What Makes Tea Strong

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Strength, in summary:** Tea strength covers caffeine, body, tannin, astringency, aromatic intensity, bitterness; distinct dimensions for distinct drinker contexts.

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

"Strong tea" means three different things in different contexts, and the word gets used loosely in tea descriptions on packaging. A "strong" Yorkshire Tea is doing something different from a "strong" Assam single origin, which is doing something different from a "strong" matcha. Knowing what you actually want when you say "strong" makes the right tea easier to pick, and the right brewing technique easier to apply.

This guide unpacks the three meanings of "strong tea" (body, flavour intensity, caffeine), the family by family strength characteristics, the practical brewing technique for stronger cups, and how to avoid the common mistake of producing astringent rather than strong cups through over brewing.

What "strong" actually means

Three distinct measures get bundled under the word.

Measure	What it means	How you increase it
Body	How heavy and substantial the cup feels in the mouth. A full bodied tea coats the tongue; a thin one evaporates	Use more leaf. Pick a leaf with naturally heavy body (Assam, breakfast blends)
Flavour intensity	How loud the dominant notes are: malt, brisk, smoky, vegetal etc.	More leaf. Hotter water (within family limits). The right brewing time, not longer
Caffeine kick	How much you feel the stimulant	More leaf. A black tea over a green or white. Steep 3+ minutes (most caffeine extracts in 30 to 45 seconds, but longer steeps add a small amount more)

The unifying lever is **more leaf**. You almost never get a stronger cup by steeping the same amount longer; you just get a more bitter cup. Tannins keep extracting after the flavour and caffeine peaks, so long steeps tip the balance toward harshness without adding the things you actually want.

The chemistry behind "strength"

Different compounds extract at different rates and produce different "strength" effects:

- **Caffeine** extracts in the first 30 to 60 seconds of brewing; more leaf produces more caffeine
- **Catechins (green tea polyphenols)** extract within 1 to 3 minutes; produce green tea's astringency and bright character
- **Theaflavins and thearubigins (black tea polyphenols)** extract throughout brewing; produce black tea's body and amber colour
- **Tannins** extract continuously; over extraction produces bitterness and astringency
- **Volatile aroma compounds** extract early but can be driven off by extended brewing or very hot water
- **L theanine and amino acids** extract early; produce sweetness and umami character

The practical implication: brewing time affects the balance between these compounds. Short brewing (1 to 2 minutes) emphasises caffeine and bright character; standard brewing (3 to 4 minutes) produces balanced character; long brewing (5+ minutes) extracts excess tannins and produces harsh cups.

For more on the chemistry see the ultimate caffeine guide.

The most mentioned strong teas

Tea	What kind of "strong" it is
Yorkshire Tea Gold	Body and flavour intensity. The Assam leaning blend gives weight and malt
Assam single origin	Maximum body and malt; brisk too. The classic strong cup
PG Tips	Brisk and fast extracting. Caffeine arrives quickly. Cup feels punchy rather than heavy
Lapsang Souchong	Strong in the smoky flavour sense, not the body sense. The smokiness dominates everything
Matcha (whisked, full bowl)	Strong on caffeine and umami body. Different "strong" from black tea; more savoury and concentrated
Pu erh (shu)	Strong on body and earth. Mellow rather than brisk
Roasted oolong (Da Hong Pao)	Strong on roasted, mineral notes. Body without harshness
Twinings Russian Caravan	Strong in a complex way; smoky base + black blend. Distinct flavour profile
Yunnan Dianhong	Strong on malt and peppery character. Distinctive Chinese black tea strength
Irish Breakfast	Strong on body and Assam led malt; one of the heaviest British blends

Strong vs full bodied vs astringent: they're not the same

The vocabulary gets sloppy on packaging because the words sound related. They aren't.

