Ceylon Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Ceylon, in summary:** The full Ceylon reference: a brisk, bright, citrus edged Sri Lankan black, its elevation tiers, how to brew it, and why its quality is so consistent.

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

Ceylon tea (now formally Sri Lankan tea, though "Ceylon" remains the international trade name) is one of the world's premier black tea origins, distinguished by brisk, bright, citrusy character and substantial volume on global tea markets. Sri Lanka produces around 300 million kilograms of tea annually, making it the world's fourth largest tea producer, with Ceylon tea exported to over 90 countries and forming a significant part of major British black tea blends. The "Ceylon" name was retained as the international trade designation when Sri Lanka changed its name in 1972, similar to how Bombay tea retains its name despite the city being renamed Mumbai.

This guide covers everything about Ceylon tea: the geography that produces the brisk character, the major regional growing areas (Nuwara Eliya, Dimbula, Uva, Kandy, and others), the orthodox processing that distinguishes Ceylon from CTC Indian tea, the seasonal harvests, and how Ceylon fits into British tea culture .

The Sri Lankan tea geography

Sri Lankan tea is grown across the mountainous central and southern regions of the island, at elevations from sea level to 2,000+ metres. The growing region is divided into seven distinct sub regions, each producing tea with characteristic flavour profiles based on altitude, climate, and seasonal patterns. The major regions:

High grown regions (above 1,200m):

- **Nuwara Eliya:** the highest elevation region in the central highlands (1,800 to 2,000m and above), producing the lightest and most delicate Ceylon teas. The cups are pale gold with bright, slightly floral character; sometimes called "the champagne of Ceylon teas". The high elevation produces slow leaf growth and concentrated flavour compounds.
- **Dimbula:** mid to high elevation western highlands (1,200 to 1,700m), producing medium light teas with brisk character and clean finish. The dry season Dimbula (January to March) is particularly prized for its crispness.

- **Uva:** eastern highlands (900 to 1,500m), producing distinctive aromatic teas with mentholated character. Uva tea produced during the optimal seasonal window (July to September) commands premium prices for its specific aromatic profile.

Mid grown regions (600 to 1,200m):

- **Kandy:** the central region around Kandy city, producing fuller bodied medium strength teas. This is the original Ceylon district, where James Taylor first planted tea, and it is where Hyson is headquartered.
- **Uda Pussellawa:** mid to high grown, sitting between Nuwara Eliya and Uva. Less famous than its neighbours but producing excellent specialist teas.

Low grown regions (sea level to 600m):

- **Ruhuna:** low grown, on the southern coast. Dark, bold, sometimes smoky.
- **Sabaragamuwa:** low to mid grown, central south. Full bodied, traditional in character.
- Both are often used for blending where heavy character and dark cup colour are wanted.

The regional variation produces meaningful cup character differences. High grown Ceylon is light, bright, and delicate; low grown Ceylon is full bodied and dark; mid grown Ceylon balances the two extremes. For drinkers exploring Ceylon, sampling teas from several regions gives real variety in cup character.

For more on the wider black tea family see the black tea overview.

The Ceylon tea history

Sri Lankan tea production began in the late 1860s after the collapse of the Ceylon coffee industry due to coffee leaf rust disease (*Hemileia vastatrix*). The first commercial tea plantation in Ceylon was established by Scottish planter James Taylor at the Loolecondera Estate in 1867; the resulting tea was so successful that within a few decades Ceylon had become one of the world's largest tea exporters, replacing the failed coffee industry as the colonial era backbone of the Sri Lankan agricultural economy. By the 1890s tea had replaced coffee almost completely, and the island went from a coffee led colony to one of the world's biggest tea exporters in roughly eighty years. It sits around third in the world by tea exported, while ranking fourth by the amount of tea grown; the two rankings differ because Sri Lanka exports most of what it produces.

