Builders' Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Builder's tea, in summary:** Builders tea is a method, not a brand: strong, hot, milky, made fast in a big mug. The full recipe spec and how the cup is actually made.

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

Builder's tea is a manifesto, not a brand. Strong, hot, milky, sugary if you take sugar, made fast, drunk faster, served in a mug big enough to wash a plate in. It is the cup that fuelled British construction, manufacturing, postal services, and call centres for a hundred years. This page documents the builder's tea standard with the seriousness it deserves.

The definition

A builder's tea is:

1. Strong, heavy on Assam, brewed long enough to colour the teaspoon when you stir it.
2. Hot, just boiled water, pre warmed mug, drunk while it still steams.
3. Milky, semi skimmed or whole, enough to lighten the cup to a pale tan.
4. Sugary, usually one or two, occasionally three. Some take it sugarless; the historical norm was two.
5. Mug sized, 350-450ml. Not a teacup. Not a thimble. The Sports Direct mug is the ironic icon.
6. Made fast, kettle on, bag in, water on, milk in, stir, drink. No ceremony, no timer, no Pinterest.

The brand canon

Three brands carry the builder's tea standard: Yorkshire Tea, PG Tips, and Tetley. All three are heavy on Assam and Kenyan blacks, blended specifically to take milk and sugar without losing character. Yorkshire Tea is currently the most loved, it brews dark within 90 seconds, holds character with two milks, and doesn't go bitter even left to stew on a worktop. PG Tips is brisker; Tetley is lighter. PG's pyramid bag is a real design, giving the leaf room to move.

The technique

Proper builder's tea technique:

1. Kettle on. Cold water, fresh fill. Don't reboil yesterday's water, flat, oxygen depleted.

2. Tea bag in the mug. One bag, no exceptions. (For an extra strong cup, add a second; don't squeeze.)
3. Just boiled water poured directly onto the bag. Fill to 80%, leave room for milk.
4. Stir for 5 seconds. Brew for 90 seconds to 2 minutes.
5. Press the bag against the side of the mug with the spoon, do NOT squeeze. Squeezing releases tannins and makes the cup bitter.
6. Bag out. Milk in until the colour goes pale tan. Sugar to taste.
7. Drink while hot. Builder's tea cools fast in a wide mug; once it's lukewarm, top up or restart.

Why this technique is honoured

Each detail evolved for a reason. Cold fresh water gives more dissolved oxygen and a brighter cup. The 90-second brew is the optimal extraction window for British black blends, longer over extracts, shorter under extracts. Pressing instead of squeezing keeps tannins in check. Milk after, not before, is the post-1979 standard (the "milk first" tradition died with porcelain teacups; modern mugs are heat tolerant enough to take tea first).

Variations across Britain

- **Northern English builder's tea:** tends to be even stronger, Yorkshire Gold or PG Tips brewed 3 minutes. Often two sugars.
- **Scottish builder's tea:** mirrors Northern English. Glengettie (Welsh blended Scottish leaning) is locally favoured.
- **Welsh builder's tea** Glengettie is the local choice; brewed strong, milk, often no sugar.
- **Southern English builder's tea:** tends slightly lighter. Tetley dominates by sales in the South.
- **The London variant** is often weaker because of London's hard water, tea over extracts faster in calcium rich water.

Things builder's tea is NOT

- It is not Earl Grey. Bergamot is not the worker's flavour.
- It is not loose leaf. The bag is the standard.
- It is not green. Green tea was not in British kitchens until the 2000s.
- It is not herbal. "Tea" in the British workplace context means Camellia sinensis with milk.
- It is not "strong" the same as a strong Italian espresso. Strong builder's tea is full flavoured, not concentrated.

Caffeine

A proper builder's tea (Yorkshire Tea or PG Tips, 90-second brew, mug sized) delivers approximately 50-65mg of caffeine. A six mug day is 300-400mg, at the upper end of what NHS guidelines suggest, but normal for British construction sites and offices.

FAQ

What is builder's tea? Strong, milky, hot black tea served in a mug. Yorkshire Tea, PG Tips, or Tetley brewed quickly with milk and optional sugar. The British workplace cup.

What's the best builder's tea brand? Yorkshire Tea Original is the most loved. PG Tips is brisker. Tetley is lighter. All three qualify.

How long do you brew builder's tea? 90 seconds to 2 minutes. Longer than that and the cup turns harsh. Shorter and it's under extracted.

Do you put milk in builder's tea? Yes. Always. Without milk it's just strong black tea; with milk it's builder's tea.

How many sugars in builder's tea? Historical default: two. Modern shift: one or none. "Two sugars please" is still the workplace standard.

Curator's note: there is no shame in a builder's tea. It is the cup that fuelled British infrastructure, and the technique honours that. Yorkshire Tea, two milks, one sugar, drunk hot. Lee, teas.co.uk.

This page is the recipe and method angle. The cultural history is the builders brew tradition, and the working class social story is builders tea. Buy a base equal to it from Yorkshire Tea or the full tea shop.

Reference noted

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

On the practical shopping side: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. The full tea shop is there for the rest, and UK delivery costs nothing once you pass £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Pick what you'll actually drink every day. The mug of builders' you actually drink beats the fancy tin you only display.

Brew-tradition reading

- Builders brew tradition
- Builders tea (working class brew)
- the black tea family
- Milk first or tea first

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea

- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
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