Afternoon Tea vs High Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Afternoon tea vs high tea, in summary:** Afternoon tea (posh, scones, sandwiches) vs high tea (working class, hot supper). UK historical guide. Free £35+ delivery.

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

Afternoon tea is the posh one. High tea is the working one. They are not the same and have never been the same, despite what every Marriott in America insists. The British inverted the names compared to most foreign assumptions, then made it harder by serving both with cake. This page sorts the confusion in straight English.

One sentence answer

Afternoon tea is a small, fancy meal eaten between 3pm and 5pm by people who do not need to work. **High tea** is a cooked supper served between 5pm and 7pm by people who finished a shift and need feeding. The "high" refers to the height of the dining table, not the social rank of the meal.

Afternoon tea, properly

Anna, the Seventh Duchess of Bedford, gets the credit for inventing afternoon tea around 1840. Dinner had drifted later, the upper class evening meal sat at 8pm or later by the Victorian era, and she was hungry by mid afternoon. She started taking a pot of tea, a small sandwich and a slice of cake in her room around 4pm, then began inviting friends. By the 1880s every aristocratic household had taken up the custom.

The classic three tier afternoon tea is structured: finger sandwiches on the bottom (cucumber, egg and cress, smoked salmon, ham and mustard), warm scones with clotted cream and jam in the middle, sweet pastries and cakes on top. You eat upward. The tea is loose leaf, in a proper pot, served with milk in delicate porcelain. Twinings Afternoon Tea and Taylors of Harrogate Afternoon Darjeeling are the supermarket tier options; for proper occasions, Whittard single estate Darjeeling first flush is the classic match, its muscatel character cuts through cream laden scones without overwhelming the cucumber sandwiches.

High tea, properly

High tea is the meal a coal miner in 1880s Yorkshire ate when he came home at 6pm with mud on his boots. Hot food: a pie, cold meats, pickles, bread, cheese, sometimes kippers, always strong tea. The "high" is the high dining table, afternoon tea is taken on a low parlour table or coffee table, while high tea uses the proper

dining table because you are eating supper. That is the entire distinction. Calling a posh hotel afternoon tea "high tea" is American shorthand and historically wrong.

The tea for high tea is workman strong: Yorkshire Tea Original, Tetley, PG Tips. Milk and sugar standard. Brewed for at least four minutes from a fresh boiled kettle. Served in a proper mug or a thick teacup, not a porcelain dish you are afraid to grip.

The American confusion

Across the Atlantic the names got swapped because "high tea" sounded grander than "afternoon tea". Most American hotels use "high tea" to mean what we call afternoon tea. Most British hotels are too polite to correct them. If you are in a UK hotel and the menu says "high tea," it almost certainly means afternoon tea, the British hospitality industry surrendered to the misunderstanding decades ago. If a Yorkshire grandmother says "I'll have your tea on the table at 6," she means actual high tea, and she means cooked supper.

The cream tea variant

Cream tea is the small version of afternoon tea. Two scones, clotted cream, jam, a pot of tea. No sandwiches, no cake tier. Originated in Devon and Cornwall, where the long running war over *jam first or cream first* still divides counties (Cornwall: jam first, then cream on top; Devon: cream first, then jam). Either way the scone is split with a knife, the spreads are layered generously, and the tea is taken between bites.

Tea matched to occasion

Afternoon tea wants something elegant: a Darjeeling, a Ceylon, an Assam if you take milk, an Earl Grey if you want bergamot under the cucumber sandwiches. Avoid black tea so strong it fights the food. Quick Buy: Whittard Darjeeling loose 100g.

High tea wants strength: a builder's brew that survives milk, takes the heat off a pickle, and stays drinkable while you talk. Quick Buy: Yorkshire Tea Original 80s.

FAQ

Is high tea the same as afternoon tea? No. Afternoon tea is a light upper class snack at 3-5pm. High tea is a cooked working class supper at 5-7pm.

Why is it called "high" tea? Because it was eaten at the high dining table, not the low parlour table where the upper classes took afternoon tea. The "high" refers to the furniture, not the formality.

