# Afternoon Tea, Start to Finish

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The tradition in brief:** A complete afternoon tea guide: the Victorian origin, the three tier spread, which tea to serve, the Cornwall versus Devon scone debate, and how to host it at home.

*Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in January 2026.*

**Afternoon tea is a Victorian invention with a very specific origin: Anna, the seventh Duchess of Bedford, in the 1840s.** Dinner at the time was served at 8 or 9 in the evening, leaving an aristocrat's afternoon hungry. The Duchess took to having a pot of tea and a small meal sent to her room around 4pm. Friends were invited. The habit moved from her room to the drawing room. By the 1880s, "afternoon tea" was a fashionable society event. By the early 1900s it was an institution.

What it isn't, and what it has never been, is the working class evening meal that some Americans call "high tea". That's a different thing entirely, covered in the builders' vs high tea guide. This guide covers everything about afternoon tea: the history, the formal structure, the tea selection, the etiquette, the regional variations, and how to host or enjoy afternoon tea at home or at a hotel.

## The historical origin

Afternoon tea was popularised by Anna, Duchess of Bedford in the 1840s. Anna found the traditional aristocratic schedule (early breakfast, light lunch around midday, dinner not served until 8 or 9pm) produced uncomfortable hunger in the afternoon hours; she began having tea and a small snack brought to her room around 4pm to bridge the gap. The practice quickly spread among aristocratic women, becoming a social occasion involving guests; through the late Victorian era, afternoon tea evolved into the formal multi course tradition that's still recognisable today.

By the early 20th century, afternoon tea had become a defining element of British social life across multiple classes. Hotels began offering formal afternoon tea services (Claridge's, the Ritz, the Savoy in London, plus prestigious hotels across the country); tea rooms emerged as social spaces particularly important for women's public socialising. The tradition declined somewhat in the post WWII period as social life accelerated and structured afternoon meals became less common, but afternoon tea has experienced significant revival through the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

For the wider tea history context see the tea history overview and the British tea culture overview.

## The traditional spread

A formal afternoon tea is built in three tiers, served bottom to top:

1. **Savoury sandwiches:** finger sized, crusts off. The classic five are cucumber, egg and cress, smoked salmon, ham and mustard, and coronation chicken. Always served first; you eat them before you move up the tiers
2. **Scones with clotted cream and jam:** the cream tea component. Plain or sultana scones, served warm. Whether jam goes on first (Cornwall) or cream goes on first (Devon) is the only legitimate religious dispute England has left
3. **Sweet pastries and small cakes** Battenberg, Victoria sponge, lemon tarts, fondant fancies, fruit cake. Tier three is the show off layer

The drink is loose leaf tea, served from a proper teapot, with a milk jug and sugar bowl on the table. The tea matters as much as the food.

## The Cornwall vs Devon scone debate

One specific cultural element worth covering: the Cornwall vs Devon scone debate. Both Cornish and Devon traditions have strongly held positions on the order of jam and cream on a scone:

- **The Cornish way:** jam first, then cream on top. The jam fills the scone and the cream provides the topping
- **The Devon way:** cream first, then jam on top. The cream is treated like butter and the jam is the topping

Both regions hold their position with significant cultural pride; the debate periodically becomes news when prominent figures or institutions are seen breaking tradition. There's no definitive correct answer; the distinction is part of the regional cultural identity rather than any objective superiority.

For drinkers visiting either region, following the local convention shows cultural awareness; for everyday home afternoon tea, choose whichever method you prefer. The clotted cream itself (the rich Cornish or Devon cream that's distinctive from regular dairy cream) is the more important element than the order of application.

## Which tea to serve

Afternoon tea blends are deliberately lighter and more aromatic than breakfast blends, built to drink without milk (though milk is fine), and to complement rather than overpower the food.

| Tea | Why it works |
|---|---|
| Darjeeling (second flush) | Light, muscatel, aromatic. The classic afternoon tea; pairs with sandwiches and cakes equally well, drunk without milk |
| Earl Grey | Bergamot lifts the cup; works alongside lemon flavoured cakes especially well. Often served black with lemon |

| Tea | Why it works |
|---|---|
| Lady Grey | Lighter version of Earl Grey with citrus peels added; particularly suited to delicate afternoon tea |
| Ceylon (single estate) | Bright, brisk, citrussy. A reliable middle option that suits everything on the table |
| Lapsang Souchong | Smoky. Polarising. Pairs surprisingly well with smoked salmon sandwiches |
| Assam (lighter grade) | If you take milk and want body. Avoid the strongest Assam; it's a breakfast tea, not an afternoon one |
| Keemun | Sweet, complex Chinese black tea; the classical refined afternoon tea option |
| Jasmine green | Less traditional but increasingly popular. Floral and refreshing on the palate, it suits Asian inspired afternoon teas |
| Russian Caravan | Lightly smoky blend; historical association with afternoon tea |
| Prince of Wales | Delicate Chinese tea blend; particularly elegant afternoon option |

