Lapsang Souchong

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Lapsang Souchong, in summary:** Lapsang Souchong is pine-smoke-dried Wuyi black tea, generally the world's first black tea, with a powerful polarising malty-smoky cup and wide quality.

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

Lapsang Souchong is the smoke dried Chinese black tea with the most distinctive aroma of any commercial tea in British retail. Made from the leaves of *Camellia sinensis* grown in the Wuyi Mountains of Fujian Province, China, and traditionally smoke dried over pinewood fires, lapsang produces a black tea with a powerful smoky bonfire character that some drinkers love and others say tastes like medicine. It's one of the oldest documented black teas in the world (often credited as the original black tea, dating to the 1600s) and remains one of the most distinctive teas available on any British shelf.

This guide covers everything about lapsang souchong: the Wuyi Mountain heritage, the pine smoke production process, the polarising flavour character, the proper brewing approach, the major commercial products, and how lapsang fits into the wider Chinese black tea tradition.

The lapsang souchong heritage

Lapsang souchong (????, Zhèng Sh?n Xi?o Zh?ng, meaning "true mountain small variety") originated in the Wuyi Mountains of northern Fujian Province in the 17th century. The traditional origin story tells of a tea processing facility in the village of Tongmu being requisitioned by passing armies, forcing the tea workers to dry their tea over pine fires to meet shipping deadlines; the resulting smoky tea proved popular with European merchants and the production method became established.

The tea is widely credited as the original "black tea" in the modern sense; before lapsang's development, Chinese tea was primarily green or oolong. The full oxidation that defines black tea was first systematically applied at scale in the lapsang souchong tradition. From this Fujian origin, black tea production spread across China and eventually to India, Sri Lanka, Kenya, and the broader global tea industry.

The "Zheng Shan" (true mountain) designation refers to the specific Wuyi Mountain region; only tea grown in this protected geographical area can be sold as authentic Zheng Shan Xiao Zhong. Tea produced in the lapsang style outside this region is typically labelled simply "lapsang souchong" without the "Zheng Shan" prefix, similar to how Champagne is protected while sparkling wine made elsewhere uses different names.

The pine smoke production process

Authentic lapsang souchong is produced through a distinctive process:

1. **Plucking:** leaves and stems are picked from the Wuyi Mountain tea bushes; lapsang traditionally uses larger, more mature leaves (the "souchong" or "small kind" name refers to the leaf grade)
2. **Withering:** the picked leaves are spread on bamboo trays for several hours, sometimes over warm pine smoke for the first stage of smoke absorption
3. **Rolling:** the withered leaves are rolled to break the cell walls and start oxidation
4. **Oxidation:** the rolled leaves are oxidised to develop the dark colour and black tea character
5. **Pine smoke drying:** the oxidised leaves are dried over pinewood fires in traditional bamboo baskets above smouldering pine; the smoke imparts the characteristic smoky aroma. The drying process can take 8 to 10 hours and significantly affects the final cup character
6. **Final sorting:** leaves are sorted and graded

The pine smoke drying is what defines lapsang souchong. Different production batches use different pine wood (typically Pinus massoniana, the local Chinese pine), different smoke intensities, and different drying durations, producing variations in the final smokiness. Premium lapsang has subtler, more layered smoke; mass market lapsang tends toward heavier, more uniform smoke.

Modern variations include "unsmoked lapsang souchong" (sometimes called Bohea or Wuyi black tea) where the traditional smoke drying step is omitted, producing a tea with the underlying Wuyi character without the smoke layer. This unsmoked version reveals the natural sweet, fruity, malty character of the underlying tea that's typically masked by the smoke.