Notable historical milestones:

- **1860s** Ceylon coffee industry collapses due to leaf rust disease
- **1867** James Taylor plants the first commercial tea at Loolecondera Estate
- **1873:** the first Ceylon tea is shipped to London, beginning the global Ceylon tea trade
- **1890s** Thomas Lipton acquires Ceylon tea estates and begins building the Lipton Tea brand around Ceylon origin tea. The business was vertically integrated from estate to shop, so Ceylon tea reached British shelves cheaply enough to become an everyday drink instead of a drink for the aristocracy
- **1948** Ceylon gains independence from Britain; the tea industry continues as the country's largest export

- **1972** Ceylon is renamed Sri Lanka, but the "Ceylon" name is kept in the tea trade thanks to its established international brand recognition
- **2010s onwards:** increasing focus on premium positioning, organic certification, and direct trade relationships

The Ceylon tea industry remains a major employer in Sri Lanka, with hundreds of thousands of workers employed across the tea estates and processing facilities. The industry is concentrated in the central highlands and supports significant infrastructure (railways, port facilities, processing plants) that's been built up over 150+ years of tea production.

The "Ceylon" name and the Lion logo

"Ceylon Tea" is not simply a nostalgic trade name. It is a protected origin mark, and unusually for an origin mark it is actually enforced: only tea grown, processed and packed within Sri Lanka may carry it.

- **1972:** the country renames itself from Ceylon to Sri Lanka
- **The tea industry** keeps "Ceylon" as the international trade name
- **Today** “Ceylon Tea” is a protected origin mark, and it is properly policed
- **The requirement:** the tea must be grown, processed and packed within Sri Lanka to carry the mark
- **The Lion logo:** the “Pure Ceylon” lion on a packet marks the tea as authentic, because every export batch is tested and certified by the Sri Lanka Tea Board

The Lion logo confirms origin, not greatness, so the cup is still the evidence.

The Ceylon character

The defining flavour profile of Ceylon black tea: brisk, bright, citrusy, with a clean finish and medium body. Distinctive characteristics:

- **Brightness:** the cup has a clear, bright character without heavy maltiness
- **Citrus notes:** often described as lemon like or orange peel like, providing a clean acidic finish
- **Medium body:** between the heavy Assam and the delicate Darjeeling
- **Clean finish:** doesn't linger heavily; refreshing rather than warming
- **Versatility with milk or lemon** works well neat with a slice of lemon (the more traditional Sri Lankan serving) or with milk in the British style

The brisk character comes partly from the orthodox processing approach used by most Ceylon tea producers. Where most Indian tea is now CTC processed (cut tear curl) for tea bags, much Ceylon tea is still produced using orthodox methods (traditional rolling and oxidation), which preserves more whole leaf character and produces a brisker, more refined cup. See the Hyson deep dive for more on the orthodox processing approach.

Orthodox vs CTC processing

One of the practical distinctions between Ceylon and most modern Indian tea: processing method.

Orthodox processing (traditional method, dominant in Ceylon):

1. Withering, the picked leaves are spread on racks for several hours to lose moisture
2. Rolling, the withered leaves are rolled to break the cell walls and start oxidation
3. Oxidation, the leaves are spread out and allowed to oxidise for 1 to 4 hours
4. Drying, the oxidised leaves are dried in heated chambers to halt oxidation and produce shelf stable tea
5. Sorting, leaves are sorted into grades based on size and quality

CTC processing (cut tear curl, dominant in modern Indian tea production):

1. Withering (similar to orthodox)
2. Cut tear curl, leaves are passed through machines that cut, tear, and curl the leaves into uniform small pellets
3. Oxidation (faster than orthodox due to greater leaf surface area)
4. Drying and sorting

The CTC method is faster, more consistent, and better suited to tea bag production; the orthodox method is slower but preserves more whole leaf character. Ceylon's continued emphasis on orthodox processing is part of why Ceylon black tea is often perceived as more refined than CTC Indian tea, even though both can produce excellent cups.

Ceylon grading explained

Ceylon orthodox grading is precise. The grade on the packet describes leaf size and tip content, not quality:

- **OP (Orange Pekoe)** long, wiry whole leaves
- **BOP (Broken Orange Pekoe)** smaller broken pieces; faster brewing, stronger cup
- **FOP (Flowery Orange Pekoe)** OP with significant tip (young leaf bud); premium
- **FBOP, FBOPF and the other subdivisions:** specifying tip content and breakage
- **Fannings and Dust:** the smallest grades, used in tea bags

Higher grades (OP, FOP) are not necessarily better, they are different. A strong breakfast cup wants BOP for fast extraction; a gentle afternoon cup wants OP for a slower release.

