Dragonwell Green Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Dragonwell, in summary:** Dragonwell (Longjing) is the benchmark pan-fired Chinese green: flat leaf, chestnutty sweetness, low astringency. Grades, production, and how to brew it.

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

Dragonwell (Long Jing) is China's most famous green tea, the pan fired Chinese green tea that's been a national prestige drink for over 1,200 years and remains the standard against which other Chinese green teas are measured. Made from the leaves of *Camellia sinensis* grown around West Lake (Xi Hu) in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, dragonwell produces a distinctively flat, sword shaped leaf that brews into a clear pale yellow cup with toasted chestnut character and gentle sweetness. The pan firing production method distinguishes Chinese green tea from the steamed Japanese style; the resulting cup has a different flavour profile altogether.

This guide covers dragonwell from the West Lake heritage and the pan firing production method to the four seasonal grades, how to brew it, the best known commercial products, and how dragonwell compares with other green teas.

The dragonwell heritage

Dragonwell tea takes its name from the Dragon Well (Long Jing), a spring near the West Lake region of Hangzhou where the tea has been produced for over 1,200 years. The name refers both to the spring and to the tea cultivated in the surrounding hills; legend has it that a dragon lived in the well and the tea grown nearby took on special properties from the spring water.

The tea was raised to imperial tribute status during the Qing Dynasty (1644 to 1912); the 18 specific tea bushes at Shi Feng (Lion Peak), planted by Emperor Qianlong, are still standing and their tea is among the most prestigious agricultural products in China. Dragonwell continues to be one of China's "Famous Teas" (a formal designation for the highest quality national products) and is one of the most sought after green teas in international tea trade.

The "Xi Hu Long Jing" designation (West Lake Dragon Well) is a protected geographical indication; only tea grown in the specific West Lake region of Hangzhou can carry this designation. Dragonwell style teas grown elsewhere in Zhejiang Province (and indeed elsewhere in China) are sold as "Long Jing" without the West Lake provenance, at significantly lower prices.

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

The pan firing production method

Dragonwell is produced through pan firing, the traditional Chinese green tea method that distinguishes it from steamed Japanese style green teas:

1. **Plucking** only the youngest leaves and buds are picked, traditionally in early spring (Pre Qingming, the "before clear and bright" festival in early April, produces the most prized harvest)
2. **Withering:** the picked leaves are spread on bamboo trays for several hours to lose moisture
3. **Pan firing in a wok:** the withered leaves are tossed and pressed against the heated walls of a large wok at temperatures around 80 to 100°C; this halts oxidation while developing the distinctive flat leaf shape and toasted character. The pan firing is done by hand for premium dragonwell; the master tea maker controls the temperature and pressure to produce the characteristic flat, smooth leaf shape
4. **Cooling and resorting:** the leaves are cooled and sorted
5. **Second pan firing:** often a second pan firing develops more character and ensures the leaves are fully dried
6. **Final sorting and grading:** leaves are sorted by size, shape, and quality grade

The pan firing method produces several distinctive characteristics:

- **Flat, sword shaped leaves:** the wok pressing creates the distinctive shape that's part of dragonwell's visual identity
- **Smooth, flat leaf surface:** polished from contact with the wok walls
- **Toasted character** Maillard reaction browning develops the chestnut like flavour notes
- **Lower chlorophyll content** than steamed Japanese teas, producing pale yellow rather than bright green cup colour
- **More developed aroma:** the higher heat releases more volatile aroma compounds

For comparison with Japanese style steaming see the sencha overview.

The dragonwell flavour profile

Quality dragonwell has a distinctive flavour profile:

- **Toasted chestnut character:** the dominant flavour note from the pan firing; nutty, slightly toasted, faintly sweet
- **Gentle sweetness:** particularly in spring harvest premium grades
- **Mild umami:** less pronounced than Japanese sencha but still present
- **Smooth, silky mouthfeel:** the clean processing produces a refined cup texture
- **Pale yellow to gold cup colour:** lighter than Japanese steamed greens
- **Aromatic and fresh:** the aroma develops through proper brewing
- **Long sweet finish:** the cup lingers pleasantly after sipping

The toasted chestnut character is what most distinguishes dragonwell from Japanese sencha (which tends more grassy/marine) or Chinese gunpowder green tea (which tends more smoky/bold). For drinkers used to Japanese style green tea, dragonwell's toasted character is initially different but easy to appreciate; for drinkers used to British supermarket green tea bags, dragonwell shows what proper green tea can be.

The dragonwell grades

Dragonwell is graded by harvest timing and leaf quality:

Pre Qingming Dragonwell (early April harvest), the most prized grade. Picked before the Qingming festival in early April; the youngest, most tender leaves of the spring season produce the most refined, sweetest dragonwell with the highest premium pricing. Premium pre Qingming dragonwell from West Lake can cost £100+ per 100g.

Mingqian (April pre Qingming), similar to the above; the most premium category.

Pre Guyu (mid April), second tier premium harvest, before the Guyu festival in late April. Excellent quality at slightly lower prices than pre Qingming.

Guyu (late April harvest), standard grade dragonwell. Still good quality but less refined than the early spring harvests. Most everyday priced dragonwell falls into this category.

Summer dragonwell (May to August), lower grade harvests. More astringent, less refined, often used for blending or lower tier retail.

For drinkers exploring dragonwell, pre Guyu or Guyu grade dragonwell from a reputable specialist retailer provides good representative quality at accessible prices (£10 to £25 per 100g). Premium pre Qingming is for occasions where the very best dragonwell experience is wanted; the price premium is real but so is the quality difference.