For brand selections see the Twinings 1706 to today (the heritage brand most associated with classic afternoon tea), the Teapigs deep dive (premium whole leaf option), and the Yorkshire Tea curator review (everyday strong British option). For wider tea context see the Earl Grey overview, the Darjeeling overview, and the Earl Grey vs Lady Grey comparison.

## Cream tea vs afternoon tea: they're not the same

A **cream tea** is just scones with clotted cream and jam, plus a pot of tea. No sandwiches, no pastries. Cheaper, simpler, served in cafés across the West Country and on every National Trust property in the country.

An **afternoon tea** is the full three tier version with savoury sandwiches as the opening act. The price difference reflects the work involved; a proper afternoon tea takes a kitchen brigade an hour to prep per cover.

Calling a cream tea "afternoon tea" on a menu is a small fib that's now too widespread to die out. The historically correct distinction matters mostly to people who care about it.

## Modern variations

Modern afternoon tea has developed several variations beyond the classic format:

- **Cream tea:** simpler version with just scones, jam, cream, and tea (no sandwiches or cakes); particularly common in Cornwall and Devon
- **High tea:** often confused with afternoon tea; high tea is actually a traditional working class evening meal involving heartier hot food. The "high" refers to the height of the dining table, not the prestige of the meal
- **Champagne afternoon tea** includes champagne or sparkling wine; popular for special occasions
- **Themed afternoon tea:** hotels often offer themed services (Christmas afternoon tea, summer berry afternoon tea, chocolate afternoon tea, etc.)

- **Vegetarian and vegan afternoon tea:** increasingly available; modern hotels typically offer plant based versions
- **International variations:** hotel groups have exported afternoon tea globally; the format adapts to local tastes while preserving the essential structure

### Doing afternoon tea at home

You don't need a Claridge's grade kit. You need:

- A proper teapot (4-cup or 6-cup)
- Cups and saucers, not mugs (the saucer collects the spoon and is doing real work)
- A milk jug and sugar bowl
- A tiered cake stand if you've got one; if not, three plates stacked sensibly
- Loose leaf tea, brewed properly per the temperatures guide

The food is whatever you can manage. A box of decent shop scones, clotted cream, strawberry jam, and three or four cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off is an entirely respectable home version. Don't get intimidated by the Ritz menu.

### How to host afternoon tea at home: step by step

For drinkers wanting to host afternoon tea, a simplified approach works well:

1. **Choose your tea** 1 to 2 black tea options (English Breakfast and Earl Grey is a classic combination)
2. **Prepare sandwiches** 3 to 4 finger sandwich varieties; cut crusts off and cut into small triangles or fingers
3. **Buy or bake scones** plus clotted cream (essential, not regular cream) and good quality strawberry jam
4. **Provide cakes and pastries** 3 to 4 small cake options; can be home baked or bought from a good bakery
5. **Set the table:** even simple white plates and cloth napkins lift the experience
6. **Allow proper time:** plan 1.5 to 2 hours for the meal
7. **Brew tea fresh** in a teapot, and serve with milk and sugar separately

Home afternoon tea doesn't need to be elaborate; the structure and time commitment are the defining elements rather than expense or perfection. A casual afternoon tea with friends brings real company and pleasant food, which counts for more in a fast paced modern life.

### The pour out etiquette

One person at the table pours for everyone (the host, traditionally the woman of the house). Milk goes in *after* the tea is poured, so the colour can be judged. Sugar last. The teapot is refilled as needed; the cups are refilled as long as anyone wants more, which is usually for at least an hour.

Traditional afternoon tea has specific etiquette:

- **Eating order:** traditionally bottom to top: sandwiches first, then scones, then cakes
- **Tea pouring:** the host pours; if at a hotel, the staff pour
- **Milk in tea:** traditionally added to the cup after the tea is poured
- **Stirring:** gentle back and forth motion rather than circular; avoid clinking the cup with the spoon
- **Spoon placement** when not in use, rest on the saucer rather than leaving in the cup
- **Pinky finger:** traditional etiquette is pinky finger down (not extended); the extended pinky is a misconception
- **Sandwich eating** with fingers (not knife and fork)
- **Scones:** broken with hands rather than cut with a knife; jam and cream applied to each piece individually
- **Conversation:** leisurely and unhurried; afternoon tea is meant to be a relaxed social occasion

For modern hotel afternoon tea, staff will typically guide guests through any unfamiliar elements; the etiquette is helpful to know but not essential for enjoying the experience. See the milk first vs tea first debate.