Ceylon beyond black tea

Ceylon is overwhelmingly a black tea origin, but Sri Lanka produces more than black:

- **Ceylon green tea** a smaller production; lighter and less grassy than Japanese green, more vegetal than Chinese green
- **Ceylon white tea** "Silver Tips", a very small production from the highest altitude estates, at premium pricing

- **Specialty teas:** some estates produce oolong style and even smoke cured Ceylon; niche, but interesting

The Ceylon seasonal harvests

Sri Lankan tea is harvested year round due to the tropical climate, but specific regions have optimal "quality seasons" when the best teas are produced:

- **Western highlands (Nuwara Eliya, Dimbula)** January to March is the dry season producing the best teas; "Western quality season" Ceylon is highly prized
- **Eastern highlands (Uva)** July to September is the optimal "eastern quality season"; Uva tea from this period commands premium prices for its distinctive aromatic profile
- **Other regions:** year round production with less pronounced seasonal variation

The seasons are staggered because Sri Lanka has two monsoons, the southwest from May to September and the northeast from December to February. Different regions therefore reach peak quality at different points in the year, which is why there is always good Ceylon coming off the slopes somewhere.

For premium Ceylon buyers, the seasonal positioning matters; "Nuwara Eliya First Flush" or "Uva July Crop" are specific quality designations. For everyday Ceylon blended supermarket tea, the seasonal differences are largely irrelevant because the year round production is blended for consistency.

How to brew Ceylon properly

Ceylon takes the standard British black tea brewing approach with a few specific considerations:

1. **Use freshly drawn cold water** brought to a rolling boil. Ceylon takes boiling water without issue.
2. **Use 1 to 2 teaspoons of leaves per 200ml cup**
3. **Brew for 3 to 4 minutes:** slightly shorter than Assam led blends; the brisk Ceylon character benefits from controlled extraction
4. **Strain or remove leaves**
5. **Drink with a slice of lemon (traditional Sri Lankan style) or with milk (British style)** both work; sugar optional

Ceylon tends to be slightly less forgiving of over brewing than Assam; the bright character can become astringent if brewed too long. Premium high grown Ceylon (Nuwara Eliya, Dimbula) is more delicate and benefits from the shorter brewing time. The detail for each tea family is in the water temperatures guide.

Ceylon in British tea blends

Ceylon is one of the major component origins in British black tea blends, alongside Assam and Kenyan tea. The role of Ceylon:

- **English Breakfast blends** Ceylon typically provides the brightness and clean finish; balanced with Assam for body

- **Yorkshire Tea Original:** multi origin blend with Ceylon contributing brightness
- **Yorkshire Tea Gold:** three origin blend with Ceylon as part of the balance
- **Earl Grey:** the bergamot flavoured black tea is often Ceylon based, with the brisk Ceylon character providing a clean canvas for the bergamot oil
- **Single origin Ceylon products:** several brands sell pure Ceylon tea (Twinings Ceylon, Hyson, various others) for drinkers who want the unblended origin character

For drinkers wanting to taste pure Ceylon character, single origin Ceylon tea is the way to do it. Hyson is the most prominent dedicated Ceylon brand on British shelves; Twinings Ceylon is the supermarket shelf option. The pure Ceylon character is brisker and brighter than typical British blended tea.

Ceylon vs Assam vs Darjeeling

The three major black tea origins, side by side:

Origin	Character	Best for	Pairs with
Ceylon (Sri Lanka)	Brisk, bright, citrusy, clean	All day drinking, balanced cup	Lemon or milk, both work
Assam (India)	Malty, sturdy, biscuity, full bodied	Strong morning cup with milk	Milk and sugar, hearty breakfast
Darjeeling (India)	Light, muscatel, floral, complex	Delicate afternoon cup	Lemon or neat, never milk

For drinkers exploring single origin black tea, working through one of each (Ceylon, Assam, Darjeeling) provides foundational understanding of how blended British black teas are constructed. See the Assam overview and the Darjeeling overview.