- **Strong** = lots of flavour, body, or caffeine. Achieved by leaf quantity and tea choice

- **Full bodied** = heavy mouthfeel. A property of certain teas (Assam, breakfast blends, pu erh) regardless of how strongly you brew them
- **Astringent** = mouth puckering, dry. A side effect of tannins, often from over steeping or under temperature mismatch
- **Bitter** = unpleasant taste on the tongue, often from over extraction or wrong water temperature
- **Brisk** = bright, lively character with mild astringency; positive quality in black tea
- **Robust** = combination of body and flavour intensity; the broad term for "strong"

A cup can be strong without being astringent. A cup can be astringent without being strong. The distinction matters because if you brew weak tea for a long time, you get a cup that's astringent but thin; the worst of both worlds. The fix is more leaf and shorter time, not the other way round.

For more on tea vocabulary see the tea flavour guide.

Strength by family: what to expect

Family	Typical strength character
Assam led black tea & English Breakfast	Strong on body + malt + caffeine. The full strength benchmark
Irish Breakfast	Even stronger than English Breakfast; more Assam content, heavier body
Ceylon black	Strong on briskness, lighter on body. Bright rather than heavy
Yunnan Dianhong	Strong on malt with distinctive peppery character
Keemun	Strong on complexity and refinement; not heavy body
Darjeeling	Light. Almost never described as "strong"; wrong tea for the brief
Green tea	Variable. Matcha is strong; sencha and gunpowder are moderate; longjing is delicate
Oolong	Wide range. Lighter oolongs are subtle; darker roasted ones are strong on flavour without being brisk
Pu erh	Strong on body and earth. Caffeine is moderate. The earthy character can feel "strong" or "deep"
White tea	The most delicate. Avoid if you want strong
Lapsang Souchong	Strong on smoky aroma and flavour intensity
Rooibos & herbals	Caffeine free regardless of how strongly you brew. Body and flavour can be strong; alertness will not be

Brand strength comparison

Strength comparison across major British brands:

Brand	Strength rating (1 to 5)	Character
Yorkshire Tea Gold	5	Heaviest body, malty, full bodied
Yorkshire Tea Original	4	Strong British everyday brew

Brand	Strength rating (1 to 5)	Character
Twinings Irish Breakfast	5	Heaviest Assam led blend
PG Tips	3	Brisker but lighter than Yorkshire
Tetley Original	3	Balanced everyday strength
Twinings English Breakfast	3	Balanced classic afternoon tea style
Teapigs Everyday Brew	4	Whole leaf premium strong
Twinings Earl Grey	3	Moderate strength with bergamot character
Twinings Darjeeling	2	Light, delicate; not "strong"
Hyson Premium Breakfast	3	Brisk Sri Lankan strength

For comparisons see the Yorkshire vs PG Tips comparison, the Yorkshire Gold vs Original comparison, and the English Breakfast vs Irish Breakfast comparison.

How to get a strong cup, properly

1. **Pick a tea with naturally strong characteristics** Assam led black, Yorkshire Gold, matcha, pu erh, dark oolong. Don't try to brew Darjeeling into a builders' brew; it doesn't have the leaf for it
2. **Use more leaf** 1.5x the standard amount. For bagged tea, use two bags per mug
3. **Brew the standard time, not longer** 3 to 5 minutes for black, not 8
4. **Use full temperature water** (within the family's range). 100°C for blacks, herbals and rooibos; 70 to 80°C for greens
5. **Don't squeeze the bag** unless you're going for the deliberate brisk builders'-tea character (in which case, see the strong builders' tea guide)

This pulls more body, more flavour, more caffeine, without the bitterness of an over steeped cup. The leaf does the work; the brewing technique just makes sure that work shows up in the cup.

