Formal Afternoon Tea Etiquette

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The etiquette in brief:** Afternoon tea etiquette done properly: where you sit, the order of courses, the scone debate, how to hold a teacup, pouring, and what never to do.

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

Afternoon tea, done formally, has more rules than a county cricket match. The proper way involves cutlery you didn't know existed, an order of courses you didn't know you needed to memorise, and a teapot etiquette that, if violated, will earn you the sort of polite British glare that withers crops. This entry is the formal formal version of how to do afternoon tea, the kind they actually teach at The Ritz, Claridge's, and the Savoy. It's also slightly tongue in cheek, because if you're not having fun with it, why bother.

For the relaxed everyday version, see our companion entry: Afternoon tea etiquette for normal people. For the cultural and historical context see the afternoon tea tradition overview.

Where you sit

The host sits at the head of the table. The most senior guest sits to the host's right. If the senior guest is significantly senior (titled, royal, or your gran), the host may relinquish the head seat. Don't pre emptively claim it; wait to be directed. If you're in a hotel rather than someone's home, the head of the table is whoever pays the bill.

Napkin goes across the lap, never tucked into the collar. The collar tuck is what they did in pre Victorian taverns. We have moved on.

The order of the courses

A formal afternoon tea is served in three courses, bottom up on the tiered stand:

1. **Sandwiches:** finger sandwiches, crusts off, classic fillings (cucumber, egg mayo, salmon, chicken with watercress, ham with mustard). Served first because they're savoury and you eat them before sweets.
2. **Scones:** middle tier. Always plural. Always with clotted cream and jam. Always still slightly warm if the establishment respects itself.

3. **Pastries / cakes:** top tier. Petit fours, Battenberg, Victoria sponge, fruit tart. Sweet and rich; saved for last.

You eat in this order. You don't start with the cakes because the cakes "look nice." You don't skip the sandwiches because you're "saving room." This is afternoon tea, not a buffet at a wedding.

The scone debate (cream first or jam first?)

This is the part where British people who normally agree about everything become irreconcilable enemies.

The Devon method: cream first, then jam. The cream acts as butter would; the jam goes on top.

The Cornwall method: jam first, then cream. The jam soaks into the scone; the cream sits on top like a hat.

The clear verdict: the King is officially Devon (cream first). The Queen Consort was officially Cornwall (jam first). The royal household has historically refused to take a side. Most of Cornwall is firmly Cornwall method; most of Devon is firmly Devon method; everyone else picks one and dies on that hill.

The actual answer: it doesn't matter. Use whichever method you grew up with, defend it loudly at dinner parties, do not change your mind under any circumstances.

However, you do not, under any circumstances, "sandwich" the scone. A scone is split horizontally. Cream and jam go on each cut surface (or, if you're being economical, just one). You do not put the top half back on. That's not a scone, that's a jam and cream burger.

How to hold a teacup

The pinky out thing is a myth perpetuated by people who learned tea etiquette from cartoons. Real life proper teacup grip: thumb and forefinger pinch the handle, middle finger supports underneath, ring finger and pinky tucked NEAR the cup, not extended. Pinky out signals "I learned this from the Looney Tunes."

The teacup is held in one hand. Saucer in the other if you're standing; on the table if seated. You bring the cup to your mouth, not your mouth to the cup, a forward lean over the cup is shockingly common and shockingly wrong.

Stirring etiquette

If milk and sugar are involved, stir gently. The traditional rule is twelve to six only, straight from the back of the cup to the front, no swirling, no tinkling, no clinking the spoon against the cup.

The spoon, when not in use, rests on the saucer behind the cup, not in the cup. Leaving the spoon in the cup is what they do at motorway service stations.

Tea pouring sequence

The host pours. Tea goes in the cup first (in formal afternoon tea), milk added after. Sugar last. The tea first / milk second order is the Twinings / Royal Society of Chemistry / Buckingham Palace position; the working class historical practice was milk first to protect the china. See our milk first vs tea first overview for the full debate.

If you're the guest, you do not pour your own. If you'd like more, you wait for the host to top you up; you do not lift the pot yourself unless invited. To signal "no more, thank you" you place your spoon across the top of your cup.

What to drink

Afternoon tea traditionally pairs with a strong, milk friendly black tea. The classic options:

- **English Breakfast:** the safe house default. See our traditional breakfast blends overview.
- **Earl Grey:** bergamot scented, slightly perfumed; a more refined choice. Best taken without milk by purists, with milk by the rest of us.
- **Darjeeling first flush:** the "champagne of teas." Light, muscatel, no milk needed. The connoisseur's choice. See our Darjeeling overview.
- **Assam:** full bodied, malty, milk friendly. The sturdy afternoon tea pour.
- **Lapsang Souchong:** smoky, polarising, the in the know choice. Don't add milk.

Twinings, Yorkshire Tea, Williamson, and Rare Tea Co all do excellent afternoon tea grade black teas at British retail. See the Twinings and Williamson brand pages.

What not to do

- **Do not blow on your tea.** If it's too hot, wait. The British do not blow.
- **Do not slurp.** Even if you're testing for flavour. Save that for a tasting flight.
- **Do not dunk biscuits in your tea** at formal afternoon tea. Dunking is for at home; it's not a hotel manoeuvre.
- **Do not use your phone at the table.** Same rule as a proper dinner. Photos of the tier stand are tolerated; phone out scrolling is not.
- **Do not order coffee at afternoon tea.** If you wanted coffee you should have gone for elevenses or coffee and cake. Different ritual.

How to know you're getting it right

The signal that you're being treated as a competent afternoon tea participant: the staff stop offering hints. They top up your tea without comment. Nobody mentions the cream first / jam first thing. The conversation moves to other matters. That's the sign you've blended in.

The signal that you're being read as a tourist: the staff say "now this is a scone" with the patience of a primary school teacher. Don't take offence; they do this twenty times a day.

Enjoy the ritual

Formal afternoon tea is a performance, and like any performance, knowing the rules makes it more fun rather than less. The British do not actually expect you to be flawless on your first visit to The Ritz; they expect you to make a sincere attempt. A pinky out lapse will get you a quiet smile, not a beheading. Relax into it. Use the wrong fork. Get cream on your jumper. Have a third scone. The point is not the rules but the

occasion.

If you want to host afternoon tea at home, none of this is required. See our normal people version for the relaxed kit list. For tea selection, the Twinings, Yorkshire Tea, and Teapigs brand pages cover the everyday quality afternoon tea options at British retail prices.

For the wider context see the afternoon tea tradition overview, the normal people version, the British tea culture overview, the milk first vs tea first debate, the black tea overview, the Darjeeling overview, the Stephen Twining overview, and the great British tea phrases overview.

Quick etiquette reference

Element	The proper form
Order of courses	Sandwiches, then scones, then cakes, bottom up the stand
Scone	Split horizontally; cream and jam on each half, never sandwiched
Teacup grip	Thumb and forefinger on the handle, no pinky out
Stirring	Gently, back to front (twelve to six), no clinking
Pouring	The host pours; guests wait to be topped up
Tea or milk first	Formal: tea first, milk after, sugar last

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. For formal tea, choose by the cup and its description, check what each cup costs, and note UK delivery is free over £35.

Related on the wiki: Afternoon Tea Etiquette.

Teas in the same conversation: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Browse the wider tea range; UK shipping is free over £35, from a single bag upwards.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · For hosting, a small trusted stash beats a big random one. Rotate two or three teas you love pouring for guests.

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