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

The lapsang flavour profile

Authentic lapsang souchong has one of the most distinctive flavour profiles of any tea:

- **Powerful pine smoke character:** the dominant note; described variously as "campfire", "bonfire", "BBQ", "Islay whisky like", or "tar"
- **Underlying sweet malty base:** the Wuyi black tea character provides body beneath the smoke; some drinkers describe a fruity honey character that emerges as the smoke recedes
- **Long warming finish:** the smokiness lingers in the mouth for minutes after sipping
- **Deep amber to dark mahogany cup colour**
- **Intense aroma:** the dry leaf has the strongest aroma of any commercial tea; the smoke is detectable across a room
- **Polarising character:** drinkers either love it or find it harsh and unpleasant

The polarising nature is part of lapsang's identity. New lapsang drinkers often need 3 or 4 cups before developing appreciation; the initial encounter can be overwhelming for drinkers unfamiliar with the smoky character. Drinkers who develop the taste often become devoted; lapsang is one of the more loved specialty teas among committed tea drinkers.

The whisky comparison holds up; lapsang shares some flavour notes with peated Scotch whiskies (particularly Islay malts like Laphroaig or Lagavulin) due to the phenolic compounds developed during pine smoke drying. Drinkers who like peated whisky often appreciate lapsang for similar reasons.

How to brew lapsang souchong properly

Lapsang takes the standard British black tea brewing approach:

1. **Use freshly drawn cold water** brought to a rolling boil. Lapsang takes boiling water without issue.
2. **Use 1 to 2 teaspoons of leaves** per 200ml cup; lapsang's strong character means you don't need extra leaf for body
3. **Brew for 3 to 5 minutes:** depending on desired smokiness intensity; shorter brewing produces lighter character, longer brewing produces stronger smoke
4. **Strain or remove leaves**
5. **Drink neat or with milk:** lapsang is one of the few teas that really works with milk (the smoke and malt hold up well once milk goes in); also excellent neat. Many drinkers find lapsang particularly good with a slice of lemon
6. **Sugar optional:** the natural sweetness of the underlying tea often doesn't need additional sweetener; some drinkers prefer it sweetened

Lapsang is one of the more forgiving teas to brew; the strong character means small variations in brewing don't dramatically affect the cup. For lapsang and every other tea, the right heat is set out in the water temperatures guide.

Lapsang in cooking

One distinctive use case worth knowing: lapsang souchong is used as a culinary ingredient as well as a beverage:

- **Smoking flavour for vegetarian cooking:** lapsang adds smoky depth to dishes without requiring actual smoking equipment; particularly useful for plant based cooking where bacon or smoked meat would traditionally provide the smoky note
- **Tea smoked meats and tofu:** traditional Chinese tea smoking technique uses lapsang to flavour duck, salmon, tofu, and other proteins
- **Bread and baking:** brewed lapsang can be used as the liquid in bread doughs to add smoky flavour
- **Cocktails and mocktails** lapsang infusions or syrups add unique smoky character to mixed drinks
- **Marinades and sauces:** lapsang's smokiness adds depth to barbecue sauces and marinades

For drinkers who enjoy lapsang as a beverage, exploring its culinary applications is a natural extension. A simple lapsang smoked salmon (poach salmon in strong brewed lapsang for 10 minutes) demonstrates the culinary potential.

Lapsang vs other Chinese black teas

Comparison with related Chinese black tea options:

Tea	Region	Character
Lapsang Souchong	Wuyi Mountains, Fujian	Smoky, malty, distinctive pine smoke aroma
Russian Caravan	Various Chinese origins	Mildly smoky blend, less intense than pure lapsang
Keemun (Qimen)	Anhui Province	Sweet, malty, slightly smoky, unsmoked. Often called the "burgundy of teas"
Yunnan (Dianhong)	Yunnan Province	Malty, honeyed, peppery, no smoke
Jin Jun Mei	Wuyi Mountains, Fujian	Premium unsmoked Wuyi black tea; sweet, fruity, complex

For drinkers wanting the lapsang character, pure lapsang souchong is the strongest delivery. For drinkers wanting Russian Caravan's milder smokiness as an introduction, this blend (typically lapsang plus other less smoky teas) is widely available; Twinings Russian Caravan is the supermarket shelf option. For drinkers wanting unsmoked Wuyi character, Jin Jun Mei or unsmoked lapsang reveals the underlying fruitiness without the smoke layer.

