Darjeeling Tea: Origins, Estates and Flavour

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Darjeeling, in summary:** Darjeeling, the "champagne of teas": the Himalayan terroir, the four flushes, the muscatel character, and why the name alone is not a guarantee.

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

Darjeeling is the most prized of all Indian teas, often called "the champagne of teas" for its delicate, complex character and limited geographical origin. Grown only in the small Darjeeling district of West Bengal, India, in the foothills of the Himalayas, Darjeeling produces a distinctively light, muscatel flavoured black tea that's unlike any other tea in the world. The Darjeeling Geographical Indication (similar to Champagne or Stilton) protects the name, ensuring only tea grown in the specific Darjeeling region can carry the Darjeeling label.

This guide covers everything about Darjeeling: the geography that makes the character, the four seasonal flushes that produce dramatically different cups, the brewing approach that brings out the best, the major tea estates, and how to navigate the Darjeeling section of any decent British tea retailer.

The Darjeeling geography

Darjeeling tea is grown in a small district of West Bengal, India, in the foothills of the Himalayas at altitudes of 600 to 2,000 metres. The growing region covers approximately 17,500 hectares across 87 registered tea gardens (estates), producing only about 8.5 million kilograms of tea per year. To put that in perspective, total Indian tea production is about 1.4 billion kilograms annually; Darjeeling accounts for less than 1 percent of Indian tea by volume but commands premium prices that put it at the top of the global tea market by value per kilogram.

The geography produces the distinctive Darjeeling character through several factors:

- **High altitude:** growing high up slows leaf growth and concentrates flavour compounds
- **Cool climate:** the Himalayan foothills produce cool nights and mild days; ideal for slow growth tea
- **Specific cultivar** Darjeeling uses the China type tea plant variety (*Camellia sinensis var. sinensis*), distinct from the Assam type used in most Indian tea, producing a different flavour profile
- **Mountain mist and rainfall patterns:** the regional weather produces specific moisture conditions that affect leaf development

- **Soil composition:** the Himalayan foothill soil contains specific mineral compositions that influence cup character

Together these factors give a tea that cannot be copied outside the Darjeeling region. Tea grown to similar specifications elsewhere produces different cups; the geography is fundamental to the Darjeeling character.

The "Champagne of teas", and why it's protected

Darjeeling holds Geographical Indication (GI) protection, similar to Champagne (must come from Champagne, France), Roquefort cheese, and Parma ham. Only tea grown, processed, and packed in the Darjeeling district can be labelled "Darjeeling." The Tea Board of India enforces this internationally. The famous logo, "Darjeeling" in a stylised script with a leaf and bud design, certifies authentic origin.

This matters because Darjeeling production is small, about 8 million kg per year, but global "Darjeeling" sales would suggest 40+ million kg if all the labels were clear. Most "Darjeeling" tea bags in supermarkets are blends with non Darjeeling tea or outright mislabelling. Real single estate Darjeeling carries the GI logo.

The four seasonal flushes

Darjeeling is harvested in four distinct seasonal flushes, each producing dramatically different cup character:

First Flush (Spring, March to April), the most prized harvest. The first flush produces light, delicate, floral teas with a green tea like character despite being technically processed as black tea. The cups are pale gold rather than amber, with notes of fresh cut grass, white flowers, and a slight muscatel sweetness. First flush Darjeelings command the highest prices and are the closest Darjeeling gets to a green tea drinking experience. Often described as "champagne like" for the bright, complex character.

Second Flush (Summer, May to June), the most recognisable Darjeeling character. The second flush produces fuller bodied teas with the distinctive muscatel grape flavour that's most associated with Darjeeling. The cups are more amber, with notes of muscat grapes, ripe fruit, and floral honey. Second flush is the classic Darjeeling experience and the version most British drinkers will encounter in retail.

Monsoon Flush (Summer Autumn, July to September), the least prized harvest. The monsoon flush produces stronger, less complex teas during the rainy season; the cups are bolder but lack the refinement of first and second flush. Monsoon flush is rarely sold as single flush Darjeeling and is more often used in blends.

Autumnal Flush (Autumn, October to November), the underappreciated harvest. The autumnal flush produces medium bodied teas with toasted, nutty character and warm copper colour. Less famous than first or second flush but excellent value for drinkers wanting authentic Darjeeling character at lower prices.

