Catherine of Braganza

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The court story:** The Portuguese princess who married Charles II in 1662 and turned tea into the fashionable habit of the English court, and what she did and did not do.

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

Catherine of Braganza is the Portuguese princess who married Charles II in 1662, brought a chest of tea in her dowry, and accidentally turned Britain into a tea drinking nation. Before Catherine, tea was a curiosity in England, a rare, exotic, expensive luxury. By the time she died, tea had become the drink of the English court. Within fifty years, it was the drink of the country. Without her, Britain would probably be drinking coffee like the French.

This is the story of the queen who quietly reprogrammed an entire nation's beverage habits.

Who Catherine was

Catherine of Braganza (1638-1705) was the daughter of King John IV of Portugal. Portugal at the time had a powerful Asian trade empire, Macau, Goa, Malacca, and tea, which they'd encountered through Chinese trade, was already an established habit at the Portuguese court. Catherine grew up drinking tea daily. It was as ordinary to her as cocoa to a Belgian or wine to a French aristocrat.

In 1662 she married Charles II of England, the recently restored Stuart king, in a politically arranged match designed to cement Anglo Portuguese trade and military alliance. Her dowry included Tangier, Bombay, two million Portuguese crowns, and, almost as a footnote, a chest of tea. The chest of tea is the bit that mattered.

What "tea" looked like in 1662 England

When Catherine arrived, tea in England was: occasionally available at upper class coffee houses in London, sold in tiny quantities, taxed enormously, regarded as a curious oriental medicine, and consumed almost exclusively by men in coffee house settings. It was not yet a domestic drink. It was not yet a women's drink. It was not yet a drink with a ceremony around it.

Catherine changed all three. She drank tea daily at the English court. The other court ladies, ever attentive to royal habits, began drinking tea too. The newly minted middle classes, ever attentive to court habits, began drinking tea too. By 1700, tea was an established household drink for English aristocracy. By 1750, it

had spread to the middle classes. By 1800, it was the national drink of Britain.

The Bombay connection

One often overlooked side of the Catherine Charles marriage: her dowry included Bombay (Mumbai). Charles passed it almost immediately to the East India Company in lease. The East India Company then went on to dominate global tea trade for the next 250 years, including the disastrous Boston Tea Party episode that triggered American independence (see our tea history overview for that thread).

The geographic line from "Catherine's Portuguese dowry" through "British East India Company control of the subcontinent" to "Indian grown tea on every British shelf" is a direct one. Catherine didn't intend any of it; she just brought her tea habit. The downstream economic and political consequences were enormous.

Why Catherine specifically, not just "Portugal"

Plenty of Portuguese aristocrats drank tea before 1662. The reason it was Catherine specifically that triggered the British shift wasn't her nationality, it was her position. Royal habits were watched and imitated. A Portuguese maid drinking tea in London in 1655 changed nothing. A queen consort drinking tea daily in Whitehall changed everything.

Catherine was also unusual in being well liked despite political headwinds. The Stuart court at the time was anti Catholic and Catherine was a Catholic Portuguese princess; she had every reason to be politically marginalised. Charles II protected her, the public mostly tolerated her, and her quiet daily habits, including the tea, became invisible status markers that everyone copied.

What happened after

Catherine outlived Charles II by twenty years, eventually returning to Portugal where she became regent and then a quiet retired queen mother. By the time she died in 1705, English tea consumption had multiplied roughly thirty fold. Tea Act era regulation was already starting; the East India Company was already a tea giant; the global trade routes that would shape the next two centuries of British history were already in motion.

Catherine's name doesn't get much credit in popular British history. She's remembered, if at all, as "Charles II's queen", as if she were a footnote. The queen who actually founded British tea culture has been more or less forgotten, which is in keeping with how British history tends to treat foreign born royal women.

The Borough High Street statue

There is a statue of Catherine of Braganza in Queens, New York (the borough is named after her). For a long time there were proposals to erect one in Borough High Street, London, close to the original site of the Borough tea trading docks, but funding was never raised. The most influential queen consort in British tea history doesn't have a London statue. Make of that what you will.

The verdict on Catherine

If you're British and you drink tea, you can thank Catherine of Braganza. The reason "putting the kettle on" is the British default at moments of stress, social call, or 4pm peckishness is that 360 years ago, a Portuguese

princess arrived in London with a chest of tea and a habit of drinking it daily.

The next time you brew a cup of tea, raise it briefly to the most under rated queen in British retail history. Or, if you want a more concrete tribute, drink one of the Portuguese imported teas that Lisbon based importers like Companhia Portuguesa do Chá still bring to UK shelves, see our tea history overview for the full Atlantic trade backstory.

For the wider context see the tea history overview, the British tea culture overview, the Anna, Duchess of Bedford overview, the afternoon tea tradition overview, the black tea overview, the Stephen Twining overview, and the Robert Fortune (the tea spy) overview.

The Catherine of Braganza timeline

Date	Event
1662	Portuguese princess marries Charles II, brings a tea habit and a tea dowry
1660s	tea becomes the fashionable drink of the Stuart court
late 1600s	the aristocracy copies the queen; tea spreads as a status habit
1700s onward	price falls, the habit moves down the social scale to a national drink

The teas that come up around this subject: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Browse the wider tea range; shipping within the UK costs nothing above £35, with single bags available too.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · A queen can set a fashion; your own shelf should follow your taste instead. Take two or three teas at a time and let your taste choose between them.

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