How to brew dragonwell properly

Dragonwell brewing is similar to other green teas with some specifics:

1. **Use freshly drawn cold water** brought to a boil and then cooled to 75 to 85°C (slightly hotter than Japanese sencha; check with a thermometer or use a temperature control kettle)
2. **Use 1 teaspoon of leaves** (about 2g) per 200ml cup
3. **Steep for 2 to 3 minutes:** slightly longer than Japanese sencha; the pan fired character develops with slightly longer brewing
4. **Don't strain immediately:** dragonwell is traditionally drunk with the leaves remaining in the cup, slowly settling to the bottom; the leaves continue to release flavour through the cup
5. **Drink neat:** no milk, no sweetener; dragonwell is meant to be appreciated for its natural character
6. **Re brew the leaves:** premium dragonwell gives 3 to 4 excellent infusions; subsequent infusions use slightly hotter water and shorter brewing

The traditional Chinese gaiwan (lidded bowl) brewing approach is particularly suited to dragonwell because it allows the drinker to see the leaves dance and unfurl during brewing; the visual aspect is part of the appreciation. For everyday Western brewing, a basic infuser or small teapot works fine.

For the detail on each tea family, see the water temperatures guide and the loose leaf brewing guide.

The "leaves dance" tradition

One specific cultural element worth knowing: dragonwell is traditionally appreciated visually as well as gustatorily. When properly brewed in a clear glass or gaiwan, the flat sword shaped leaves dance vertically in the water during brewing, slowly sinking to the bottom as they release flavour. The visual aspect is considered part of the dragonwell experience.

For drinkers who want the full effect, brewing dragonwell in a tall clear glass (rather than a teapot or opaque cup) shows the leaves moving through the water; the sight adds to the pleasure of drinking it. Premium dragonwell from West Lake is particularly prized for the visual character of the leaves alongside the flavour.

Dragonwell vs other Chinese green teas

Comparison with major Chinese green tea styles:

Tea	Region	Character
Dragonwell (Long Jing)	Hangzhou, Zhejiang	Pan fired flat leaves, toasted chestnut, gentle sweetness
Mao Feng (Huangshan)	Huangshan, Anhui	Pan fired and shaped, sweet, fruity, gentle
Bi Luo Chun	Dongting, Jiangsu	Pan fired curled leaves, fruity, floral, intense aroma
Gunpowder	Zhejiang	Pan fired tightly rolled pellets, smoky, bold
Liu An Gua Pian	Anhui	Single leaf pan fired, vegetal, refined
Mengding Ganlu	Sichuan	Twisted leaves, sweet, mellow

For drinkers exploring Chinese green tea, working through several of these shows real variety in regional character. Dragonwell is the natural starting point because of its prestige and broad availability; from there, exploring Mao Feng (Teapigs offers a quality version) and Bi Luo Chun provides additional regional perspective.

Dragonwell vs Japanese sencha

The two great green teas of Asia, side by side:

	Dragonwell	Sencha
Production	Pan fired in wok	Steamed
Leaf shape	Flat, sword shaped	Needle shaped after rolling
Leaf colour	Pale green yellow	Bright green
Cup colour	Pale yellow to gold	Bright pale green
Flavour	Toasted chestnut, gentle sweetness	Bright vegetal, marine umami
L theanine	High	Very high
Brewing temperature	75 to 85°C	70 to 80°C
Brewing time	2 to 3 minutes	1 to 2 minutes

Both teas are excellent; the choice between them is largely a matter of personal flavour preference. Drinkers who like the toasted nut character of pan fired green tea tend to prefer dragonwell; drinkers who like the marine umami character of steamed green tea tend to prefer sencha. Many serious tea drinkers keep both for different occasions.

What we stock

Browse the green tea range. Chinese style green teas on teas.co.uk:

- Teapigs Mao Feng Green Tea, quality whole leaf Chinese green tea (Mao Feng style rather than dragonwell, but representative of the Chinese pan fired character)
- Twinings Pure Green Tea, everyday accessible Chinese style green
- Clipper Organic Pure Green Tea, organic everyday Chinese style green
- Teapigs Jasmine Pearls, hand rolled Chinese green tea pearls scented with jasmine

For dragonwell specifically, teas.co.uk is growing its Chinese range, and friends like Postcard Teas in London are well worth exploring for authentic West Lake dragonwell at premium grades. For everyday Chinese style green tea, the supermarket level brands cover most use cases.

For comparisons across the wider green tea landscape, see also: Teapigs, Twinings, Clipper, Pukka.

The verdict on dragonwell

Dragonwell is the prestige Chinese green tea that any serious green tea drinker should know. The combination of 1,200 years of heritage, distinctive pan fired character, refined toasted chestnut flavour profile, and visual appreciation through the leaf dance tradition makes it one of the great experiences in the tea world.

For drinkers exploring beyond British shelf supermarket green tea, dragonwell is the natural step up. The proper brewing technique (cooled water, slightly longer steep than sencha, no sweetener) is essential; anyone who's only had Chinese green tea brewed with boiling water hasn't really experienced what the family can offer.

For drinkers building a serious tea collection, including authentic Chinese dragonwell alongside Japanese sencha and the broader specialty green tea family provides foundational understanding of what green tea can really be. The two great green tea traditions (Chinese pan fired, Japanese steamed) produce dramatically different cups despite the same plant; appreciating both is part of becoming a knowledgeable green tea drinker.

For drinkers in the UK, sourcing authentic West Lake dragonwell requires going beyond supermarket brands; specialty importers provide the best access at premium grades. For everyday Chinese style green drinking, the broader Chinese green tea range from major brands provides accessible introduction without the West Lake premium pricing.

For the wider context see the green tea overview, the sencha overview, the matcha overview, the matcha vs green tea comparison, the green tea vs black tea comparison, the water temperatures guide, the loose leaf brewing guide, the ultimate caffeine guide, and the Teapigs deep dive.

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