Black Tea: Types, Origins and Brewing

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Black tea, in summary:** Black tea is the fully oxidised tea family behind British breakfast blends: what it is, how it is made, the main origins and what each one tastes like, how to brew it, and how it compares to green tea.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team on 8 August 2026.

Black tea is the tea family behind most familiar British breakfast blends and many major origin styles. It's the same plant as green or white tea, *Camellia sinensis*, but processed differently. The leaves are withered, rolled, and crucially **fully oxidised** before being dried. Oxidation is what turns the green leaf brown black and gives the cup its strong colour, brisk character, malty body and distinctive ability to take milk well.

If you've drunk a builder's brew, an English breakfast, an Earl Grey, an Assam, a Darjeeling, a Ceylon, a Kenyan, an Irish breakfast or a Welsh breakfast tea, you've drunk black tea. It's the tea family the entire British supermarket aisle is built around, and the tea family that the standard kitchen kettle was designed for.

How black tea is made (and why it tastes the way it does)

Four steps separate green tea from black tea: withering, rolling, oxidation, and firing. The decisive step is oxidation. Once the rolled leaves are exposed to oxygen for several hours, enzymes inside the leaf convert the catechins (the green, vegetal tasting compounds) into theaflavins and thearubigins, the compounds responsible for black tea's amber brown cup colour, its tannic mouthfeel, and the brisk, slightly astringent character that takes a splash of milk so well.

Two production styles dominate the global supply:

- **CTC (Crush Tear Curl)** processing produces small, uniform pellets of leaf that brew fast and hard. CTC is what's inside almost every supermarket tea bag, Yorkshire, PG Tips, Tetley, Typhoo, Twinings English Breakfast, Lyons. The fast extraction is why a teabag brews a usable cup in three minutes.
- **Orthodox:** processing keeps the leaves whole or only lightly broken. The result brews more slowly but with more nuance. Orthodox black teas are usually sold loose or in pyramid bags. Single estate Darjeelings and most Sri Lankan single origin Ceylons are orthodox.

The major origins, and what each one tastes like

Origin	Character	Best for	Stocked from
Assam (India)	Malty, full bodied, dark amber cup, takes milk and sugar well	Builder's brew, breakfast tea, anything with milk	Backbone of every UK supermarket breakfast blend; Yorkshire Tea, PG Tips, Tetley
Darjeeling (India)	Light, floral, slightly muscatel, called the "champagne of teas"	Black no milk afternoon cup; collectors	Twinings range
Ceylon (Sri Lanka)	Bright, brisk, slightly citrussy, copper coloured cup	All day cup, with or without milk; iced tea base	Hyson (single origin from family owned gardens), Dilmah
Kenyan and East African	Strong, bright, fast extracting, slightly fruity	Bulk supermarket blends; the colour driver in builder's tea	Williamson Tea (single estate Kenyan), most supermarket budget blends
Chinese (Keemun, Yunnan, Lapsang Souchong)	Lighter body, smoother, sometimes smoky, often drunk without milk	Earl Grey base, after dinner cup, tea and pastry pairings	Twinings Lapsang and Earl Grey blends

How to brew it properly

Black tea is the most forgiving family. Boiling water won't damage it. The risk runs the other way, lukewarm water leaves the cup thin.

- **Temperature:** 95 to 100°C, freshly drawn. See the water temperature guide for the full family by family detail.
- **Steep:** 3 to 4 minutes for a brisk cup; 4 to 5 minutes if you want full body and you'll add milk. Don't go past 5, the tannins start dominating.
- **Leaf:** One bag per mug, or 1g of loose leaf per 50ml of water (one rounded teaspoon per mug).
- **Milk:** Optional. A splash of whole milk softens the tannins and rounds the cup. Oat milk works particularly well with maltier blends.

For the proper builder's brew technique (more leaf, not longer time), see the strong builder's tea guide.

Caffeine in black tea

Black tea contains caffeine, but a fixed number cannot be inferred from the family name alone. The amount varies with the leaf, dose, cup size, water temperature and steep time. For the breakdown by family and brand see the ultimate caffeine guide. For the figures brand by brand, Yorkshire, PG Tips, Tetley, Twinings and the single origins, see black tea caffeine by UK brand.

If you want black tea character without the caffeine, the decaf British teas guide covers the major UK decaf options. Decaffeination greatly reduces caffeine but does not necessarily remove all of it; check the current pack or manufacturer guidance when the amount matters.

Black tea vs green tea: the practical difference

Both come from the same plant. Black is fully oxidised, green is not oxidised at all. The cup level differences:

- **Colour:** Black is amber to mahogany; green is pale yellow to gold.
- **Body:** Black is full bodied and tannic; green is light and sometimes vegetal.
- **Caffeine:** Both contain caffeine, and amounts can overlap depending on the leaf, dose and brew.
- **Milk:** Black takes it well; green does not, milk overwhelms the cup.
- **Brewing:** Black wants 100°C; green wants 70 to 80°C.

What we stock

Browse the full black tea range. The most bought lines on teas.co.uk:

- True English Tea (T.E.T) Everyday English No 1, 20 Tea Bags 40g
- Typhoo QT One Cup Instant Tea With Whitener, 125g
- Hyson Peach Infused Black Tea, 32 Tea Bags 32g
- Yorkshire Tea Original Loose Leaf Tea, 250g
- Tetley Seriously Refreshing, 75 Tea Bags 250g
- PG Tips Chai Special Blend, 70 Tea Bags 175g

For other tea families, see the green tea and matcha range, the rooibos range, and the fruit and herbal infusions. For brewing fundamentals, the loose leaf brewing guide covers the full kit and technique.

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