Tieguanyin Oolong

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tieguanyin, in summary:** Tieguanyin is the most famous Anxi oolong: traditionally darker-roasted at 30-40% oxidation, now widely produced in a modern lighter style with orchid and creamy notes.

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

Tieguanyin (often spelled Ti Kuan Yin in older Western texts) is one of China's "Famous Teas" and the most recognised oolong tea in the world. Made from the tieguanyin cultivar of *Camellia sinensis* grown in Anxi County, Fujian Province, the tea is named after the Iron Goddess of Mercy (the Buddhist deity Guanyin). It produces a distinctive curled leaf tea that brews into a clear gold cup with floral, slightly sweet, complex character that defines the lightly oxidised oolong style. Tieguanyin is one of the great teas worth knowing for any drinker exploring beyond green and black tea.

This guide covers everything about tieguanyin: the Anxi heritage, the legend behind the name, the production process that creates the distinctive style, the different oxidation grades, the proper brewing approach, and how tieguanyin fits into the wider oolong family.

The tieguanyin heritage

Tieguanyin originated in Anxi County, Fujian Province, in the 18th century during the Qing Dynasty. The traditional origin story tells of a poor farmer named Wei who discovered an unusual tea bush growing wild near a temple to Guanyin (the Goddess of Mercy in Chinese Buddhism). Wei tended the bush carefully, propagated it, and produced the first tieguanyin tea; the name "Iron Goddess of Mercy" reflects both the heavy textured leaves (suggesting iron) and the Guanyin temple where it was discovered.

The tea grew in prestige through the 19th and 20th centuries, becoming one of China's official "Famous Teas" and a major export product. Anxi County remains the centre of tieguanyin production; the specific cultivar and the local growing conditions combine to produce the distinctive character that's hard to replicate elsewhere.

Modern tieguanyin production has evolved significantly over the last 50 years. Traditional tieguanyin was relatively heavily oxidised and roasted, producing a fuller, deeper cup. Modern production trends have shifted toward lighter oxidation and less roasting, producing the bright green tea like cup that's now most common in international retail. Both traditional and modern styles exist; for drinkers exploring tieguanyin, knowing about both versions is useful.

For the wider oolong family see the oolong overview.

Zhengyan and authentic Anxi origin

Not every tea sold as "tieguanyin" comes from the core Anxi growing area. The strict authenticity term is **zhengyan** (literally "true origin"), which refers to tieguanyin grown in the historic core townships of Anxi County in southern Fujian. Broader-market tieguanyin uses the same cultivar grown elsewhere in Fujian, or further afield in Guangdong and Taiwan; it is genuinely the same plant but a different cup, because soil, altitude, and producer experience all show through in the finished tea. The two share the cultivar's potential, but only zhengyan Anxi tieguanyin commands the very top of the market.

This shows clearly in the price spread. Authentic zhengyan Anxi tieguanyin from named growers typically sells in the £30 to £150-plus per 100g range in the UK specialty trade, with the highest competition-grade lots well above that; mass-market tieguanyin (often broader-region cultivar tea) sits at £10 to £30 per 100g and can be perfectly enjoyable for everyday gongfu sessions. Both are legitimate purchases, but the price gap is genuine quality, not pure marketing. A reputable seller will state the growing area, the harvest year, and whether the tea is *qingxiang* (light, modern) or *nongxiang* (medium, traditional roasted).

The tieguanyin production process

Tieguanyin is produced through a complex multi step process:

1. **Plucking:** picking the appropriate leaves (typically the third and fourth leaves from the bud, more mature than for green or black tea)
2. **Sun withering:** the picked leaves are spread in the sun to begin moisture loss
3. **Indoor withering:** the leaves are moved indoors and gently shaken in bamboo trays; this causes controlled bruising of the leaf edges, initiating partial oxidation
4. **Repeated shaking and resting cycles:** the shaking and resting is repeated 4 to 8 times over many hours, gradually developing the partial oxidation that defines oolong tea. The process requires expertise to judge when oxidation has progressed enough
5. **"Kill green" (shaqing)** pan firing or steaming to halt oxidation when the desired level is reached. Modern light oxidation tieguanyin is killed at a much earlier stage than traditional heavy oxidation versions
6. **Rolling and shaping:** the leaves are wrapped in cloth and rolled into the characteristic tight balls or curls; this is repeated multiple times to develop the final shape
7. **Drying:** the rolled leaves are dried to remove remaining moisture
8. **Roasting (for traditional style)** the dried tea is roasted at low temperatures to develop deeper character; modern light style tieguanyin often skips or minimises this step

The oxidation level distinguishes different tieguanyin styles:

- **Light oxidation (modern, jade or qing xiang)** around 10 to 25 percent oxidation; produces the bright green appearance and floral character

- **Medium oxidation (traditional, nong xiang)** around 30 to 50 percent oxidation; deeper character with more complex notes
- **Heavily oxidised (chen xiang)** around 60+ percent oxidation; rich, fuller cup closer to a light black tea character

For drinkers new to tieguanyin, the modern light oxidation style is the most commonly available and the most accessible introduction. Traditional medium oxidation tieguanyin provides more complex character for drinkers wanting deeper exploration.

