Tea History

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea history, in summary:** Tea history spans 5000 years from Chinese Shennong 2737 BCE through Tang/Song refinement, Japanese matcha, European luxury, British Empire.

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

Tea has been drunk for nearly 5,000 years and reshaped global trade, colonial empires, agricultural economies, and daily ritual across hundreds of cultures. The story of tea covers ancient Chinese discovery, the Silk Road tea trade, the Buddhist transmission to Japan, the European arrival in the 17th century, the British industrial scale tea trade through India and Sri Lanka, the Boston Tea Party that helped trigger American independence, and the modern global tea industry that produces billions of cups daily across 60+ producing countries. Understanding tea history adds depth to the daily cup; this guide is the foundational overview that connects to the more specific historical pillars across the wider wiki.

Ancient Chinese origins

Tea originated in China; archaeological evidence suggests tea consumption dates back at least 5,000 years to the Yunnan Sichuan border region where wild tea trees still grow today. Chinese mythology attributes tea's discovery to the legendary Emperor Shennong (the "Divine Farmer") in approximately 2737 BCE; according to legend, Shennong was boiling water under a tree when leaves fell into the pot, producing the first tea infusion. Shennong drank it, found it refreshing and medicinal, and tea consumption spread through Chinese society.

The historical record begins more clearly with the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), when tea drinking became widespread across Chinese society and Lu Yu wrote "The Classic of Tea" (Cha Jing) around 760 CE, the first comprehensive treatise on tea cultivation, processing, brewing, and culture. Lu Yu's work codified Chinese tea practice and remains influential today.

By the Song Dynasty (960-1279), tea had become central to Chinese culture: imperial tribute teas, tea ceremonies, tea poetry, tea paintings, and the development of the powdered tea drinking method that would later be transmitted to Japan as matcha. The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) saw the shift to loose leaf tea drinking that's still standard today, and the development of black tea production in the 17th century.

For more on Chinese specialty teas see the dragonwell overview, the lapsang souchong overview, the tieguanyin overview, the Da Hong Pao overview, the pu erh overview, and the silver needle overview.

Transmission to Japan

Tea reached Japan through Buddhist monks studying in China during the Tang Dynasty. The first Japanese tea is dated to 805 CE when the monk Saicho returned from China with tea seeds. The practice grew slowly through the Heian period before being firmly established in the 12th century when the monk Eisai brought matcha style powdered tea from China and wrote the first Japanese tea treatise.

The Japanese tea ceremony (chanoyu, "the way of tea") developed across several centuries, reaching its formal codification in the 16th century through tea master Sen no Rikyu. The ceremony combined Chinese matcha tradition with Japanese aesthetic principles (wabi sabi, simplicity, seasonality) into the formal ritual that's still practiced today. Modern Japanese tea culture preserves both the ceremonial matcha tradition and the everyday sencha drinking tradition.

For more on Japanese teas see the matcha overview and the sencha overview.

The European arrival

Tea reached Europe in the 17th century through Portuguese and Dutch traders. The first European tea reference comes from 1559 in a Venetian travel writing; Dutch traders began regular tea imports from China around 1610. Tea was initially expensive and exotic, drunk only by wealthy Europeans as a luxury beverage.

British tea drinking began through Catherine of Braganza (Portuguese princess who married Charles II in 1662); Catherine brought tea drinking habits to the English court, and the practice spread through aristocratic society. The British East India Company began commercial tea imports from China in the 1660s; through the 18th century, tea grew from luxury beverage to widespread British drink, with significant social and economic effects.

Tea's role in colonial era trade was enormous. The British purchased Chinese tea using silver, creating significant trade imbalances; the Opium Wars of the 19th century were partly driven by British attempts to balance the tea trade through opium exports to China. The economic and political consequences of tea trade shaped 19th century international relations.

The British Empire and Indian tea

Until the 1820s, all British tea came from China. The British East India Company wanted to break Chinese tea monopoly; the discovery of native tea plants in Assam, India in 1823 (by Robert Bruce, shown the plants by local Singpho leader Beesa Gam) provided the foundation for Indian tea cultivation. By the 1830s, British plantation tea was being produced in Assam; through the 19th century, Indian tea (primarily Assam, then Darjeeling) overtook Chinese tea as the dominant supplier to the British market.

The Indian tea industry was built on plantation labour, often involving difficult working conditions and significant social impact on producer communities. The colonial era plantation structure shaped Indian tea production for over a century; modern Indian tea industry continues to grapple with the legacy of colonial era worker welfare and ownership patterns.

Sri Lankan (Ceylon) tea production began in the 1860s after the Ceylon coffee industry collapsed due to disease. James Taylor planted the first Ceylon tea in 1867; within decades, Sri Lanka had become one of the world's largest tea exporters. The Lipton tea brand was built on Ceylon origin tea through Thomas Lipton's late-19th century estate acquisitions.

For more on the Indian and Sri Lankan tea origins see the Assam overview, the Darjeeling overview, the Ceylon overview, and the Hyson deep dive.

The Boston Tea Party and American independence

One specific historical event worth covering: the Boston Tea Party of 16 December 1773, which played a significant role in triggering American independence. American colonists, frustrated with British taxation policies (specifically the Tea Act that gave the British East India Company favourable conditions while taxing imported tea), boarded three British ships in Boston Harbor and dumped 342 chests of tea into the water.