Do British hotels still distinguish? Most have given up. If a UK hotel advertises "high tea," it almost certainly means afternoon tea. Cream tea is the only term that has stayed clear.

What tea is best for afternoon tea? Darjeeling first flush, Ceylon, or a refined English Breakfast. Earl Grey works if guests are fond of bergamot. Avoid Lapsang Souchong unless your guests have asked for it specifically.

Curator's note: if you are in Britain and someone offers you "tea" at 5pm, ask whether food is involved. The answer tells you what you have walked into. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

The afternoon tea ritual, course by course

A proper afternoon tea has an order, and following it is half the pleasure. You work upward through the stand: the savoury finger sandwiches first, while the palate is fresh and the tea is at its brightest; then the scones, ideally still warm, split with a knife rather than cut, and dressed with clotted cream and jam; and finally the pastries and cake, when you have earned them. The pot is topped up with hot water as you go rather than left to stew, and a second pot is normal for a leisurely sitting. The etiquette that actually matters is small: stir gently without clinking, return the spoon to the saucer, and ignore the myth about a raised little finger, which was never correct. None of it is difficult once you treat the meal as something to linger over rather than rush, which is the entire point of the leisured original.

Champagne, savoury and the modern versions

The Victorian template has been stretched in every direction by hotels and tea rooms. A champagne afternoon tea simply adds a glass of fizz at the start and is now the default "celebration" format. A savoury or "gentleman's" afternoon tea swaps some of the sweet tier for heartier bites such as miniature pies, quiche or a small hot dish, edging deliberately back toward the substance of a proper high tea. Themed afternoon teas, seasonal, literary, child friendly, are largely a marketing layer over the same three part structure, and good venues now offer competent vegetarian, vegan and gluten free versions as standard rather than as an afterthought. The structure survives all of it because the upward savoury to sweet logic really works with a pot of tea alongside.

The class history, and why the names stuck

The split is fundamentally about who had time and who had work. Afternoon tea was invented by and for a leisured class whose dinner had drifted late into the evening; it is a bridge meal, a treat that fills a gap rather than feeds a need. High tea was the main evening meal of working households, eaten the moment the shift ended, substantial because it had to be. That is why the British names sound counter intuitive to outsiders: "high" describes the everyday dining table of an ordinary family, not grandeur, while the really grand meal carries the plainer name. The inversion has survived because each term still maps onto a real social reality, and the same straight approach is taken on the breakfast blend comparison.

How to host either one at home

Both are easy to do well without a hotel. For afternoon tea, allow roughly four finger sandwiches, two scones and two or three sweet bites per person, make the sandwiches crustless and just before serving, warm the scones, and brew a good loose leaf pot, a Darjeeling or a refined Ceylon, in a pot you refresh with hot water rather than a fresh bag each cup. A tiered stand is pleasant but three plates work identically. For high tea, the brief is the opposite: one proper hot dish, bread, cheese and pickles, perhaps a cake to follow, and a strong pot of builder grade black brewed a full four minutes, served in mugs. The rule that decides which you are hosting is simple and unchanged since the 1880s: is this a snack between meals, or is it supper.

The essentials: afternoon tea vs high tea

Question	Afternoon tea	High tea
When?	3-5pm, between lunch and dinner	5-7pm, replacing dinner

Where (historically)?	Upper class drawing room custom	Working-class evening meal
What is served?	Sandwiches, scones, cakes, tea	Hot meal: pies, cold meats, bread, cheese, tea
Who started it?	Anna, 7th Duchess of Bedford, around 1840	Working communities in northern England, late 19th century
Where served?	Low coffee table, drawing room	High dining table, hence "high tea"
Common UK confusion?	Many Americans and visitors call any formal tea "high tea". In Britain "high tea" specifically means the working-class evening meal.	

Shop the topic

Tea suitable for either ritual: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, Darjeeling, loose leaf ranges, and Ceylon for a brisk afternoon cup. See the full tea range.

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