Earl Grey Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Earl Grey, in summary:** Earl Grey is a black tea base scented with bergamot oil, so the cup depends on the base and the bergamot independently. What it is, what bergamot does, the named variants, the history and how to judge a packet. This page explains the tea rather than ranking brands.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team on 23 September 2026.

Earl Grey is a flavoured black tea, a standard black tea base scented with the oil of the bergamot orange. The result is a cup with the brisk, malty backbone of black tea plus a distinctive citrussy, slightly floral perfume from the bergamot. It's the most drunk flavoured tea in the world, the third best known British tea family after English Breakfast and Yorkshire style builder's brew, and one of the few tea blends with a reasonably documented origin story.

The name comes from Charles Grey, 2nd Earl Grey, British Prime Minister 1830 to 1834. Multiple competing legends explain how the tea acquired his name; what's certain is that the blend has been on the British shelf since the 1830s, marketed continuously by Twinings and others for almost two centuries.

What bergamot actually is

Bergamot is *Citrus bergamia*, a small citrus fruit grown almost exclusively in the Reggio Calabria region of southern Italy. It looks like a yellow green lemon, smells dramatically of orange peel meets floral perfume, and is too sour to eat as a fruit. The valuable part is the oil pressed from the rind, the same oil used in many classic perfumes (Eau de Cologne is heavily bergamot led).

Three compounds carry that smell: limonene gives the citrus top note, and linalool with linalyl acetate give the floral, faintly lavender edge. The combination is what makes bergamot citrussy and floral at once, in a way no other citrus oil quite manages.

For Earl Grey, the bergamot oil is sprayed or sprinkled onto the dried tea leaves, which absorb the volatile aromatic compounds. Higher quality Earl Greys use real bergamot oil from Calabria. Cheaper ones use synthetic bergamot flavouring or extracts of other citrus fruits. The difference is immediately obvious in the cup, real bergamot has a complex floral citrus character; synthetic versions tend to taste flatly orange.

The black tea base, what's underneath the bergamot

Earl Grey is only as good as the tea it's built on. The base varies dramatically across brands:

Base style	Used by	Cup character
Chinese Keemun	Twinings classic Earl Grey	Lighter, smoother, slightly smoky, the traditional 19th century version
Ceylon	Hyson, Dilmah Earl Grey	Brisk, bright, copper coloured cup, more body than the Keemun version
Assam	Some supermarket Earl Greys	Maltier, fuller bodied, takes milk better, more breakfast tea like
Mixed CTC	Tetley, PG Tips Earl Grey	Standard supermarket blend base, neutral platform for the bergamot to dominate
Rooibos	Dragonfly Earl Grey Rooibos	Caffeine free version with the same bergamot top note

The Twinings classic is the historical reference point, light Chinese base black tea with bergamot. Most other Earl Greys are heavier bodied because that's what suits British milk and sugar tea drinking.

How to brew Earl Grey

The bergamot oils are volatile, which means heat helps release them but a too long steep extracts more bitterness from the base tea. Get the timing right and Earl Grey is one of the most aromatic cups on the British shelf.

- **Temperature:** 95 to 100°C, freshly drawn. The full breakdown is in the water temperatures guide.
- **Steep:** 3 to 4 minutes. Past 5 minutes the bergamot starts overwhelming the cup with bitterness rather than fragrance.
- **Leaf:** One bag per mug, or 1g of loose leaf per 50ml of water (one rounded teaspoon per mug).
- **Milk:** Optional. Earl Grey is traditionally drunk black or with a slice of lemon. A splash of milk works on the heavier Assam base versions; light Keemun base Earl Greys lose the bergamot character if you add milk.
- **Lemon:** Slice of lemon is the traditional alternative to milk, the citrus pairs naturally with the bergamot. Lemon or milk, not both, lemon curdles milk.
- **Don't squeeze the bag:** the bergamot oils tend to over extract bitterness if pressed. Lift, drip, bin.
- **Cold brew:** cold brewed Earl Grey gives a smoother, less astringent cup with the bergamot character intact, good with a slice of lemon over ice. More in the cold brew guide.

For the broader brewing context across all tea families, see the loose leaf brewing guide and the common brewing mistakes guide.

Earl Grey vs Lady Grey vs other variants

Twinings introduced Lady Grey in 1994 as a softer counterpoint to Earl Grey. Same bergamot base but with added Seville orange peel and lemon peel, and typically a lighter Chinese tea base. The cup is brighter, more citrussy, less perfumed. Lady Grey is a trademark of Twinings; other brands sell similar lighter Earl Grey variants under different names.

Other named variants worth knowing:

- **Russian Earl Grey:** adds dried citrus peels and sometimes vanilla, the tradition was born in Russia where Earl Grey was historically popular
- **French Earl Grey:** adds rose petals or rose oil to the bergamot, a more floral cup, often considered an after dinner option
- **Earl Grey Cream:** bergamot plus vanilla, a dessert leaning variant
- **Smoky Earl Grey:** uses Lapsang Souchong or pine smoked tea as the base, the bergamot meets a campfire note, polarising
- **Lavender Earl Grey:** bergamot plus dried lavender, a floral forward cup
- **Decaf Earl Grey** CO2 decaffeinated, 2 to 5mg of residual caffeine
- **Earl Grey Rooibos:** caffeine free, see the rooibos overview and the Dragonfly Earl Grey Rooibos page
- **Earl Grey Green:** bergamot on a green tea base, much lighter cup, brewed at green tea temperatures

Caffeine in Earl Grey

Standard Earl Grey on a black tea base sits in the 40 to 70mg per cup range, identical to plain black tea. The bergamot doesn't change the caffeine; it's just a flavouring layer. For the green base or rooibos base variants, caffeine is correspondingly lower or zero. Full caffeine context across all tea families is in the ultimate caffeine guide.