## Famous London afternoon tea venues

For drinkers wanting to experience formal afternoon tea, London has several iconic venues:

- **The Ritz London:** perhaps the most prestigious afternoon tea in the world; requires reservations weeks or months in advance and has formal dress code
- **Claridge's:** considered by many to serve the finest afternoon tea in London, in its famous Foyer
- **The Savoy:** classic London afternoon tea in the Thames Foyer
- **Fortnum & Mason:** the famous Piccadilly tea merchant's own afternoon tea service
- **Brown's Hotel:** traditional service in one of London's oldest hotels
- **The Goring:** royal connections (where the Queen Mother often took afternoon tea)
- **Sketch:** modern artistic alternative to traditional afternoon tea

Beyond London, prestigious afternoon tea venues exist across the UK including the Bath spa hotels, Edinburgh's Balmoral Hotel, the Ashdown Park Hotel in Sussex, and many other historic country house hotels and town hotels. For visitors to the UK looking for something classically British, hotel afternoon tea is one of the easiest cultural outings to book.

## The history of afternoon tea

Notable historical milestones:

- **1840s** Anna, Duchess of Bedford popularises afternoon tea among aristocratic women
- **1860s onwards:** the practice spreads through middle class society
- **1880s:** hotel afternoon tea services begin appearing in London
- **1907:** the Ritz London opens; afternoon tea becomes formal hotel institution
- **Inter war period:** afternoon tea reaches peak popularity as cultural practice

- **Post WWII:** decline as social life accelerates and structured meals become less common
- **1990s onwards:** revival as luxury experience; hotel afternoon teas multiply
- **2010s and 2020s:** afternoon tea becomes popular Instagram friendly cultural experience for international visitors and young Britons

### What we stock

Browse the full black tea range. The most bought afternoon tea suitable products on teas.co.uk:

- True English Tea (T.E.T) Everyday English No 1, 20 Tea Bags 40g
- Yorkshire Tea Original Loose Leaf Tea, 250g
- Tetley Seriously Refreshing, 75 Tea Bags 250g
- Yorkshire Tea Caramelised Biscuit Brew, 40 Tea Bags 112g
- Yorkshire Tea Cherry Bakewell Brew, 40 Tea Bags 112g
- Yorkshire Tea Bedtime Brew, 40 Tea Bags 100g

For comparisons across the wider tea landscape, see also: Twinings, Teapigs, Yorkshire Tea, Clipper.

### Worth doing

Afternoon tea is one of the great British traditions and one of the most pleasant social customs left in modern life. The combination of structured food courses, careful tea selection, formal serving etiquette, and the leisurely time commitment produces an experience that's really different from typical modern eating.

For drinkers wanting to experience formal afternoon tea, hotel services across the UK provide excellent introduction; London hotels offer some of the finest afternoon tea experiences in the world. For drinkers wanting the experience at home, simplified afternoon tea with friends or family provides similar pleasure at much lower cost.

The tradition has lasted 180+ years of social change because it offers something of real value: structured social time, pleasant food, considered drink and an unhurried pace unlike modern fast paced life. For special occasions, romantic dates, family gatherings, or simply pleasant Saturday afternoons, afternoon tea provides meaningful experience that's worth preserving and practicing.

*Browse the afternoon tea range, single estate Darjeeling, Earl Grey blends, and Twinings classics all stocked. For the wider context see the British tea culture overview, the tea history overview, the black tea overview, the Earl Grey overview, the English Breakfast vs Irish Breakfast comparison, the Earl Grey vs Lady Grey comparison, the Darjeeling overview, the builders' vs high tea guide, the builders' brew tradition, the Twinings deep dive, and the Teapigs deep dive.*

### Buy a good afternoon tea

The tea matters as much as the food: a light, aromatic loose leaf rather than a strong builder’s blend is what an afternoon tea wants. Browse afternoon tea blends, a classic Darjeeling or Earl Grey at teas.co.uk, or the full tea shop. Pick afternoon teas by the cup and their descriptions, compare the per cup price, and enjoy free UK delivery over £35.

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