For the complete black tea family map see the black tea overview.

The muscatel character

The defining flavour note of premium Darjeeling, particularly second flush. "Muscatel" refers to a flavour profile reminiscent of muscat grapes (the grape variety used in muscat dessert wines): sweet, floral, slightly fruity, with a complex aromatic character that's hard to describe but immediately recognisable.

The muscatel character is partly produced by a specific insect: the green leafhopper (*Empoasca* species) that feeds on Darjeeling tea leaves. The plant's defence response to the insect feeding produces specific aromatic compounds that contribute to the muscatel flavour. This is why "leafhopper bitten" leaves are sometimes specifically marketed in premium Darjeeling; the insect bite is part of what creates the most prized flavour profile.

The muscatel character is most pronounced in second flush Darjeelings from gardens with high leafhopper populations during the growing season. First flush has less muscatel character; autumnal flush has different secondary notes. The character also develops with proper brewing; under brewed Darjeeling doesn't show the muscatel profile fully.

The major Darjeeling tea estates

Darjeeling tea is sold by garden (estate) rather than just by region, similar to how fine wine is sold by vineyard. The major Darjeeling estates worth knowing:

- **Castleton:** one of the most prized estates, particularly known for second flush teas with strong muscatel character
- **Margaret's Hope:** historic estate producing balanced, classic Darjeelings across all flushes
- **Glenburn:** family owned estate with reputation for elegant first flush teas
- **Makaibari:** the world's first tea estate to convert to fully organic biodynamic farming, producing distinctive ethical credentials Darjeeling
- **Goomtee:** mid elevation estate with consistent quality across all flushes
- **Risheehat:** high elevation estate producing crisp, bright teas
- **Ambootia:** organic certified estate with strong sustainability programmes
- **Soom:** known for exceptional second flush teas
- **Singbulli:** mid tier estate with broad accessibility
- **Selimbong:** organic estate known for distinctive first flush character

For premium Darjeeling buyers, the estate name is part of the value proposition; the specific garden produces specific cup character that experienced drinkers learn to recognise. For everyday Darjeeling drinkers in mainstream British retail, the brand blended Darjeelings (Twinings, Whittard, Fortnum & Mason) are blends from multiple estates rather than single garden teas, and provide the general Darjeeling character without the estate specific positioning.

How to brew Darjeeling properly

Darjeeling is the most temperature sensitive black tea family and benefits from slightly different brewing than typical British black tea:

1. **Use freshly drawn cold water** brought to the boil and then allowed to cool slightly (target 90 to 95°C; a thermometer or a temperature-controlled kettle is the reliable way to tell)
2. **Use 1 to 2 teaspoons of leaves per 200ml cup:** slightly less leaf than standard black tea because Darjeeling is delicate

3. **Brew for 3 to 4 minutes:** less than the 4 to 5 minutes for stronger Assam led blends; over brewing flattens the delicate character
4. **Strain or remove leaves promptly**
5. **Drink neat or with a slice of lemon:** milk is generally avoided with quality Darjeeling because it masks the muscatel character

The temperature point matters: boiling water on premium Darjeeling can flatten the distinctive character, particularly for first flush. The 90 to 95°C target preserves the delicate floral notes. For Darjeeling and every other family, the right heat is in the water temperatures guide and the loose leaf brewing guide.

Premium Darjeeling vs everyday Darjeeling

The Darjeeling category covers a huge price range, from £4 supermarket bagged Darjeeling to £80+ single estate first flush from premium retailers. The differences:

- **Supermarket Darjeeling tea bags (£3 to £6)** typically blended Darjeeling with various other origins, processed for the bag format. Provides a hint of Darjeeling character but rarely shows the full muscatel quality. Twinings Darjeeling is the typical supermarket shelf example.
- **Premium loose leaf Darjeeling (£15 to £40 per 100g)** single estate or quality blended Darjeeling in whole leaf format. Shows authentic Darjeeling character; this is where the muscatel quality becomes apparent.
- **First flush specialist Darjeeling (£40 to £80+ per 100g)** the most prized seasonal harvests from top estates. Shows the full delicate floral character that defines premium Darjeeling.

For drinkers exploring Darjeeling for the first time, supermarket Darjeeling is fine for getting a sense of the family character; for drinkers who want to understand what Darjeeling can really be, premium loose leaf is essential. The price step up is real but so is the cup quality difference.