The tieguanyin flavour profile

Quality light oxidation tieguanyin has a distinctive flavour profile:

- **Strong floral character:** the dominant note; described as "orchid", "lilac", "honey floral", or "rich green flower"
- **Sweet, slightly fruity character:** particularly in premium grades
- **Complex aroma:** the fragrance is one of the more distinctive in the tea world
- **Smooth, silky mouthfeel:** the proper rolling and processing produces refined cup texture
- **Bright gold to greenish gold cup colour**
- **Long sweet finish:** the cup lingers pleasantly
- **Multiple infusion potential:** the rolled leaves slowly unfurl across multiple brews

Traditional medium oxidation tieguanyin has different character: deeper, with notes of toasted nut, ripe fruit, honey, and warm wood; less floral than the light oxidation modern style but more complex.

How to brew tieguanyin properly

Tieguanyin benefits from gongfu style brewing with multiple short infusions:

1. **Use freshly drawn cold water** brought to a boil and then cooled slightly to 85 to 90°C (or 90 to 95°C for traditional medium oxidation)
2. **Use 5 to 7g of leaves** per 150ml of water (more leaf than typical Western brewing); the rolled balls expand significantly
3. **Rinse the leaves first:** pour boiling water over the tea and immediately pour off; this "wakes up" the leaves and removes any dust
4. **First infusion:** brew for 30 to 45 seconds; the rolled leaves haven't fully unfurled so flavour extracts gradually
5. **Subsequent infusions:** increase brewing time slightly each round; tieguanyin is excellent for 5 to 8 infusions
6. **Drink neat:** no milk, no sweetener; tieguanyin's character is the entire point
7. **Pay attention to the leaves:** the slow unfurling across infusions is part of the experience; observing this in a clear gaiwan or glass adds to appreciation

For Western drinkers without gongfu equipment, simpler brewing works fine: 1 to 2 teaspoons of tieguanyin per 200ml cup, 90°C water, 3 to 4 minute brewing for first infusion, multiple shorter re brews. The character is still excellent though slightly less refined than gongfu approach.

For the family by family detail see the water temperatures guide and the loose leaf brewing guide.

Tieguanyin vs Da Hong Pao

The two most famous Chinese oolongs, side by side:

	Tieguanyin	Da Hong Pao
Region	Anxi, Fujian (south)	Wuyi Mountains, Fujian (north)
Style	Lighter oxidation, rolled leaves	Heavy oxidation, twisted leaves
Character	Floral, gentle, refined	Mineral, roasted, robust
Body	Light medium	Medium full
Brewing	85 to 90°C, multiple short infusions	95 to 100°C, multiple short infusions

Both are excellent oolongs but represent different sides of the family. For drinkers wanting introduction to oolong, tieguanyin is the more accessible starting point; the floral character is widely appealing. For drinkers wanting the more robust "rock tea" style, Da Hong Pao is the natural exploration. See the Da Hong Pao overview.

Caffeine and L theanine

Tieguanyin sits in the middle of the caffeine spectrum:

- **Caffeine per cup** 30 to 50mg, between green tea and black tea
- **L theanine content:** moderate; produces a relaxed focus effect though less pronounced than green tea or matcha
- **Suitable for morning to early afternoon drinking** similar to other oolongs

For drinkers exploring tea as caffeine source, oolongs like tieguanyin provide a middle option between the lower caffeine of green tea and the higher caffeine of black tea. See the ultimate caffeine guide.

What we stock

Browse the oolong tea range. Tieguanyin availability in mainstream British retail varies; specialty Chinese tea importers provide the most comprehensive options.

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

Tieguanyin oolong at a glance

Aspect	Answer
What it is	Both a specific cultivar AND the famous Chinese oolong made from it
Name meaning	"Iron Goddess of Mercy"; refers to the Buddhist deity Guanyin

Aspect	Answer
Origin region	Anxi County, Fujian Province, China
Tea category	Oolong (partially oxidised); roughly 10 to 50 percent oxidation
Two main styles	Modern light (qingxiang) vs traditional roasted (nongxiang)
Flavour signature	Orchid floral, creamy, long sweet finish, mineral undertones
Authenticity term	Zhengyan (core Anxi) vs broader cultivar grown elsewhere
Brewing	85 to 95°C; gongfu small pot or gaiwan; many short infusions
Caffeine	Approximately 30 to 50mg per cup; mid-spectrum
Cost range	Authentic Anxi £30 to £150-plus per 100g; mass-market £10 to £30
Storage	Light qingxiang less storage-friendly; roasted nongxiang ages well
Reputation	One of China's "Famous Teas"; widely seen as a national prestige cup
Best for	Drinkers exploring beyond green and black tea; weekend slow brewing

The verdict on Tieguanyin

Tieguanyin is one of the great Chinese teas and the most accessible introduction to the oolong family for British drinkers. The combination of distinctive floral character, multiple infusion brewing, smooth refined cup quality, and visual appeal of the rolled leaves makes it one of the more rewarding tea exploration territories.