The British response (closing Boston Harbor, the "Intolerable Acts") radicalised American colonial opinion and helped trigger the American Revolutionary War. American tea consumption shifted away from British supplied tea during and after the Revolution; coffee became the dominant American beverage, a cultural pattern that persists to this day.

The 19th and 20th century industrialisation

Tea production was transformed by 19th century industrialisation. Mechanical processing equipment, plantation scale cultivation, the development of CTC (cut tear curl) processing for tea bags, and the establishment of global tea trade networks created the modern tea industry. Tea became an everyday commodity rather than a luxury, accessible to working class British consumers as well as wealthy ones.

The tea bag was invented by chance in 1908 by Thomas Sullivan, a New York tea merchant who began sending tea samples in small silk bags; recipients brewed the tea in the bags and the format took off. By the 1950s and 1960s, tea bags had become the dominant format in British retail, replacing loose leaf for everyday use.

The major British tea brands took shape through this period. Twinings (founded 1706) had been operating for over 200 years already; PG Tips launched in 1930, Yorkshire Tea in 1977, Tetley (founded 1837) had been growing through the late 19th and 20th centuries. Each brand built specific positioning that's persisted to today.

For more on the major brands see the Yorkshire Tea deep dive, the PG Tips deep dive, the Twinings story, and the Tetley deep dive.

The modern global tea industry

Tea is now produced commercially in over 60 countries, with annual global production exceeding 6 million tonnes. The major producers:

- **China** by far the largest producer, around 2.8 million tonnes annually; produces all major tea families with extensive regional specialisations
- **India** around 1.4 million tonnes annually; primarily Assam and Darjeeling black tea
- **Kenya** around 500,000 tonnes annually; the dominant African producer, primarily CTC black tea
- **Sri Lanka** around 300,000 tonnes annually; orthodox processed black tea (Ceylon)
- **Vietnam, Indonesia, Turkey, Argentina, Japan, Iran, Bangladesh, Malawi, Rwanda:** significant producers each with distinct positioning

Modern tea consumption is dominated by black tea (around 78 percent of global consumption), followed by green tea (around 20 percent), with white, oolong, dark, and yellow teas making up the remaining few percent. Per capita tea consumption varies dramatically: Turkey (around 3.2kg per person annually) is the largest consumer, followed by Ireland (2.2kg), the UK (1.9kg), Russia (1.4kg), and others. Britain remains one of the world's largest tea consuming nations despite the relative population size.

Recent developments and the wellness era

The last 30 years have seen significant changes in tea culture and consumption:

- **The wellness movement:** herbal infusions and wellness positioned teas have grown dramatically; brands like Pukka (founded 2001) and the broader herbal tea category have expanded significantly. See the Pukka deep dive
- **The premium tea revival:** brands like Teapigs (founded 2006) brought whole leaf premium tea back into mainstream British retail. See the Teapigs deep dive
- **The matcha boom:** matcha shifted from niche specialty to mainstream wellness drink across the 2010s, driven partly by visual appeal and partly by L theanine awareness
- **The bubble tea phenomenon:** the Taiwanese bubble tea (boba) tradition spread globally through the 2000s and 2010s, creating a new tea based drink category
- **Sustainability and ethical sourcing:** consumer awareness of tea industry labour and environmental issues has driven Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, and organic certification growth
- **Plastic free packaging:** the late-2010s plastic in tea bags controversy led most major brands to transition to plant based bag materials

Tea's social and cultural impact

Beyond the commercial industry, tea has shaped social rituals across cultures:

- **British afternoon tea:** the ritual codified by Anna, Duchess of Bedford in the 1840s, has become an iconic British cultural export
- **Russian samovar tea:** the central role of tea in Russian hospitality and household life
- **Moroccan mint tea:** the elaborate hospitality ritual involving green tea, fresh mint, and sugar
- **Indian chai culture:** the daily milk tea and spices drink that's central to Indian daily life
- **Japanese tea ceremony:** the formal matcha based ritual with deep philosophical and aesthetic dimensions
- **Chinese gongfu cha:** the multi infusion brewing tradition that emphasises tea appreciation
- **Turkish tea culture:** the high volume daily black tea drinking using distinctive double pot brewing

For more on British tea culture specifically see the British tea culture overview.

The essentials: tea history

Era	Plain note

Ancient China (3000 BCE-220 CE)	Legendary origin Shennong 2737 BCE; early medicinal use
Tang dynasty (618-907)	Lu Yu Classic of Tea 760 CE; aesthetic refinement
Song dynasty (960-1279)	Powdered tea (matcha precursor); tea-ceremony foundation
Japan (12th c onwards)	Matcha tradition imported; tea-ceremony codified
Europe (17th c)	Dutch then British East India Company; aristocratic luxury
British Empire (18-19c)	Indian and Ceylon estates; Robert Fortune 1848 Chinese theft
Industrial era (20c)	CTC processing; mass-market tea-bags; African production scale
Modern (21c)	Specialty revival; wellness era; sustainability focus

Source

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

If you want the shopping shortlist: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. The full tea shop is open, with free UK delivery once you pass £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

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

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- Green tea
- Black tea
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