Best Instant Coffee UK

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Best instant coffee, in summary:** The best instant coffee in the UK, ranked by tier from supermarket basics to speciality freeze dried, plus decaf options and how to make a better cup.

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

"Why does a tea website sell coffee?" Fair question. The most British households drink both. We sell coffee from the same independent perspective we apply to tea, what's actually good, what's overpriced, and what tastes like burnt cardboard regardless of price. This is the working guide to instant coffee in the UK from a tea person who drinks coffee too.

Why instant coffee gets a bad rap

Speciality coffee culture loves to dunk on instant. Some of the criticism is fair, since mass market freeze dried robusta really is poor, and some is snobbery, because modern premium instants are far better than they were 20 years ago. The truth: there's a wide quality range. £2-a jar supermarket basics are not what £8-a jar speciality instants are. Don't write the category off because of the bottom shelf.

How instant coffee is made (briefly)

Two main methods:

- **Spray drying.** Brewed coffee is sprayed into hot air. Water evaporates instantly, leaving fine powder. Cheaper, faster, slightly more flavour loss.
- **Freeze drying.** Brewed coffee is frozen, then water is sublimated under vacuum. Slower, more expensive, better aromatic preservation. Most premium instant uses freeze drying.

Both methods produce a soluble powder that reconstitutes in hot water. The bean quality and brewing method before drying matter as much as the dehydration method itself.

The UK instant coffee tiers

Bottom tier (£2-3 per 100g)

Supermarket own brand. Mostly robusta beans, spray dried. Bitter, flat, sometimes ashy. Functional caffeine delivery, not a pleasant cup.

Examples: Tesco Value Instant, Sainsbury's Basics Instant, ASDA Smart Price Instant. Avoid unless price is the only consideration.

Mid tier (£4-6 per 100g)

The volume British market. Mainstream brands using mostly robusta, often blended with some arabica. Spray dried or freeze dried. Recognisable, drinkable, not exceptional.

Examples: Nescafé Original, Nescafé Gold Blend, Kenco Smooth, Maxwell House. The everyday standard.

Mid premium tier (£6-9 per 100g)

Premium freeze dried blends, often higher arabica content, sometimes single origin. Noticeably better than mid tier in cup smoothness and aroma. The sweet spot for daily driver instant.

Examples: Nescafé Azera, Kenco Millicano, Lyons Kenyan Arabica, Carte Noire (French brand, widely available in UK).

Speciality tier (£10-30+ per 100g)

Single origin freeze dried instants from speciality coffee brands. Made from fresh roasted beans, premium drying processes, often in small batches. A few can stand comparison with a pour over coffee.

Examples: Sudden Coffee (US, available online), Mount Hagen Organic, Waka Coffee, Joe Black instant pods and Wandering Bear cold brew, which is technically a liquid concentrate but sits in the same category.

What we stock and why

The teas.co.uk coffee range follows the same principle as our tea range: independent and characterful, not just supermarket repeats. We carry brands that wouldn't normally land in a supermarket aisle, small roastery instants, single origin freeze dried, and decaf options that don't taste like tar.

Decaf instant coffee

Decaf instant has historically been worse than caffeinated instant, the decaffeination process strips some flavour compounds along with the caffeine. Modern CO2-process decaf has narrowed the gap considerably.

- **Nescafé Gold Blend Decaf.** Mainstream baseline. Reasonable.
- **Kenco Decaf.** Comparable to Nescafé Gold Decaf. Different flavour profile.
- **Mount Hagen Organic Decaf.** Specialty option. Cleaner cup. CO2-process decaffeination.
- **Carte Noire Décaféiné.** French style decaf, slightly richer than UK mainstream.

Caffeine in instant coffee

Per teaspoon (1.8g), brewed in 200ml water:

- Standard instant: 60-80mg caffeine
- "Strong" instant or double teaspoon: 100-150mg

- Decaf instant: 2-5mg

Roughly comparable to filter coffee on a per cup basis, lower than espresso, higher than most tea.

How to make better instant coffee

Most instant coffee is ruined at the cup making stage:

1. **Use water just off boiling, not boiling.** Boiling water scalds coffee compounds. 90-92°C is ideal.
2. **Stir vigorously for 15 seconds.** Fully dissolves the granules; reduces "puddle" of undissolved coffee at the bottom.
3. **Use a slightly heaped teaspoon.** Most jars suggest "1 level tsp"; a slightly heaped tsp produces a noticeably better cup.
4. **Bloom the coffee (premium instants only).** Add a splash of hot water to the powder, stir to a paste, then add the rest. Releases more aromatics. Worth doing for £6+ instants; not needed for basics.
5. **Add milk after, not before.** Adding milk before the coffee dissolves can cause clumping.
6. **Don't reuse old jars indefinitely.** Instant coffee oxidises slowly. 3-6 months after opening for peak flavour.

Instant coffee vs filter vs espresso vs pod

Method	Cup quality	Time	Cost per cup
Cheap instant	2/10	30 sec	£0.05
Mid instant (Gold Blend)	5/10	30 sec	£0.08
Premium instant	7/10	1 min	£0.20
Filter (machine)	7/10	5 min	£0.15
Pour over (V60)	9/10	5 min	£0.30
Espresso (machine)	9/10	2 min	£0.20
Pod (Nespresso)	7/10	30 sec	£0.40

FAQ

Best instant coffee UK? Mid premium tier: Nescafé Azera, Kenco Millicano, Lyons Kenyan Arabica. Speciality tier: Mount Hagen Organic.

Why is supermarket instant so bitter? Mostly robusta beans, spray dried, often over extracted at the brewing stage before drying. Higher arabica content and freeze drying make a big difference.

Does instant coffee have less caffeine? Per cup, roughly equivalent to filter coffee. Per gram of coffee, similar.

Can I make filter quality coffee with instant? Premium freeze dried specialty instant gets surprisingly close. Mainstream instant doesn't.

Why does teas.co.uk sell coffee? Most UK households drink both. We bring the same independent specialist eye to coffee as we do to tea, what's actually good, regardless of marketing.

Curator's note: I drink Yorkshire Gold in the morning and a cup of Mount Hagen Organic mid afternoon when the coffee mood hits. Tea and coffee aren't rivals, they're different tools for different parts of the day. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Quick take

Instant coffee deserves its bad reputation only at the bottom shelf; modern mid premium and speciality freeze dried is dramatically better. Skip the two pound robusta jars, treat Nescafé Gold and Kenco as the everyday standard, and step up to Azera, Millicano or a single origin speciality jar when you want a properly good cup. Brew it off boil, stir hard, use a heaped spoon, bloom the premium jars. Decaf has narrowed the gap with CO2 processing. Tea and coffee are tools for different parts of the day, not rivals.

> **From the same independent shelf:** browse the coffee range, or the tea side, everyday black from Yorkshire Tea, organic from Pukka, or premium from Teapigs. See also the caffeine guide and best decaf guide.

References cited

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)
- NHS guidance on caffeine

If you want the shopping shortlist: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Find more in the tea shop; UK delivery is free over £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · What one mug costs you is the only price worth checking. Loose leaf tea tends to win on that count, and a supermarket bag now and then does as well.

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