For drinkers used to green and black tea, tieguanyin sits between them in oxidation and character; it's the natural step into the wider tea world. The proper brewing (cooled water, multiple short infusions, no sweetener) is essential; tieguanyin brewed Western style with one long steep doesn't show the family character properly.

For drinkers building a serious tea collection, including tieguanyin alongside Da Hong Pao provides representation of the two great Chinese oolong traditions. The Anxi southern style and the Wuyi northern style produce dramatically different cups despite both being oolongs.

Buying tieguanyin in the UK

Genuine Anxi origin tieguanyin is harder to source on British supermarket shelves than mainstream black tea, but the situation is improving as premium tea retailers expand their oolong sections. The accessible UK route in is via the major specialty tea brands that include a tieguanyin or "Iron Goddess" oolong in their loose leaf range; for deeper exploration, specialty Chinese tea importers carry named grower Anxi tieguanyin in both modern light oxidation and traditional medium oxidation styles.

The teas.co.uk oolong tea range sits within the wider teas.co.uk shop; free UK delivery applies above £35, and the per cup price displayed on each product card is the plain comparison metric for premium leaf tea purchases. Quality tieguanyin is more expensive per gram than mainstream black tea but gives multiple gongfu infusions per session, so the per cup cost is closer than it first appears.

Frequently asked questions

Why is tieguanyin sometimes spelled differently? Tieguanyin (modern pinyin), Ti Kuan Yin (older Wade Giles romanisation), and "Iron Goddess of Mercy" (English translation) all refer to the same tea. Modern

pinyin is now standard but older books and packaging still use Ti Kuan Yin.

Light or traditional oxidation, which should I try first? Most British drinkers find the modern light oxidation (qing xiang) style more accessible because the floral, near green tea character is bright and approachable. Once you have got the family character, traditional medium oxidation (nong xiang) gives you the deeper roasted fruit complexity that long time tieguanyin drinkers often prefer.

Can I use a teabag style tieguanyin? Some major brands sell tieguanyin in pyramid bags; the quality can be reasonable but the gongfu multi infusion experience is lost. For genuine appreciation of the style, loose leaf rolled balls in a gaiwan or small teapot is the right format.

Why do my tieguanyin balls expand so much? The rolling and shaping step compresses each leaf into a tight ball; when hot water hits, the ball unfurls back to the full leaf shape. A teaspoon of dry leaf can become a heaping mound of opened leaves. Use a vessel with room for expansion.

How many infusions can I get? Five to eight is typical for a quality tieguanyin in gongfu format; the character changes meaningfully across the session, with the early infusions emphasising the floral top notes and the later ones revealing sweeter, lighter character.

What food pairs with tieguanyin? Light and gentle pairings work best: dim sum, fresh sushi, almond biscuits, light shortbread, fresh fruit. Avoid pairing with strong flavoured foods that compete with the floral character.

Is tieguanyin good for cold brewing? Yes; cold brewed tieguanyin is one of the more distinctive iced teas. Use 5g per litre of cold water, refrigerate for 6 to 8 hours, strain. The floral character translates beautifully to the cold format. See the cold brew tea guide.

Tieguanyin in the British tea cupboard

For most British drinkers, tieguanyin is the weekend or special cup tea rather than the daily mug; the gongfu format requires more attention and equipment than dropping a teabag into a mug. A 50g pouch of quality tieguanyin gives roughly 8 to 12 sessions; the per session cost is reasonable relative to other premium drinks. Drinkers who enjoy the multi infusion ritual often build a small Chinese tea rotation that includes tieguanyin alongside Da Hong Pao, an aged pu erh, and a quality silver needle white; this four tea kit covers the major Chinese prestige tea families.

Alongside this premium rotation, mainstream British staples from Yorkshire Tea, Twinings brand profile, Tetley, and Teapigs handle the daily mug duty. Both have their place; tieguanyin is the slow Saturday morning tea, not the seven am school run tea.

For the wider context see the oolong overview, the Da Hong Pao overview, the green tea overview, the black tea overview, the silver needle white overview, the pu erh overview, the loose leaf brewing guide, the cold brew tea guide, the water temperatures guide, and the caffeine reference.

Source

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)
- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health (2006)

Teas in the same conversation: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. There is plenty more in the tea shop, and UK postage is free above £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Per-cup price is the only price that matters. Loose leaf usually wins; supermarket bags sometimes do too.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/