The Russian Caravan connection

Russian Caravan tea is a related blend with historical significance. The blend dates to the 17th-19th century overland tea trade between China and Russia, when tea was transported by camel caravan across thousands of miles. The trip took 16 to 18 months, and the tea was exposed to campfire smoke all the way, picking up a smoky character that eventually became part of its identity.

Modern Russian Caravan is a blend designed to echo this history, typically combining lapsang souchong with less smoky teas (often Keemun and Oolong) for a gentle smokiness rather than full intensity lapsang. For drinkers wanting introduction to smoky teas without the full lapsang intensity, Russian Caravan is a more accessible starting point.

Twinings Russian Caravan is widely available in British retail and provides a good representative of the blend style. See the Twinings deep dive.

Caffeine in lapsang

Lapsang souchong is a fully oxidised black tea; the caffeine content is comparable to other black teas:

- **Caffeine per cup** 40 to 60mg; standard British black tea range
- **Strong brewed lapsang** 60 to 70mg; comparable to a strong builders' brew
- **Suitable for morning to early afternoon:** like other black teas

For drinkers using lapsang as a morning cup, the caffeine load is appropriate. For evening drinking, decaf or caffeine free alternatives would be preferable. See the ultimate caffeine guide.

What we stock

Browse the black tea range. For a bold, strong black cup instead, the most bought on teas.co.uk:

- Tetley Extra Strong Breakfast Tea, 75 Tea Bags 237g
- Teapigs Earl Grey Strong, 15 Tea Bags 37.5g
- Twinings Assam Loose Tea, 125g
- Twinings Assam, 40 Tea Bags 100g
- Twinings Assam, 80 Tea Bags 200g
- Twinings Strong English Breakfast 120 Plant-Based, 375g

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

The verdict on Lapsang

Lapsang souchong is the most distinctive black tea on the British shelf and one of the most polarising teas available anywhere. The combination of pine smoke heritage, powerful aromatic character, malty underlying tea base, and culinary versatility makes it one of the more rewarding specialty teas for adventurous drinkers.

For drinkers exploring beyond standard British black tea, lapsang is worth trying at least once. The character is unlike any other tea you'll meet; you may become a devoted lapsang drinker or never want it again, but it's worth tasting once. The polarising nature means you'll know quickly whether it's for you; many drinkers love it from the first cup, others find it too overwhelming for regular drinking.

For drinkers who like peated Scotch whisky, smoked foods, or generally bold flavours, lapsang is likely to appeal. For drinkers who prefer subtle, delicate teas, lapsang will probably feel too aggressive; in this case, Russian Caravan provides a milder smoky introduction or unsmoked Keemun delivers similar Chinese black tea quality without the smoke character.

Don't underestimate lapsang in the kitchen; even drinkers who don't enjoy it in a cup can cook with it, where its smoky character adds real value. A few teaspoons used in vegetarian cooking provides smoky depth that's hard to achieve through other ingredients.

For drinkers building a serious specialty tea collection, lapsang souchong is a meaningful inclusion alongside the everyday breakfast blends, single origin Darjeeling and Assam, and the broader Chinese tea family. It's one of the most distinctive teas, worth keeping a tin of for the occasional dramatic cup.

For the wider context see the black tea overview, the Assam overview, the Darjeeling overview, the Ceylon overview, the English Breakfast vs Irish Breakfast comparison, the loose leaf brewing guide, the Twinings deep dive, and the caffeine reference.

Source

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

Teas in the same conversation: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Have a wander through the tea range; above £35, the smoky tins and everything else ship free in the UK.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Price lapsang by the cup, not by the tin. Loose lapsang usually wins there, though supermarket bags now and then do.

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