How to brew a properly strong cup by tea family

Specific approaches by tea family:

Strong black tea (Yorkshire, PG Tips, English Breakfast):

- Two tea bags per 250ml mug
- Just boiled water
- 3 to 4 minute brew
- Generous milk; sugar optional

Strong green tea:

- 1.5 teaspoons or 2 bags per cup
- 70 to 80°C water (NOT boiling)
- 2 minutes maximum brewing

- Drink neat

Strong matcha:

- 2 teaspoons of matcha powder (vs standard 1 teaspoon)
- 60ml of water at 75°C
- Whisk vigorously for 30 to 60 seconds
- Drink immediately

Strong oolong (gongfu approach):

- 5 to 7g of leaves per 150ml
- 95°C water for darker oolongs, 90°C for lighter
- 30 to 60 second first infusion
- Multiple short infusions across a session

Strong pu erh:

- 5 to 7g of leaves per 150ml
- Boiling water
- Rinse the leaves first
- 30 second to 1 minute first infusion
- Multiple infusions; pu erh gives 8+ excellent cups

For the family by family detail see the water temperatures guide, the steeping times guide, and the loose leaf brewing guide.

Strong tea for different occasions

Different "strong" teas suit different jobs:

- **Maximum morning energy:** two bags of Yorkshire Gold or strong matcha; for the highest caffeine + L theanine focus support
- **Substantial breakfast cup** Yorkshire Tea Original or Irish Breakfast; the body matches the meal
- **Working day sustained energy:** matcha (4 to 6 hour focus) or pu erh (multi infusion across the day)
- **Cold weather warming:** dark roasted oolong or pu erh; the substantial body provides physical warming sensation
- **After heavy meals:** pu erh; the traditional "fat cutting" tea that refreshes the palate
- **Hangover recovery:** strong builders' brew with milk and sugar; the British classic morning after cup
- **Distinctive smoky strong cup** Lapsang Souchong; not body strong but flavour overwhelming
- **Substantial afternoon cup:** strong Earl Grey or Yorkshire Gold; sustained energy without sleep impact if before 2pm

For more on use case specific tea selection see the best tea for energy guide and the best tea for focus guide.

Common strength mistakes

Specific mistakes drinkers make when seeking stronger tea:

- **Brewing for 10+ minutes:** produces astringency, not strength
- **Reusing tea bags:** the second cup is hot water with a hint of leaf
- **Trying to make Darjeeling strong:** wrong tea family for "strong"; it's meant to be delicate
- **Boiling water on green tea expecting strength:** produces bitterness rather than strength
- **Adding more water to thin a cup that's bitter:** the bitterness is in solution; dilution doesn't fix it, brewing differently next time does
- **Using cheap tea and expecting strength to come from technique:** technique doesn't fix poor leaf
- **Over bagging then squeezing:** multiplies the over extraction problem

For the wider mistakes context see the common brewing mistakes guide.

Strong tea and food pairings

Strong teas pair particularly well with substantial food:

- **Strong English Breakfast** with full English breakfast, bacon sandwiches, hearty meals
- **Yorkshire Gold** with cheese boards, fruit cake, hearty cakes
- **Lapsang Souchong** with smoked salmon, blue cheese, dark chocolate
- **Pu erh** with rich Chinese food, dim sum, fatty foods
- **Matcha** with Japanese sweets (wagashi), dark chocolate
- **Dark oolong** with roast meats, hard cheeses, rich pastries
- **Yunnan Dianhong** with spicy Asian cuisine, strong cheese

For more on tea food pairing see the tea and food pairings overview.

The essentials: tea strength dimensions

Dimension	Plain note
Caffeine strength	Total caffeine content per cup; Assam highest, herbal zero
Body strength	Mouthfeel weight; builder tea heaviest
Tannic strength	Mouth-drying sensation; black tea highest
Astringent strength	Related to tannin; mouth-puckering
Aromatic strength	Olfactory intensity; smoky and floral high
Bitter strength	Over-brewed or over-leafed tea; avoid
Perceived strength	Subjective; builder-tea-with-milk most familiar UK signal
Distinction	Different "strong" dimensions; not interchangeable

Related on the wiki: Tea Strength, Explained.

Reference

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)

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

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