finish)**
- **Aftertaste duration**
- **Overall verdict and use cases**

Useful comparisons to start with

Here are five side by side tastings that teach you a lot in 20 minutes:

1. **Two breakfast blends**. Yorkshire Tea vs PG Tips, or Twinings English Breakfast vs Tetley British Blend. Same brief, different leaf sources. The differences are larger than you think
2. **Loose leaf vs the same brand's bag**. A 50g pouch of loose Assam vs a Yorkshire Tea bag. Same family of tea, very different cup
3. **First flush vs second flush Darjeeling**. Spring vs summer pick from the same garden. Tastes like two different teas. The only clear way to understand "flush"
4. **A cheap vs a premium green**. Standard supermarket green tea vs a £15 100g pouch of decent sencha. The cheap one will be flat, slightly bitter; the decent one will have a clean, sweet, vegetal finish
5. **Pyramid bag vs flat bag of the same brand**. Where brands offer both (Twinings, Teapigs), the pyramid will brew closer to loose leaf quality. Tells you whether the upgrade is worth it for your usage

Advanced comparisons worth doing

For drinkers wanting deeper learning, more advanced comparisons:

1. **Yorkshire Tea Original vs Yorkshire Tea Gold**. Same brand, different blend grades. Tells you what the price premium delivers
2. **Single origin Assam vs single origin Ceylon**. Two different black tea origins; the regional character differences are dramatic
3. **Earl Grey from three brands** Twinings, Teapigs, supermarket own label. The bergamot quality and base tea quality both vary significantly
4. **Hot brewed vs cold brewed:** the same tea brewed both ways; the chemistry differences become obvious
5. **Tieguanyin vs Da Hong Pao:** the two great Chinese oolongs; demonstrates the light vs dark oolong distinction
6. **Sencha vs dragonwell** Japanese steamed vs Chinese pan fired green; the processing difference produces dramatically different cups
7. **Matcha vs ceremonial grade gyokuro:** similar shade grown leaf, different processing
8. **Standard Darjeeling vs single estate first flush:** the ultra premium single estate experience vs everyday Darjeeling

For more side by side context across tea, see the Yorkshire vs PG Tips comparison, the Yorkshire vs Tetley comparison, the matcha vs green tea comparison, and the English Breakfast vs Irish Breakfast comparison.

Pitfalls to avoid

Palate fatigue. After 4 to 5 teas in a row your tongue stops registering subtleties. Stop, drink water, eat plain bread, come back in 10 minutes. Professional cuppers limit themselves to 8 to 10 teas in a session.

Comparing across families. Comparing a green tea to a black tea is a category error; they're meant to taste completely different. Stick to within family comparisons (two greens, two blacks) for useful learning.

Reading the brand description before you taste. The marketing copy primes you to find the notes the brand wants you to find. Cover the labels, taste blind, then read what the seller said. Disagreements are the most useful information of all.

Trusting one tasting. The same tea brewed on two different days with the same kit can taste subtly different; your palate, the kettle, even the air pressure affects extraction slightly. Important comparisons are worth doing twice.

Tasting after coffee or strong food. Coffee, particularly espresso, dominates the palate for 30 to 60 minutes; tasting tea immediately after produces unreliable results. Wait at least an hour after coffee or strong food before serious tasting.

Brewing too hot for greens. Boiling water on green tea masks differences between teas; both cups taste over extracted and bitter. Use solid temperature (70 to 80°C) for fair comparison.

Underleafing. Too little leaf produces thin cups where character differences are hard to detect; full leaf to water ratio (3g per 150ml) gives proper character development.

Comparing teas of dramatically different prices. A £4 supermarket bag against a £40 single estate premium tea isn't a fair comparison; both will show their character but one will obviously win. Compare within similar price tiers for the most useful information.

The blind tasting approach

For the most rigorous comparisons, blind tasting eliminates marketing driven bias:

1. Have someone else prepare the cups, hidden from you
2. Or prepare the cups yourself but cover the brand identification
3. Taste, take notes, score
4. Reveal the identification only after you've recorded your impressions

Blind tasting often produces surprising results: drinkers regularly prefer cheaper teas to expensive ones when blind, or pick non favourite brands as their actual preference. The marketing and packaging influence on perception is real and significant; blind tasting bypasses it.

Building a tasting practice

For drinkers wanting to develop tasting skills systematically:

1. **Start with easy comparisons:** two breakfast teas; build from there
2. **Compare regularly:** weekly tastings build cumulative knowledge faster than occasional sessions
3. **Keep notes consistently:** the cumulative record reveals patterns over time
4. **Try teas you don't think you'll like:** broadens palate
5. **Re taste teas you've previously assessed:** your palate evolves; the same tea may impress you differently after months of practice
6. **Find a tasting partner:** comparing notes with another drinker reveals what you're missing
7. **Visit specialty tea shops:** the staff can guide tastings beyond what you'd attempt at home
8. **Read tasting notes from multiple sources:** develops descriptive vocabulary

Equipment for serious comparison

Practical equipment for tasting:

- **Kitchen scale** £5 to £15; essential for consistent leaf measurement
- **Two identical white cups** £5 to £20 for a pair
- **Kitchen timer:** free on phone; essential for consistent timing
- **Temperature control kettle** £40 to £100; useful for green tea comparisons specifically
- **Notebook and pen:** for recording results
- **Plain water and crackers/bread:** to reset the palate between teas

For more advanced setups: cupping cups with internal strainers (the professional standard), specific tasting glasses, and similar equipment exists but isn't necessary for everyday comparison practice. See the teapots and infusers guide.

What we stock for comparison drinking

Browse the full black tea range, green tea range, and broader catalogue. Useful comparison teas on teas.co.uk:

- Yorkshire Tea Original, the British black tea benchmark
- PG Tips Original Pyramid, for the classic comparison
- Yorkshire Tea Gold, for the Original vs Gold comparison
- Teapigs Everyday Brew, for the bag vs pyramid comparison
- Twinings English Breakfast, for the English Breakfast style comparison
- Twinings Irish Breakfast, for the English vs Irish comparison
- Twinings Pure Green Tea, for the everyday green comparison
- Teapigs Mao Feng Green Tea, for the cheap vs premium green comparison

For comparisons across the larger tea landscape, see also: Yorkshire Tea, PG Tips, Tetley, Twinings, Teapigs, Pukka.

The straight verdict

Side by side tea comparison is one of the more rewarding small disciplines available to British tea drinkers. The time (20 minutes per session) and kit (scales, identical cups, timer) cost little, and the tasting skill you build really does improve everyday drinking and buying.

For drinkers who currently buy tea by brand habit or price point, doing a few side by side tastings can transform purchasing approach. You may discover you actually prefer the cheaper brand to the premium one (saving money), or that the premium upgrade you've been paying for certainly is worth it (validating spend), or that you've been buying the wrong style entirely for your taste preferences.

Side by side tasting needn't feel daunting; the method is simple. Two cups, same brewing, taste together, take notes. From this basic habit, finer tasting skills grow naturally over months of steady attention.

Browse the black tea range and pick two side by side candidates to start. The ten minute comparison is more useful than ten months of one off cups. For the wider context see also the flavour guide, the brewing guide, the temperatures guide, the black tea overview, the green tea overview, the inside Yorkshire Tea, the Twinings brand profile, the Teapigs deep dive, and the tea bags vs loose leaf comparison.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Pick the simplest comparison here that fits your routine. Wider comparisons and kit can wait for week two.

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