Afternoon Tea Tradition

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Afternoon tea, in summary:** The afternoon tea tradition explained: the 1840s origin with Anna, Duchess of Bedford, the formal structure, the food courses, etiquette and regional.

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

Afternoon tea is one of Britain's best known traditions, set down by Anna, Duchess of Bedford in the 1840s and now held both formally (at hotels and tea rooms) and informally (in British homes) as one of the defining customs of British food culture. The tradition combines specific tea selections, structured food courses, formal serving etiquette and plenty of unhurried time into one of the more elaborate eating and drinking customs in any Western culture. Whether experienced as a special occasion hotel splurge or a casual home practice, afternoon tea remains one of the most recognised British cultural exports globally.

This guide covers everything about afternoon tea: the historical origins, the formal structure, the food courses, the tea selection, the etiquette, the regional variations, and how to host or enjoy afternoon tea at home or at a hotel.

The historical origin

Afternoon tea was popularised by Anna, Duchess of Bedford in the 1840s. Anna found the traditional aristocratic schedule (early breakfast, light lunch around midday, dinner not served until 8 or 9pm) produced uncomfortable hunger in the afternoon hours; she began having tea and a small snack brought to her room around 4pm to bridge the gap. The practice quickly spread among aristocratic women, becoming a social occasion involving guests; through the late Victorian era, afternoon tea evolved into the formal multi course tradition that's still recognisable today.

By the early 20th century, afternoon tea had become a defining element of British social life across multiple classes. Hotels began offering formal afternoon tea services (Claridge's, the Ritz, the Savoy in London, plus prestigious hotels across the country); tea rooms emerged as social spaces particularly important for women's public socialising. The tradition declined somewhat in the post WWII period as social life accelerated and structured afternoon meals became less common, but afternoon tea has experienced significant revival through the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

For the bigger picture of tea in Britain, see the British tea culture overview and the tea history overview.

The afternoon tea structure

Traditional formal afternoon tea has a specific structure:

The drink:

- Black tea is traditional; English Breakfast, Earl Grey, Darjeeling, Assam, and Lapsang Souchong are the standard selections
- Loose leaf tea brewed in a teapot, served at the table
- Milk and sugar offered separately for guests to add
- Some establishments now offer green tea, white tea, and herbal options for non traditional drinkers
- Champagne or sparkling wine sometimes added for "champagne afternoon tea" celebrations

The food (served on a tiered cake stand):

- **Bottom tier: finger sandwiches:** traditional savoury course featuring small crustless sandwiches in classic combinations:
  - Cucumber and cream cheese
  - Smoked salmon with cream cheese or butter
  - Egg mayonnaise (sometimes with cress)
  - Coronation chicken
  - Ham with mustard butter
- **Middle tier: scones:** traditionally:
  - Plain scones and fruit scones (typically with sultanas)
  - Served warm rather than cold when possible
  - Accompanied by clotted cream and strawberry jam
  - Plus the eternal Cornwall vs Devon debate about whether jam or cream goes first
- **Top tier: cakes and pastries:** varied selection:
  - Victoria sponge
  - Lemon drizzle cake
  - Battenberg cake
  - Macarons (more recently)
  - Eclairs and small choux pastries
  - Fruit tarts
  - Petit fours

The setting:

- White tablecloth or formal cloth setting
- Fine china teacups and saucers
- Silverware including small dessert forks and butter knives
- Linen napkins
- Small plates for individual courses

The timing:

- Traditionally 3.30pm to 5pm
- Modern services often run 12pm to 6pm
- Allow 1.5 to 2 hours for proper afternoon tea experience

The Cornwall vs Devon scone debate

One specific cultural element worth covering: the Cornwall vs Devon scone debate. Both Cornish and Devon traditions have strongly held positions on the order of jam and cream on a scone:

- **The Cornish way:** jam first, then cream on top. The jam fills the scone and the cream provides the topping
- **The Devon way:** cream first, then jam on top. The cream is treated like butter and the jam is the topping

Both regions hold their position with significant cultural pride; the debate periodically becomes news when prominent figures or institutions are seen breaking tradition. There's no definitive correct answer; the distinction is part of the regional cultural identity rather than any objective superiority.

