Yunnan Black Tea (Dianhong)

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **In short:** Yunnan Dianhong is China's malty, chocolatey black tea from the same large-leaf cultivar as Assam. How it tastes, brews and compares to Indian black tea.

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

Yunnan black tea (Dianhong, "Yunnan red tea" in Chinese) is the bold, malty, peppery black tea produced from the same Yunnan large leaf tea trees that produce pu erh. Made primarily from the var. *assamica* tea cultivar grown in Yunnan Province, China (the historical birthplace of all tea cultivation), Dianhong produces a distinctively robust cup with malt, honey, and characteristic peppery spicy notes that distinguish it from other Chinese black teas. Premium Dianhong has significant golden tip ratio similar to Jin Jun Mei but with much fuller body and more pronounced character.

This guide covers everything about Yunnan black tea: the Yunnan heritage, the var. assamica connection, the production grades, the proper brewing approach, and how Dianhong fits into the wider Chinese black tea family.

The Yunnan tea heritage

Yunnan Province is widely considered the birthplace of all tea cultivation; ancient wild tea trees still grow in the Yunnan mountains, some over 2,000 years old. The region has produced tea for over 1,700 years, primarily as pu erh (which dominated Yunnan tea production for most of that history) and as black tea (Dianhong, a relatively recent development).

Dianhong was developed in 1939 as a deliberate effort to produce export quality Chinese black tea using the Yunnan large leaf tea cultivar. The name "Dianhong" combines "Dian" (an old name for Yunnan Province) and "Hong" (red, the Chinese term for what Westerners call black tea). The tea was developed specifically to compete with Indian and Sri Lankan black tea in international markets; Dianhong became one of China's major export black teas through the mid-20th century.

The var. *assamica* connection is significant. Most Chinese tea uses var. *sinensis* (China type tea plant); Yunnan tea uses var. *assamica* (the same plant variety used in Indian Assam tea). The var. *assamica* produces larger leaves with stronger, more robust character than var. *sinensis*; Dianhong's distinctive boldness reflects this plant variety connection. For more on var. *assamica* see the Assam overview.

The Dianhong flavour profile

Quality Dianhong has a distinctive flavour profile:

- **Malty character:** similar to Indian Assam in the basic flavour profile
- **Honey notes:** sweetness layered over the malt
- **Peppery spice:** the most distinctive Dianhong note; sometimes described as "black pepper" or "warm spice"
- **Slight cocoa hints:** particularly in premium grades
- **Full body:** the var. *assamica* heritage produces substantial mouthfeel
- **Deep amber to red brown cup colour**
- **Long warming finish:** particularly the peppery note that lingers

The peppery note is what most distinguishes Dianhong from Indian Assam despite the shared plant variety. Where Assam emphasises malt and biscuit notes, Dianhong adds the distinctive spicy character that makes it instantly recognisable. The combination of malty body and peppery character produces a cup that's particularly suited to morning drinking, food pairing with hearty meals, and milk tea preparation.

Dianhong grades

Dianhong is sold in multiple grades:

- **Yunnan Gold (Dianhong Jinya)** premium grade with significant golden tip content; refined sweet character
- **Yunnan Gold Tip (Dianhong Jin Hao)** super premium grade with mostly golden tips; the most expensive Dianhong
- **Standard Dianhong:** broader commercial grade with twisted dark leaf character
- **Yunnan broken:** lower grade often used for blending or tea bags

For drinkers exploring Dianhong, Yunnan Gold provides excellent quality at accessible prices. The premium tippy versions are for special occasion drinking; the standard grade is the practical everyday option.

Dianhong vs other black teas

Comparing Dianhong with related black teas:

Tea	Region	Plant	Character
Dianhong (Yunnan)	Yunnan, China	var. assamica	Malty, peppery, honeyed
Assam	Assam, India	var. assamica	Malty, biscuity, robust
Keemun	Anhui, China	var. sinensis	Sweet, complex, refined
Jin Jun Mei	Wuyi, Fujian	var. sinensis	Premium unsmoked, sweet, fruity

The Dianhong vs Assam comparison is particularly interesting because both use var. *assamica*; the geographical and processing differences produce distinct character despite the shared plant. Dianhong's peppery note is the clearest distinguishing feature.

For more on related teas see the Assam overview, the Keemun overview, and the Jin Jun Mei overview.

The pu erh connection

One specific Yunnan tea consideration: Dianhong and pu erh are produced from the same source plant (var. *assamica* Yunnan trees) but through completely different processing. Where pu erh is fermented and often aged for decades, Dianhong is processed as standard black tea (full oxidation, no fermentation) and consumed when fresh.

For drinkers exploring Yunnan tea, having both Dianhong and pu erh provides representation of the two main Yunnan tea families. Dianhong shows what the Yunnan plants produce when processed for fresh consumption; pu erh shows what they produce when fermented and aged. See the pu erh overview.

How to brew Dianhong

Dianhong takes the standard British black tea approach:

1. **Use freshly drawn cold water** brought to a rolling boil. Dianhong handles boiling water without issue
2. **Use 1 to 2 teaspoons of leaves** per 200ml cup
3. **Brew for 3 to 4 minutes:** longer brewing produces more pronounced peppery character
4. **Strain or remove leaves**
5. **Drink neat or with milk** Dianhong holds up well to milk in British tradition; also excellent neat
6. **Multiple infusions:** premium Dianhong gives 2 to 3 reasonable re brews

For the family by family detail see the water temperatures guide.

What we stock

Browse the black tea range. Yunnan black tea availability in mainstream British retail is limited; specialty Chinese tea importers provide the most comprehensive options.

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

The takeaway

Yunnan black tea (Dianhong) is one of the more distinctive Chinese black teas and a genuinely different experience from typical British black tea. The combination of malty body, peppery spice character, golden tip visual appeal, and Yunnan's deep tea cultivation heritage makes it one of the more rewarding Chinese black tea exploration territories.

For drinkers used to Indian Assam, Dianhong provides interesting comparison; both use var. *assamica* but produce noticeably different cups due to terroir and processing differences. The peppery character is genuinely distinctive and rewards drinkers willing to engage with the family.

For drinkers building a serious black tea collection, including Yunnan Dianhong alongside Indian Assam, Darjeeling, Sri Lankan Ceylon, and various Chinese black teas (Keemun, lapsang, Jin Jun Mei) provides comprehensive representation of the world's black tea regions. Each origin produces distinctly different cups; the comparative tasting is one of the more educational experiences in tea exploration.

For the wider context see the black tea overview, the Assam overview, the Keemun overview, the lapsang souchong overview, the Jin Jun Mei overview, the pu erh overview, the Darjeeling overview, and the loose leaf brewing guide.

A comparison worth doing

To taste classic Yunnan Dianhong, look for a leaf labelled Dianhong or Yunnan black tea from an independent specialist. The golden-tip premium grades (sometimes called Golden Monkey or Yunnan Gold) carry a chocolatey, malty sweetness that is the most reliable introduction to Chinese black tea. For comparison, brew Dianhong alongside a quality Assam single origin, both at 90 to 95C for 3 minutes, both without milk. The Yunnan is softer, sweeter and lower in tannin, its malty notes leaning cocoa where the Assam leans grain. That side by side teaches the Yunnan cultivar story faster than any tasting note.

Where this fits in the fuller range: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Have a wander through the tea range; UK delivery is on the house above £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

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

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