Keemun (Qimen): Anhui's Classic Black Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Short version:** Keemun is China's most prestigious classical black tea, refined and complex with sweetness, cocoa and mild smoke, the historic backbone of English.

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

Keemun (Qimen) is China's most prestigious classical black tea and one of the foundational components of British afternoon tea blends. Made from *Camellia sinensis* grown in Qimen County of Anhui Province, China, Keemun produces a distinctively sweet, slightly smoky, complex cup with notes of cocoa, ripe fruit, and warm wood. Often called "the burgundy of teas" by Western tea writers, Keemun has been one of the most respected Chinese black teas since its development in the 19th century and continues to be highly prized internationally. The tea is the principal Chinese component of many traditional English Breakfast blends.

This guide covers everything about Keemun: the Anhui heritage, the production process, the comparison with other Chinese black teas, the proper brewing approach, and how Keemun fits into both Chinese tea culture and British afternoon tea traditions.

The Keemun heritage

Keemun (sometimes spelled Qimen, the modern Pinyin transliteration) was developed in 1875 by Yu Ganchen, a Chinese government official who studied black tea production in Fujian and applied the techniques to the local Qimen tea cultivar in Anhui Province. The resulting tea quickly gained international recognition; Keemun was awarded multiple gold medals at international expositions through the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The tea became one of China's most significant export products through the early 20th century, particularly to Britain and continental Europe. Keemun was a major component of premium English Breakfast blends and dedicated single origin Chinese black tea offerings; it remains one of the most respected Chinese black teas internationally.

Keemun is one of China's "Famous Teas" (a formal designation for the most prestigious national products) and continues to be produced primarily in the Qimen County region of Anhui Province. Production has expanded modestly to nearby regions but the most prestigious Keemun remains specifically from Qimen.

For the wider black tea context see the black tea overview.

The Keemun flavour profile

Quality Keemun has a distinctive flavour profile:

- **Natural sweetness:** the dominant note; described as "honeyed" or "sugary"
- **Cocoa and chocolate notes** particularly in premium grades
- **Slight smokiness:** very mild compared to lapsang; sometimes called "subtly smoky"
- **Ripe fruit character:** plum, apricot, sometimes raisin notes
- **Warm wood notes:** complex aromatic dimension
- **Smooth refined mouthfeel**
- **Deep amber to copper cup colour**
- **Long warming finish**

The complexity is what distinguishes Keemun from mass market black tea. Where typical Indian or Sri Lankan black tea provides solid, sturdy character, Keemun layers multiple distinct flavour dimensions. The "burgundy of teas" description reflects the wine like complexity that quality Keemun can deliver.

Keemun grades

Keemun is sold in multiple grades:

- **Keemun Mao Feng:** premium grade with tightly twisted leaves and significant gold tips; the most refined version
- **Keemun Hao Ya A and B:** super premium grades with extensive gold tips; the most expensive Keemun
- **Keemun Gongfu:** traditional standard grade with longer twisted leaves
- **Keemun Xin Ya:** grade focused on tippy character
- **Keemun standard:** the broader commercial grade often used in blends

For drinkers exploring Keemun, Mao Feng grade provides excellent quality at accessible prices; Hao Ya is for special occasion premium drinking. Standard Keemun appears in many quality British blends as part of the Chinese black tea component.

Keemun in British blends

Keemun has historically been a major component of premium British black tea blends:

- **English Breakfast blends:** traditional formulations often included significant Keemun for the sweet, complex character
- **Afternoon tea blends** Keemun's refinement made it suitable for formal afternoon tea
- **Russian Caravan blends:** often combined Keemun with lapsang souchong for the historical "smoky tea" character
- **Premium single origin offerings:** brands like Twinings and Fortnum & Mason offered (and continue to offer) single origin Keemun

Modern English Breakfast blends often use less Keemun than historical formulations due to cost pressures; cheaper African and Indian leaf has replaced some of the Chinese component. For drinkers wanting traditional English Breakfast character, premium brands and single origin Keemun provide the historical experience.

Keemun vs other Chinese black teas

The Chinese black tea family, side by side:

Tea	Region	Character
Keemun	Anhui Province	Sweet, complex, cocoa ripe fruit, slightly smoky
Lapsang Souchong	Wuyi Mountains, Fujian	Heavily smoky, malty base
Jin Jun Mei	Wuyi Mountains, Fujian	Premium unsmoked, sweet, fruity, refined
Yunnan (Dianhong)	Yunnan Province	Malty, honeyed, peppery, sometimes spicy

For drinkers exploring Chinese black tea, working through one of each provides real variety. Keemun's classical refined character contrasts dramatically with lapsang's smokiness and provides a more accessible entry to Chinese black tea than either lapsang or Yunnan.

For more on related teas see the lapsang souchong overview, the Jin Jun Mei overview, and the Yunnan black overview.

How to brew Keemun solidly

Keemun takes standard black tea brewing with attention to a few specifics:

1. **Use freshly drawn cold water** brought to a rolling boil. Keemun handles boiling water
2. **Use 1 to 2 teaspoons of leaves** per 200ml cup
3. **Brew for 3 to 4 minutes:** slightly shorter than for stronger Indian black teas; the refined character benefits from controlled extraction
4. **Strain or remove leaves**
5. **Drink neat or with a splash of milk:** traditional British practice; many drinkers prefer Keemun neat to appreciate the complex character
6. **Sugar optional:** the natural sweetness often makes additional sweetener unnecessary

Keemun's exact temperature, like every family's, is in the water temperatures guide.

What we stock

Browse the black tea range. Keemun appears in many quality British blends; specialty Chinese tea importers provide single origin Keemun options.

For comparisons across the broader black tea landscape, see also: Twinings brand profile, Teapigs, Yorkshire Tea, Hyson.

The verdict

Keemun is one of the great classical Chinese black teas and deserves more attention from British drinkers than it typically receives. The combination of natural sweetness, complex flavour profile, refined production, and historical role in British afternoon tea blends makes it one of the more rewarding premium tea exploration territories.

For drinkers exploring Chinese black tea beyond lapsang souchong, Keemun is the natural next step. The refined sweet cocoa character is more universally accessible than lapsang's smokiness while providing a really distinctive Chinese black tea experience.

For drinkers wanting to understand British afternoon tea blends fully, sourcing single origin Keemun shows what the Chinese component contributes; many premium English Breakfast blends derive much of their character from Keemun.

For the wider context see the black tea overview, the lapsang souchong overview, the Jin Jun Mei overview, the Darjeeling overview, the Assam overview, the English Breakfast vs Irish Breakfast comparison, and the afternoon tea tradition.

Buying Keemun

"Keemun" covers a wide quality range, from everyday blend grade to refined Hao Ya, so treat the name as a hint and judge the cup; Mao Feng is the usual value sweet spot. Tasting a single-origin Keemun next to your usual breakfast blend is the quickest way to hear what the Chinese component contributes. Explore it across the black tea range, the breakfast blends, or the full tea shop.

Related on the wiki: Keemun Tea: The Gauged Named-Tea Verdict.

Day-to-day teas that sit alongside this one: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Have a wander through the tea range; shipping to UK addresses costs nothing above £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · For Keemun, the cost of a cup is the price to compare. Loose Keemun usually wins, and the occasional supermarket bag can run it close.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.