For drinkers visiting either region, following the local convention shows cultural awareness; for everyday home afternoon tea, choose whichever method you prefer. The clotted cream itself (the rich Cornish or Devon cream that's distinctive from regular dairy cream) is the more important element than the order of application.

The tea selection for afternoon tea

Traditional afternoon tea typically offers a selection of black teas with optional broader range:

Classic black teas:

- English Breakfast, the safe default, balanced and full enough to suit the food
- Earl Grey, the bergamot classic; particularly popular for afternoon
- Darjeeling, more delicate; particularly suited to afternoon drinking with milder food pairings
- Assam, strong and malty for drinkers who like a bolder cup
- Lapsang Souchong, smoky alternative for adventurous drinkers

Broader range (modern hotel afternoon tea):

- Various flavoured black teas (jasmine, vanilla, fruit blended)
- Green teas (sencha, jasmine pearls)
- Herbal infusions (chamomile, peppermint) for non caffeinated drinkers
- Specialty teas (white tea, oolong) for tea enthusiasts

For brand selections see the inside Twinings (the heritage brand most associated with classic afternoon tea), the Teapigs deep dive (premium whole leaf option), and the Yorkshire Tea brand profile (everyday

strong British option).

Etiquette and customs

Traditional afternoon tea has specific etiquette:

- **Eating order:** traditionally bottom to top: sandwiches first, then scones, then cakes
- **Tea pouring:** the host pours; if at a hotel, the staff pour
- **Milk in tea:** traditionally added to the cup after the tea is poured (though "milk in first" remains a class debate)
- **Stirring:** gentle back and forth motion rather than circular; avoid clinking the cup with the spoon
- **Spoon placement** when not in use, rest on the saucer rather than leaving in the cup
- **Pinky finger:** traditional etiquette is pinky finger down (not extended); the extended pinky is a misconception
- **Sandwich eating** with fingers (not knife and fork)
- **Scones:** broken with hands rather than cut with a knife; jam and cream applied to each piece individually
- **Conversation:** leisurely and unhurried; afternoon tea is meant to be a relaxed social occasion

For modern hotel afternoon tea, staff will typically guide guests through any unfamiliar elements; the etiquette is helpful to know but not essential for enjoying the experience.

Modern variations

Modern afternoon tea has developed several variations beyond the classic format:

- **Cream tea:** simpler version with just scones, jam, cream, and tea (no sandwiches or cakes); particularly common in Cornwall and Devon
- **High tea:** often confused with afternoon tea; high tea is actually a traditional working class evening meal involving heartier hot food. The "high" refers to the height of the dining table, not the prestige of the meal
- **Champagne afternoon tea** includes champagne or sparkling wine; popular for special occasions
- **Themed afternoon tea:** hotels often offer themed services (Christmas afternoon tea, summer berry afternoon tea, chocolate afternoon tea, etc.)
- **Vegetarian and vegan afternoon tea:** increasingly available; modern hotels typically offer plant based versions
- **International variations:** hotel groups have exported afternoon tea globally; the format adapts to local tastes while preserving the essential structure

How to host afternoon tea at home

For drinkers wanting to host afternoon tea at home, a simplified approach works well:

1. **Choose your tea** 1 to 2 black tea options (English Breakfast and Earl Grey is a classic combination)

2. **Prepare sandwiches** 3 to 4 finger sandwich varieties; cut crusts off and cut into small triangles or fingers
3. **Buy or bake scones** plus clotted cream (essential, not regular cream) and good quality strawberry jam
4. **Provide cakes and pastries** 3 to 4 small cake options; can be home baked or bought from a good bakery
5. **Set the table:** even simple white plates and cloth napkins lift the experience
6. **Allow proper time:** plan 1.5 to 2 hours for the meal
7. **Brew tea fresh** in a teapot, and serve with milk and sugar separately

Home afternoon tea doesn't need to be elaborate; the structure and time commitment are the defining elements rather than expense or perfection. Even a casual afternoon tea with friends gives real company and good food, which matters more as modern life speeds up.