The Charles Grey origin story (the legends)

There are at least three competing origin stories for Earl Grey, all dating from the 1830s, and the historical record doesn't decisively support any of them:

1. **The diplomat thank you story**: Charles Grey received the blend as a gift from a Chinese diplomat (or "mandarin") whose son's life had been saved by a member of Grey's entourage. Romantic but not well documented.
2. **The Quincey blender story**: London tea merchant Richard Twining (or another contemporary) blended bergamot with black tea specifically to mask the off flavours of poor quality Chinese tea reaching London. The blend was named for Earl Grey because it was developed during his premiership. More plausible.
3. **The hard water story**: the blend was developed for Earl Grey's home in Northumberland, where the local hard water made standard black tea taste flat. The bergamot helped the cup taste better. Possibly an embellishment.

Several things count against the diplomat thank you story in particular:

- Charles Grey never visited China.
- Bergamot was already a known tea flavouring in early 19th century London, well before his premiership.

- No surviving period correspondence supports the tale.
- The Earl's family has acknowledged that the story is folklore.

The nobody knows for sure, and Charles Grey's family never trademarked the name, which is why every tea brand in the world can sell "Earl Grey" without paying anyone. The first documented commercial Earl Grey was sold by Jacksons of Piccadilly in the 1830s; Twinings claims continuous production since the same era.

Why Earl Grey stuck

- **A flavour you can name:** bergamot is unlike any other tea flavouring, once you know it you recognise it instantly
- **British shorthand:** it reads as the polite British cup abroad, helped along by Captain Picard ordering "Earl Grey, hot" on Star Trek
- **Range:** it drinks well black, with lemon, with milk, and it carries into baking, ice cream and cocktails, few teas have that spread
- **Twinings marketing:** decades of consistent brand building made Earl Grey a Twinings hero product

Earl Grey vs other British black teas

	Earl Grey	English Breakfast	Lady Grey
Base	Variable, often Keemun or Ceylon	Assam led, sometimes plus Ceylon and Kenyan	Light Chinese
Flavour added	Bergamot oil	None, plain black	Bergamot + Seville orange + lemon peel
Cup colour	Amber to copper	Mahogany	Lighter amber
Takes milk	Optional, lemon traditional	Yes, the standard British way	Better without milk
Best for	Afternoon cup, with cake or biscuits	Morning cup, with breakfast	Afternoon cup, lighter occasions

For the full British breakfast tea context including Yorkshire, PG Tips, Tetley, and Twinings English Breakfast, see the best selling British teas guide and the traditional breakfast blends guide.

Earl Grey is also one of the most rewarding teas to cook with, the bergamot carries into shortbread, ice cream and cocktails. See cooking with tea and the Earl Grey martini recipe.

How to judge an Earl Grey

The base and the bergamot vary independently, so taste for each one separately. It sorts the shelf faster than working through brands.

- **Aroma:** distinctly floral and citrussy, slightly perfumed. Bergamot is unmistakable.
- **Body:** medium. A Ceylon base gives backbone without overwhelming the bergamot.
- **Flavour:** bright black tea with bergamot's complex citrus floral character. Some Earl Greys lean more citrussy, others more floral.

- **Finish:** long, with the bergamot lingering on the palate.

The bergamot test, in three steps:

1. Smell the dry leaves. Real bergamot smells complex, citrussy with a floral undertone, not sharply perfumed.
2. Brew at 3 minutes and smell the cup. The bergamot should be present but not overwhelming.
3. Taste. The bergamot should integrate with the tea rather than sit on top of it. Cheap synthetic bergamot tastes added.

Signal	Cheap or poor	Good
Black base	Dusty fannings, flat and harsh	Whole leaf Ceylon or China, brisk and clean
Bergamot	Sharp, synthetic, perfume like	Rounded natural citrus, fragrant not soapy
Dry aroma	One note chemical	Layered citrus over real tea
With milk	Curdled, muddy flavour	Holds up, or better taken black or with lemon
Aftertaste	Bitter, lingering perfume	Clean, citrus fades to tea

What we stock

Browse the Earl Grey range through the black tea range (filter for Earl Grey) and the Earl Grey collection. If you want our picks with current prices rather than the background, the best Earl Grey tea guide sorts them by what you want the cup for. The most bought lines:

- True English Tea (T.E.T) British Mix Collection, 30 Tea Bags 57.5g
- Lipton Black Earl Grey With Italian Bergamot, 20 Tea Bags 32g
- Tetley Earl Grey, 50 Tea Bags 125g
- Teapigs Darjeeling Earl Grey, 15 Tea Bags 37.5g
- Brew Tea Co Earl Grey Proper, 15 Tea Bags 45g
- Clipper Organic Fairtrade Earl Grey Tea, 80 Unbleached Tea Bags 200g

Three brands are worth knowing here, because each one shows what a different base does to the same bergamot. They are the ones named in the base table above:

- Twinings, the light Chinese Keemun base, the historical reference point for what Earl Grey tasted like
- Dilmah, a single origin Sri Lankan Ceylon base, brisker and brighter under the same bergamot
- Dragonfly, a rooibos base, which is how a caffeine free Earl Grey is made at all

Other Earl Greys on our shelf come from Tetley, Loyd and Hyson.

For the wider tea family map see the black tea overview, the green tea overview, and the rooibos overview. For brewing fundamentals across all families, the loose leaf brewing guide. For the caffeine context the caffeine across teas.

Source

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

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · A couple of reliable Earl Greys beat a cupboard of curiosities. Take turns between two or three Earl Greys you like.

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