Tea in Britain: The National Cup

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **British tea culture, in summary:** Britain has not one tea culture but dozens, by class, region, time of day and brand. A short overview of the national cup, how it got embedded and what it means now.

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

Britain drinks 165 million cups of tea every day. That's 100 billion cups a year, 1,500 cups per person. No other beverage approaches this scale. The UK Tea & Infusions Association tracks the figure annually; it has barely shifted in twenty years despite the rise of coffee shops, gourmet drinks, and the supposed "death" of tea among young people. This page is the cultural overview of how tea got embedded so deeply into British life and what role it plays now.

The arrival

Tea reached England via Catherine of Braganza, the Portuguese princess who married Charles II in 1662. She brought tea drinking with her dowry and made it fashionable at court. The East India Company began importing in volume from the 1670s; by 1700 there were over 500 coffee houses in London serving tea, and by 1800 it had displaced gin as the working class daily drink. The British government taxed tea heavily (the duty was 119% at one point), which spawned a thriving smuggling industry, tea smugglers were folk heroes in 18th century Cornwall and Devon.

The pivot to India

For most of the 18th and early 19th centuries, all tea drunk in Britain came from China. The trade imbalance was enormous, Britain was paying in silver. The British East India Company solved this two ways: by selling Indian grown opium into China (causing the Opium Wars), and by establishing tea plantations in Assam and Darjeeling. By 1880, Indian tea outsold Chinese in Britain. Most British black tea today is still Assam led with Ceylon and Kenya, a colonial legacy that persists in the cup.

The cup as ritual

Britain has more tea drinking customs than any other country. The "cuppa" is offered as condolence, celebration, peacekeeping, hospitality, time killing, and weather marking. "Put the kettle on" is the British

response to almost any emotional event. This is not metaphor, it's documented behavior. Most British households consume 3-5 cups per person per day, scattered across the morning routine, mid morning break ("elevenses"), lunch, mid afternoon, after work, and bedtime.

Class and tea

Tea cuts across British class lines but does so visibly. The working class cuppa is strong, milky, sugary, drunk from a mug. The middle class cuppa is moderate strength, milk, occasional sugar, drunk from a mug or proper teacup. The upper class cuppa is loose leaf in a teapot, often without milk for premium teas, in porcelain. Afternoon tea (upper class) and high tea (working class) reflect this split historically.

The brand landscape

Britain has produced a handful of tea brands that have become national institutions:

- **Yorkshire Tea** family owned (Taylors of Harrogate) since 1886. Currently the most loved tea brand in the UK by survey.
- **PG Tips:** the chimps adverts, the pyramid bag pioneer, in British kitchens since 1930.
- **Tetley:** the supermarket benchmark since 1837.
- **Twinings:** established 1706 in The Strand, the oldest still operating tea brand in the world.
- **Typhoo:** pioneered the British tea bag in 1953.
- **Pukka:** the modern herbal brand, Bristol founded 2002.
- **Teapigs:** the premium pyramid bag brand bridging supermarket to loose leaf.

The current state

Coffee has overtaken tea by VALUE in the UK (because coffee is more expensive per unit). But by VOLUME tea still dominates: 165 million cups a day vs ~95 million cups of coffee. The narrative that "young people don't drink tea" is also overstated, they drink less of it than older generations did at the same age, but they drink more variety (matcha, chai, fruit infusions) and they spend more per cup.

Tea and British weather

Britain's tea consumption rises with temperature drops. The first cold snap in October produces a measurable spike in tea sales. Heat waves see fruit and iced teas rise. The cup really does follow the climate.

Tea in British literature and culture

From Mrs Doyle in Father Ted ("go on, go on, go on") to Captain Picard's "tea, Earl Grey, hot" in Star Trek (Patrick Stewart insisted), tea is a British identity marker that has travelled. George Orwell wrote a 1946 essay "A Nice Cup of Tea" laying out 11 strict rules; Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide* features Arthur Dent searching for a proper cuppa across the galaxy.

FAQ

How many cups of tea does Britain drink per day? 165 million, per UK Tea & Infusions Association. Roughly 1,500 cups per person per year.

What is the most popular tea in Britain? By volume, English Breakfast style blends, Yorkshire Tea, Tetley, PG Tips. By preference surveys, Yorkshire Tea has overtaken PG Tips as the best loved.

Why do British drink tea with milk? Tradition driven by tea drinking habits formed in the 18th-19th centuries when most British tea was strong Indian black tea, which takes milk well. The combination became the canonical "British cuppa."

Is British tea different from American tea? The leaf is the same; the cultural cup is different. British: strong, milky, hot, daily. American: often iced, often sweetened, often without milk.

Curator's note: 165 million cups a day. Britain doesn't have one tea culture, it has dozens, organised by class, region, time of day, and brand loyalty. The cup is a national variable. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

British versus the American cup

Same leaf, different cup. British tea is part of daily life; American tea is more often an occasional, iced, sweetened drink.

	British	American
Temperature	hot	often iced
Milk	usually with milk	often without
Sweetness	optional sugar	often sweetened
Occasion	daily, all day habit	occasional

Where to go next

For the full cultural history and the daily customs in depth, read the British tea culture reference, the builders brew tradition, and the afternoon tea guide. To drink the national cup rather than only read about it, a strong everyday blend from Yorkshire Tea, a single origin from Hyson, or the wider tea shop is the British daily cup itself.

Pair it with the English tea range and loose leaf range.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Keep to the everyday supermarket box until something gives you a reason to change. Most rich teas reward patience, not budget.

Companion cultural reading

- British tea culture (full reference)

- The builders brew tradition
- Afternoon tea
- black tea reference

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

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