Famous London afternoon tea venues

For drinkers wanting to experience formal afternoon tea, London has several iconic venues:

- **The Ritz London:** perhaps the most prestigious afternoon tea in the world; requires reservations weeks or months in advance and has formal dress code
- **Claridge's:** widely judged the best afternoon tea in London, served in its well known Foyer
- **The Savoy:** classic London afternoon tea in the Thames Foyer
- **Fortnum & Mason:** the famous Piccadilly tea merchant's own afternoon tea service
- **Brown's Hotel:** traditional service in one of London's oldest hotels
- **The Goring:** royal connections (where the Queen Mother often took afternoon tea)
- **Sketch:** modern artistic alternative to traditional afternoon tea

Beyond London, prestigious afternoon tea venues exist across the UK including the Bath spa hotels, Edinburgh's Balmoral Hotel, the Ashdown Park Hotel in Sussex, and many other historic country house hotels and town hotels. Hotel afternoon tea is among the easiest ways for visitors to the UK to try a classic British occasion.

What we stock for afternoon tea

Browse the full black tea range. The most bought afternoon tea suitable products on teas.co.uk:

- True English Tea (T.E.T) Everyday English No 1, 20 Tea Bags 40g
- Yorkshire Tea Original Loose Leaf Tea, 250g
- Tetley Seriously Refreshing, 75 Tea Bags 250g
- Yorkshire Tea Caramelised Biscuit Brew, 40 Tea Bags 112g
- Yorkshire Tea Cherry Bakewell Brew, 40 Tea Bags 112g
- Yorkshire Tea Bedtime Brew, 40 Tea Bags 100g

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

The afternoon-tea verdict

As British traditions go, afternoon tea is one of the great ones, and one of the nicest social customs still around. Structured food courses, careful tea selection, formal serving etiquette and a leisurely pace together make it quite different from typical modern eating.

For drinkers wanting to experience formal afternoon tea, hotel services across the UK provide excellent introduction; London hotels offer some of the finest afternoon tea experiences in the world. For drinkers wanting the experience at home, simplified afternoon tea with friends or family provides similar pleasure at much lower cost.

It has outlasted more than 180 years of social change by offering something of real worth: time set aside with others, good food, a considered drink and a slow rhythm set against fast modern life. For special occasions, romantic dates, family gatherings, or simply pleasant Saturday afternoons, afternoon tea provides meaningful experience that's worth preserving and practicing.

For the wider context see the British tea culture overview, the tea history overview, the black tea overview, the Earl Grey overview, the English Breakfast vs Irish Breakfast comparison, the Earl Grey vs Lady Grey comparison, the Darjeeling overview, and the Twinings deep dive.

Afternoon tea at a glance

Element	Traditional form
Origin	Anna, Duchess of Bedford, 1840s, to bridge the gap to an 8 to 9pm dinner
Time	Roughly 3pm to 5pm
Bottom tier	Finger sandwiches, crusts off (cucumber, egg, salmon, chicken, ham)
Middle tier	Warm scones with clotted cream and jam
Top tier	Cakes and pastries: Victoria sponge, Battenberg, tarts, macarons
The drink	Light loose leaf black: Darjeeling, Earl Grey, Ceylon, Assam, Keemun
Order	Eaten bottom to top; sandwiches first, sweets last

Buy a good afternoon tea

The tea matters as much as the food: a light, aromatic loose leaf rather than a strong builder's blend is what an afternoon tea wants. Browse afternoon tea blends, a classic Darjeeling or Earl Grey at teas.co.uk, or the full tea shop. For an afternoon tea at home, buy by the cup and description, watch the per cup price, and use free UK delivery over £35.

Related on the wiki: Afternoon tea etiquette, the proper version.

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teas · Serve the tea that actually gets finished. Leave variety until that one is settled.

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