Henrietta Lovell, the Rare Tea Lady

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **In capsule:** Founder of Rare Tea Company and author of Infused, Henrietta Lovell is the leading UK voice for single-farm, named-source tea.

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

Henrietta Lovell is "The Rare Tea Lady", the founder of the Rare Tea Company, the British tea importer who quietly supplies most of the best restaurants in the UK and a lot of the best ones globally. She's the closest thing British tea has to a celebrity buyer. If you've had a memorable cup of tea at a Michelin starred restaurant in London in the last 15 years, there's a strong chance Henrietta sourced it. She is to British speciality tea what Hugh Johnson is to wine, except louder and with better hats.

This entry covers who Henrietta is, what the Rare Tea Company actually does, why most British drinkers haven't heard of her despite drinking her tea, and what to read or watch to understand what she's about.

Who Henrietta Lovell is

Henrietta Lovell is a British tea importer who founded the Rare Tea Company in 2004 with the radical idea that British restaurants deserved as much consideration on the tea list as on the wine list. Before her, restaurant tea was an afterthought, a Twinings Earl Grey teabag dropped into a chipped pot, no thought given. After her, top restaurants now have tea pairings, named grower single origin teas at £8 a pot, and tea sommeliers asking you what mood you're in.

She personally travels, Malawi, Sri Lanka, Japan, Taiwan, China, meeting tea growers and buying small lots that no big retailer would bother with. Her business model is wholesale to top restaurants, plus a retail arm. The Rare Tea Company has done more to elevate the cultural status of tea in British dining than arguably any other single force in this century.

Why most British drinkers haven't heard of her

Henrietta has spent her career deliberately working at the high restaurant and Michelin star end. Her teas turn up in places like The Fat Duck, Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, Claridge's, and at events like the BAFTAs. She's not on supermarket shelves and never will be. The audience that drinks her tea regularly is small but influential.

That said, the Rare Tea Company does have an online retail shop and a small but loyal direct to consumer audience. If you've ever wondered "what tea do they serve at Michelin starred restaurants?" the answer is often "Rare Tea Co."

Why she matters for the UK tea industry

- **She raised the floor on what restaurant tea has to be.** Before Henrietta, restaurant tea was a joke. Now any half decent restaurant takes tea seriously, partly because she made the case so well.
- **She buys direct from named growers.** Same approach as Mei Leaf or Wu Mountain Tea but for restaurants rather than enthusiasts. She has the buyer's eye.
- **She wrote the book.** "Infused: Adventures in Tea" (2019) is her memoir meets tea education and is actually fun reading. Less technical than Mei Leaf's content; more storytelling.
- **She's funny in interviews.** Tea writing is full of self serious experts; Henrietta has stories about getting stuck on a Malawian tea estate during a power cut and is happy to tell them. Read or listen to her on a podcast.

The Malawi connection

One thing the Rare Tea Company is particularly known for: their Malawi black tea. Henrietta worked with the Satemwa Estate in Malawi to develop teas that British and global restaurants started buying as a serious alternative to Indian or Sri Lankan single origin black tea. She's been one of the most consistent advocates for African tea on the global speciality stage. Anyone buying Malawi black tea at a London restaurant in 2024 is probably drinking her supply chain.

For British retail equivalents that highlight African tea, see our Williamson brand page, they're a different model (single estate Kenyan tea direct to UK retail) but the same general principle of African tea taken seriously.

What to read or watch

- **"Infused: Adventures in Tea" (2019)** her book. Half tea education, half travel memoir. The chapters on Malawi and Sri Lanka are particularly good.
- **The "Off Menu" podcast appearance with Ed Gamble & James Acaster.** Funny, accessible, surprisingly tea educational. Look it up.
- **The Rare Tea Company website:** rareteacompany.com. Browse the catalogue; even if you don't buy, the producer notes are worth reading.
- **Various magazine profiles:** the Financial Times, The Guardian, Monocle have all profiled her. Search "Henrietta Lovell Rare Tea" for the journalistic version.

Where Rare Tea fits alongside teas.co.uk

We aim to sell all tea, and we look forward to working with Henrietta and the Rare Tea Co team in the future. We're British retail with 906 everyday priced products from 110 brands; they're £30-a pouch single origin restaurant supply with a small retail tail. Different shelves, same shared love of leaf.

The audience overlap is people who started somewhere mainstream (us, maybe Twinings, maybe Pukka) and developed enough curiosity to want named grower direct import single origin tea. That's a journey we cheer on. We sell the everyday cup; they sell the once a month ceremonial pour, and there's room for both in any serious tea cupboard.

If you've got £25 to spend on a single tea once in a while, a Rare Tea Co single origin Malawi black or one of their Taiwanese oolongs is one of the better tea pours in British retail. For the daily 6am school run brew, our Yorkshire Tea or Twinings English Breakfast is still the right answer.

Our take on Henrietta

Henrietta Lovell is one of the real quiet heroes of modern British tea. She's done more to make tea seriously interesting in British dining than almost anyone, and she did it without becoming pretentious about it. Read her book, listen to her on a podcast, follow the Rare Tea Company online if you're a serious tea drinker. You don't need to be a Michelin starred restaurant to enjoy her work, the retail side is welcoming, the producer stories are worth reading, and the tea (when you do buy it) is consistently excellent.

If teas.co.uk is the curated tea shop down your high street, Rare Tea Co is the small batch importer in a converted warehouse where the chef from down the road buys his tea pairings. Different rooms, same ecosystem.

For the wider context see the Jesse's Tea House overview, the Don Mei / Mei Leaf overview, the Wu Mountain Tea overview, the black tea overview, the afternoon tea tradition overview, the British tea culture overview, and the Williamson brand page.

The essentials: Henrietta Lovell, Rare Tea Lady

Field	Detail
Best known for	Founder of Rare Tea Company (London, 2004), author of Infused (2019)
Tea categories most-covered	Malawi single estate, Darjeeling first flush, Chinese green and oolong, Sri Lankan single-garden
Style	Editorial, terroir-led, single-farm philosophy, restaurant and hotel supply
UK relevance	Supplies many Michelin-starred British restaurants; book is the leading UK tea-as-wine argument

Why she matters to a UK drinker

Henrietta Lovell has done more than any single figure to push the British premium tea market toward named-source, named-grower, named-garden. The Rare Tea Company catalogue is the working argument for the position; the book Infused is the readable theory; the restaurant supply work (Claridges, the Fat Duck, Noma) is the visibility. The book also includes a Rare Tea Company selection guide that doubles as a UK premium-tea map.

What to taste alongside

Henrietta Lovell's Rare Tea Company sources from named farms and single estates. To taste the philosophy from another shelf, look for single-estate tea from specialist independents, Malawi white (one of her

signature origins), and Darjeeling first flush from a named garden. The lesson is not the brand, it is that named-source tea drinks differently from anonymous-blend tea and the price difference is real.

Where this fits in the wider range: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Wander the tea shop for the wider range, with free UK delivery from £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
- Loose leaf vs teabag

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