Why Darjeeling is expensive

- **Limited production area.** Only 87 estates, only 8 million kg/year. Compare with Assam (300+ million kg) and Kenya (500+ million kg).
- **Hand picking.** The terraced steep estates aren't suitable for mechanical harvesting.
- **Old Chinese variety bushes.** Lower yield than the Assam variety.
- **Rising global demand.** Especially from Japan, Germany, US, UK.
- **Climate change pressure.** Production is declining; quality is increasingly variable.

The oversold problem

Far more tea is sold labelled "Darjeeling" worldwide than the district actually produces. The GI is in practice frequently stretched, blended out or misused. The defence is straightforward: look for the Darjeeling GI logo, prefer single-estate teas that name the garden and flush, and be realistic about price. Real first flush, single garden Darjeeling is scarce and dear; a suspiciously cheap one labelled only "Darjeeling" is telling you something.

Darjeeling vs Assam vs Ceylon

The three major Indian and Sri Lankan black tea origins produce dramatically different cups:

Origin	Character	Strength	Best with
Darjeeling	Light, muscatel, floral, complex	Lighter	Neat or with lemon; not milk
Assam	Malty, strong, biscuity, full bodied	Strongest	Milk, hearty breakfasts
Ceylon (Sri Lanka)	Brisk, bright, citrusy, clean	Medium	Either neat or with milk

Most British supermarket black tea blends combine all three (and Kenyan tea) to produce balanced everyday cups. For drinkers wanting to taste each origin distinctly, single origin loose leaf from each region is the educational starting point.

The Darjeeling sustainability picture

Darjeeling tea production faces significant sustainability challenges. The growing area is small and well defined; climate change has affected the regional weather patterns; many estates have struggled with profitability and worker welfare issues over the last 30 years. Several positive developments:

- **Geographical Indication protection:** granted in 2011, protects the Darjeeling name from misuse and ensures only authentic Darjeeling can carry the label
- **Organic certification growth:** several major estates (Makaibari, Ambootia, others) have converted to fully organic farming
- **Direct trade relationships** more estates are selling directly to specialty retailers, capturing more value for the producer side
- **Worker welfare programmes:** several estates have invested in housing, education, and healthcare for tea workers

For drinkers who specifically prioritise ethical sourcing in their Darjeeling purchasing, look for organic certified single estate Darjeeling from estates with credible sustainability programmes. The premium pricing for these teas helps fund the sustainability initiatives.

What we stock

Browse the black tea range for Darjeeling and other single origin black teas. Major brand stockists of Darjeeling on teas.co.uk include:

- **Twinings Darjeeling:** the supermarket shelf accessible introduction to the family
- **Various premium specialty Darjeelings** when supply allows from specialist importers

For comparisons across the wider black tea landscape, see also: Twinings, Teapigs, Yorkshire Tea, Hyson.

The verdict on Darjeeling

Darjeeling is one of the great teas of the world. The combination of geographical specificity, seasonal complexity, distinctive muscatel character, and premium positioning makes it a category worth exploring for any serious tea drinker. The supermarket shelf bagged Darjeeling provides accessible entry to the family;

premium loose leaf single estate Darjeeling shows what the category can really be.

For drinkers used to heavy British builders' brews, Darjeeling will feel light and unfamiliar at first. This is the authentic character rather than a defect. Brew it slightly cooler and shorter than your usual black tea, drink it neat without milk, and give yourself a few cups to develop appreciation for the muscatel complexity. Many British drinkers who try premium Darjeeling once become committed to having it as part of their tea cupboard alongside their everyday breakfast tea.

The premium for top Darjeeling is real; £40 per 100g for first flush from leading estates is the price of entry to the most refined black tea there is. For a serious tea collection, keeping at least one quality Darjeeling beside the breakfast blends gives real variety in the cup.

For the wider context see the black tea overview, the English Breakfast vs Irish Breakfast comparison, the loose leaf brewing guide, the water temperatures guide, the Twinings deep dive, and the Teapigs deep dive.

The teas that come up around this subject: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Pop into the tea shop for the rest of the Darjeeling range, with free UK shipping from £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · The Darjeeling you actually finish is the right one. Explore other estates and flushes only once that one is sorted.

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