White Tea: Grades and Brewing Guide

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **White tea, in summary:** White tea is the least processed of the six tea families: Silver Needle, White Peony, Shou Mei, aged white. Brewing, cultivars, ageing, and which to buy.

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

White tea is the least processed tea family on Earth. Same plant as green and black, *Camellia sinensis*, but the processing is barely a process at all: pick the youngest buds and leaves, wither them gently in shade or low sun, dry them. No rolling, no firing, no oxidation kill step. The result is a pale gold cup, the lowest caffeine of any caffeinated tea, the longest shelf life, and the most delicate, slightly sweet character of any tea you can buy.

White tea is the rarest family on the British shelf. Most tea drinkers in the UK have never knowingly tried it. We stock a small range because it deserves a hearing, and once you've had a properly brewed Silver Needle the difference between white and any other tea is immediately obvious.

Why "white" tea

The name comes from the silvery white down (called pekoe) on the unopened buds of the tea plant. The youngest, highest grade white teas are made entirely of these unfurled buds. The buds keep their fuzz through the minimal processing, so the dry leaf has a distinctive pale, fuzzy, almost downy appearance, and the cup is correspondingly pale.

White tea was historically reserved for the Chinese imperial court. The plant material is so young and so lightly processed that producing white tea wastes most of the harvest the plant could otherwise yield as black or green. That's why it's still the most expensive of the tea families per gram.

The two main grades

Grade	What it is	Cup character	Price tier
Silver Needle (Bai Hao Yin Zhen)	Buds only, picked in early spring	Very pale, slightly sweet, hay and stone fruit notes, almost no astringency	Most expensive white tea, premium
White Peony (Bai Mu Dan)	Buds plus the first two leaves	Slightly fuller body, more melon and floral notes, clearer cup colour	Mid tier, more affordable

You'll occasionally also see Shou Mei (Long Life Eyebrow, lower grade) and Gong Mei (Tribute Eyebrow), but those are rare on the UK shelf. Silver Needle and White Peony are what almost any UK retailer will sell.

How to brew white tea

White tea is delicate. It does not want boiling water, and it does not want a long steep. Both will pull bitterness out of the buds and ruin the cup. Get the temperature and time right and the cup is beautiful: sweet, lightly floral, hay coloured, almost wine like in clarity.

- **Temperature:** 80 to 85°C. Wait 60 seconds after the kettle clicks off. See the water temperatures guide for the family by family detail.
- **Steep:** 4 to 5 minutes for the first infusion. Yes, longer than green tea, because the leaf is so lightly processed it releases flavour slowly. Going past 6 minutes pulls bitterness.
- **Leaf:** A generous teaspoon per mug, or 2g per 200ml. White tea buds and leaves are bulky, so by volume you need more than for black tea.
- **Milk:** No. The cup is too delicate; milk obliterates it.
- **Re infusions:** White tea rewards re brewing. Three or four infusions of the same leaves, each a minute longer than the last, is normal. The third cup is often the best.

If you've ever brewed white tea with boiling water and decided it was bland, that's the boiling water, not the tea. Try again at 80°C and 4 minutes.

Caffeine in white tea

The conventional wisdom that white tea is the lowest caffeine tea is broadly true but more complicated than it is usually presented. Silver Needle (buds only) typically delivers 15 to 30mg of caffeine per cup, lower than green or black. But white teas made from later harvests or with more leaf material can sit higher, sometimes overlapping with green tea at 30 to 40mg.

The general ranking is: white < green < oolong < black for caffeine. But within each family the numbers overlap. For the full breakdown see the ultimate caffeine guide.

What white tea actually tastes like

The flavour vocabulary for white tea is unique to the family. Tasting notes commonly used by tea sommeliers:

- **Hay and dried grass**: the dominant note in good Silver Needle, clean and slightly sweet
- **Stone fruit**: peach, apricot, sometimes pear, especially in spring harvested whites
- **Melon**: honeydew or cantaloupe character is common in White Peony
- **Honey**: not added sugar, but a natural sweetness from the amino acids preserved by the minimal processing
- **Floral**: jasmine, magnolia, sometimes lilac

What white tea is NOT: it's not bitter, not astringent, not malty, not vegetal. If your cup tastes like any of those, you over brewed it. Drop the temperature or shorten the steep.

White tea vs the other families

Same plant, different processing, very different cup:

Family	Processing	Caffeine	Cup character
White tea	Wither and dry only, no oxidation	15 to 30mg	Pale, sweet, hay and fruit notes
Green tea	Steam or pan fire to kill enzymes, no oxidation	20 to 35mg	Vegetal, grassy, slightly umami
Yellow tea	Like green plus a "yellowing" smother step	20 to 35mg	Mellow, sweet, rare in the UK
Oolong tea	Partial oxidation	30 to 50mg	Honey, orchid, roasted
Black tea	Full oxidation	40 to 70mg	Malty, brisk, takes milk

What we stock

Browse the white tea range. The headline product:

- Teapigs Silver Tips White Tea 15 Bags, Silver Needle in plant based pyramid temples, individually wrapped, the easiest entry point to proper white tea in the UK shelf

White tea is a small family on most UK shelves (most suppliers don't bother stocking it because the volumes are low), but if you want to try something really different from your daily black or green cup, this is the family to spend an afternoon with.

Storage matters more than for any other tea

Because white tea is so lightly processed, it's also the most aromatic, and the most likely to lose character if you store it badly. Air, light, moisture and strong nearby smells will all damage it within weeks.

- **Airtight container:** away from light. Tin or opaque ceramic, not glass.
- **Cool, dry cupboard.** Don't store anywhere near the kettle, the cooker, or the spice shelf.
- **Drink within 6 to 12 months:** for peak character. Older Silver Needle is fine but loses the bright top notes.

For the full storage breakdown, see the tea storage tips guide.

For the wider tea family map, see the black tea overview and the green tea overview. For brewing fundamentals across all families, the loose leaf brewing guide. Premium plant based pyramid teabags from Teapigs are the easiest UK entry point to whole leaf white tea.

What to buy now

White tea is the most temperature-sensitive and the most quality-graded of the six tea families. To taste the range, start with a quality Silver Needle (Bai Hao Yinzhen), the premium bud-only grade. Step down (and across) to a White Peony (Bai Mu Dan) for the leaf-and-bud middle tier with more body. Try an aged white

tea (5 to 15 years old) to taste how white tea develops honey, dried fruit and apothecary notes over time. Add a Gong Mei or Shou Mei for the everyday white-tea workhorse.

Reference

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

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · If a white tea here appeals, buy a small pouch and try it once. One cup of white tea tells you more than twenty articles.

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