The Ceylon ethical sourcing picture

Sri Lankan tea production has its own ethical context. The industry is a major employer (hundreds of thousands of workers, many descended from Indian Tamil workers brought in during the colonial period), and worker welfare has been a long standing concern. Several positive developments:

- **Rainforest Alliance certification** across many Sri Lankan estates
- **Sri Lanka's Tea Promoters' Association:** the broader industry body managing standards and producer support
- **Direct trade relationships** with smallholder cooperatives and individual estates expanding
- **Organic certification growth:** increasing number of estates converting to organic farming
- **Sri Lankan Tea Board:** the government body promoting Ceylon tea quality standards globally

For drinkers who specifically prioritise ethical sourcing, look for Rainforest Alliance certification, organic certification, or single estate teas from estates with credible sustainability programmes. Hyson's vertical integration approach (estate ownership) provides another form of ethical positioning through direct supply chain control.

What we stock

Browse the black tea range for Ceylon and Ceylon blended options. The most bought Ceylon products on teas.co.uk:

- Dilmah Caramel Tea, 20 Tea Bags 30g
- Dilmah Ceylon Pure Green Loose Leaf Tea, 100g
- Dilmah Ginger and Honey, 20 Tea Bags 30g
- Dilmah Earl Grey, 20 Tea Bags 30g
- Dilmah Premium Ceylon Black, 25 Tea Bags 50g

Four Ceylon brands worth knowing:

- **Dilmah** Sri Lankan owned, founded by Merrill Fernando. A single origin specialist at the premium tier, and on our shelf
- **Hyson** Sri Lankan estate brand, also on our shelf. Pure Ceylon at an accessible price
- **Mlesna** Sri Lankan, premium presentation, gift friendly
- **Lumbini, Pedro and Madulkelle estates:** specialist single estate Ceylons from independent suppliers

Dilmah and Hyson are on our shelves; the others are named so you know what to look for elsewhere.

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

Ceylon tea FAQ

Is Ceylon tea the same as Sri Lankan tea? Yes. "Ceylon" is the historical name, kept on as a tea trade designation.

What does Ceylon tea taste like? Bright, citrusy and brisk. Lighter than Assam, fuller than most Chinese black teas.

Is Ceylon tea black or green? Mostly black. Sri Lanka also produces small quantities of green, white and oolong.

How can I check that my Ceylon is the real thing? Look for the "Pure Ceylon" Lion logo on the packaging. The Sri Lanka Tea Board certifies it.

When is Ceylon at its best? Different regions peak at different times. Dimbula peaks January to March; Uva peaks July to September.

The verdict on Ceylon

Ceylon (Sri Lankan) tea is one of the great black tea origins, distinguished by brisk, bright, citrusy character and centuries of production refinement. The orthodox processing tradition produces a different cup quality from CTC Indian tea; the regional variation gives real diversity of character within the family.

For drinkers who want a balanced everyday cup that's neither as heavy as Assam nor as delicate as Darjeeling, Ceylon is the natural choice. The brisk character takes milk or lemon equally well; the medium

body suits a wide range of food pairings; the regional variation provides exploration potential for drinkers who want to dive deeper.

For drinkers building a single origin black tea understanding, Ceylon is essential alongside Assam and Darjeeling as one of the three foundational origins. Working through quality examples of each origin transforms how you taste British blended teas; you can identify the components and understand how the blends are constructed.

Hyson's dedication to Sri Lankan tea gives it some of the most authentic Ceylon on offer in British retail; the vertical integration and direct estate sourcing ensure real Ceylon character rather than blend based marketing positioning.

For the wider context see the black tea overview, the Assam overview, the Darjeeling overview, the English Breakfast vs Irish Breakfast comparison, the loose leaf brewing guide, the Hyson deep dive, the Twinings brand profile, and the Teapigs deep dive.

Curator's note: Ceylon does not get a fanbase the way Darjeeling or Yunnan does, but it deserves more credit than it gets. The brightness, the cleanness, the consistency: it is the workhorse of British tea drinking and the spine of countless blends. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Sensible options on the same shelf: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. For more, the full tea shop ships free across the UK over £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

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- Loose leaf vs teabag

Current Ceylon citrus tea comparison

For products that can be bought now, see Dilmah Earl Grey vs Hyson Lemon. The guide compares two citrus-flavoured Ceylon black teas, explains bergamot versus lemon and gives an unflavoured Ceylon baseline.

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