Afternoon Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Afternoon tea, in summary:** Afternoon tea in the UK: what it actually is, where to take it properly from The Ritz to Bettys, which tea to pour, the high tea misnomer, and a home.

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

Afternoon tea is Britain's most exported custom, and its most misrepresented. What was, in the 1840s, the seventh Duchess of Bedford's solution to a hungry afternoon has become a £2 billion UK hospitality category, a Japanese fashion movement, an American hotel cliché, and a dependable London tourist line out. This guide covers what it actually is, where to drink it properly, what tea to pour, and how to make a passable version at home.

The origin in one paragraph

Anna Russell, Duchess of Bedford (1783-1857), is credited with formalising afternoon tea around 1840. Dinner at her Belvoir Castle had drifted to 8pm. By 4pm she was, in her own description, suffering "a sinking feeling." She started taking a small tray to her room, pot of tea, sandwiches, cake. Then she invited friends, and the friends invited friends, and within a generation it was an institution. Queen Victoria took up the custom in the 1860s; by 1880 every London hotel had a tea room.

The structure of a proper afternoon tea

A traditional afternoon tea is a small meal served between roughly 3pm and 5pm. The classic three tier presentation is structured bottom to top:

- **Bottom tier, Sandwiches.** Crusts off, cut into fingers or triangles. The five British classics: cucumber with butter, egg and cress, ham and English mustard, smoked salmon and cream cheese, coronation chicken. Bread is white, brown, or both. Always fresh, not made more than two hours ahead.
- **Middle tier, Scones.** Plain or sultana, served warm with strawberry jam (Tiptree if you are particular) and Cornish or Devon clotted cream. The Cornwall and Devon argument over which spread goes on first is still unsettled. Cornwall says jam first, cream on top. Devon says cream first, jam on top. Both are correct in their respective counties.
- **Top tier, Pastries.** Macarons, mini Victoria sponges, fruit tarts, éclairs, lemon drizzle, Battenberg. Two or three bites each. Sweet but not heavy.

You eat upward, sandwiches first, scones second, sweets last. The tea is loose leaf, in a proper pot with a strainer, served in porcelain teacups with saucers. Milk and sugar on the side, never premixed.

Which tea to serve

Afternoon tea is a delicate meal. The wrong tea overwhelms the cucumber sandwiches. Three classics work:

- **Darjeeling first flush** light, muscatel, almost wine like. Cuts through cream without dominating sandwiches. The traditional choice. Twinings Darjeeling for everyday; Whittard single estate Darjeeling for occasions.
- **Ceylon:** bright, citrusy, well balanced. Takes a little milk if needed. Forgiving with food.
- **Earl Grey** bergamot is divisive but classic. Works particularly well with cucumber sandwiches and lemon flavoured pastries. Twinings Earl Grey is the supermarket benchmark; Whittard Earl Grey uses better bergamot oil.

Avoid Lapsang Souchong (too smoky), strong Assam (overwhelms sandwiches), and any flavoured fruit tea (clashes with food). Decaf options are normal, many guests prefer it after lunch. Quick Buy: Twinings Decaf Earl Grey.

Where to take afternoon tea in the UK

The traditional London hotels, The Ritz, Claridge's, Brown's, The Dorchester, The Savoy, set the standard. Booking weeks ahead is normal; expect £80-£120 per head with champagne. Outside London, Bettys in Yorkshire (York and Harrogate) is the regional benchmark, run by the same family that owns Yorkshire Tea. The Pump Room in Bath, the Witchery in Edinburgh, and the Goring in London all do excellent versions. Smaller cafés across the country offer "afternoon tea" from £15, and quality varies; ask whether the scones are baked on the premises and whether the cream is real clotted cream, not whipped.

Making afternoon tea at home

The trick is preparation in stages. Bake or warm the scones last so they are still warm when served. Sandwiches should be made within 90 minutes of serving, earlier and the bread dries; later and you are stressed. Pastries can be bought; nobody minds a Mr Kipling Battenberg if everything else is right.

Brew the tea in a warmed pot. Water temperature matters: 95°C for most blacks, 85°C for Darjeeling first flush. Steep four minutes, no more. Pour through a strainer. Milk into the cup first or after, the order does change the flavour slightly because milk then tea cools the milk less, but no British host has lost a friendship over it.

The "high tea" misnomer

If a hotel menu calls it "high tea," they almost always mean afternoon tea. High tea is actually the working class evening meal, cooked supper at 6pm, eaten at the high dining table. Afternoon tea is the upper class light snack at the low parlour table. The names got swapped in the American imagination and most British hotels gave up correcting it.

FAQ

What time is afternoon tea served? 3pm to 5pm typically. Hotel afternoon tea slots run from about 12pm (which is technically lunch) to 5pm last sitting.

Do you wear formal clothes? Most London hotels still ask for "smart casual", collared shirts, no flip flops, no sportswear. The Ritz still requires a jacket and tie for men. Most regional venues are relaxed.

Is champagne afternoon tea traditional? No, champagne with afternoon tea is a 20th century hotel invention. The Duchess of Bedford did not drink champagne with hers. But it is now standard hotel practice and excellent regardless of historical purity.

Best tea for someone trying afternoon tea for the first time? Darjeeling. It is light, refined, food friendly, and looks the part in a porcelain cup. Quick Buy: Twinings Darjeeling 50s.

Curator's note: afternoon tea works because it is small. If you finish hungry you have done it wrong, but if you finish stuffed you have also done it wrong. The whole point is the elegant pause. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Cream tea is not afternoon tea

One distinction worth keeping straight: a cream tea is just scones with clotted cream, jam and a pot of tea, no sandwiches and no pastries. An afternoon tea is the full three tier version with the savoury sandwiches as the opening course. Menus routinely blur the two, and a cream tea sold as "afternoon tea" is a small, now unkillable fib; the real difference is mostly one of price and the kitchen work involved, not prestige.

Common mistakes when hosting at home

Most home afternoon teas go wrong in predictable, fixable ways. Scones served stone cold rather than warm; sandwiches made hours ahead so the bread dries and curls; tea stewed too strong or too long so it fights the food instead of complementing it; and far too much of everything, which misses the point of an elegant, deliberately small pause. The fix is preparing, baking or warming the scones last, make the sandwiches within ninety minutes, brew a light aromatic tea for four minutes and no longer, and serve modest quantities so guests finish satisfied rather than stuffed.

The bottom line

Afternoon tea is a small, graceful custom born in Victorian times: three tiers eaten bottom to top, a light loose leaf black in a warmed pot, and a relaxed couple of hours rather than a feast. Drink it out at a proper hotel for the theatre, or stage a simple version at home where the only rules that matter are warm scones, fresh sandwiches and good tea, not the cutlery.

Quick etiquette reference

Element	The proper form
Order of courses	Sandwiches, then scones, then cakes, bottom up the stand
Scone	Split horizontally; cream and jam on each half, never sandwiched
Teacup grip	Thumb and forefinger on the handle, no pinky out
Stirring	Gently, back to front (twelve to six), no clinking

Element	The proper form
Pouring	The host pours; guests wait to be topped up
Tea or milk first	Formal: tea first, milk after, sugar 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 the Earl Grey guide at teas.co.uk, or the full tea shop. Buy afternoon tea blends by the cup and description, compare per cup prices, and get free UK delivery over £35.

The teas that come up around this subject: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. For more, the full tea shop ships free across the UK over £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Spend £35, about two or three good bags, and UK delivery is free. A small order suits afternoon tea better than a splurge.

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