Darjeeling vs Assam: India’s Two Great Teas Compared

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Darjeeling vs Assam, in summary:** Darjeeling and Assam are India’s opposite great blacks: one strong and malty for milk, one light and floral for afternoons. Which to drink, and when.

Darjeeling and Assam are both Indian black teas and are about as different as two teas from one country can be. Choosing between them is not a question of quality at all but simply of which kind of cup you actually want on the day, and knowing the contrast makes almost every Indian black tea legible.

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

Two teas, one country, opposite styles

Assam comes from the hot, humid, low lying Brahmaputra valley and is made largely from the large leaved assamica plant; Darjeeling comes from cool, high Himalayan gardens and leans on the smaller China type bush. That difference of place and plant produces the entire contrast: Assam is strong, malty and full; Darjeeling is light, floral and delicate. The fuller stories are on the Assam and Darjeeling pages; this one sets them head to head.

	Assam	Darjeeling
Region	Low, hot Brahmaputra valley	High, cool Himalayan gardens
Plant	Large leaf assamica	Mostly China type
Character	Malty, brisk, full, deep	Light, floral, muscatel, delicate
Milk	Designed for it	Usually better without
Best at	Breakfast, builder, strong mug	Afternoon, contemplative, fine
Brewing	Boiling, full steep	Just off boil, gentle, do not stew

The flavour difference

Assam is the engine of the British breakfast cup: a deep, malty, bready strength with a brisk edge strong enough to taste clearly through milk. Darjeeling is the opposite: light bodied, aromatic and floral, with the famous grape like "muscatel" note in a good second flush, a tea whose subtlety milk simply destroys. Tasting them side by side is the fastest tea education there is, because almost every other black sits

somewhere on the line between these two poles, the principle the black tea by origin guide builds on.

How they sit among the other origins

These two are the reference points for the whole category. A brisk Kenyan or low Ceylon sits near the Assam pole; a delicate high grown Ceylon or a Nilgiri leans toward the Darjeeling end. Learn this one contrast and the rest of the black tea by origin map reads itself, which is the real reason this comparison is worth understanding rather than just memorising.

The role of the flush

Darjeeling changes dramatically by season, the "flush": first flush is light and green edged, second flush gives the prized muscatel, later flushes are rounder. Assam has flushes too, with the second flush giving the maltiest, richest cup, but the swing is far less extreme than Darjeeling's. The practical point is that a Darjeeling label without a flush tells you much less than an Assam one, which is part of why real Darjeeling is also the more over sold of the two.

Which to drink when

Choose by occasion, not ranking. Want a strong morning cup with milk that wakes you up and stands up to breakfast: Assam, or an Assam led breakfast blend. Want a delicate, fragrant afternoon cup to drink without milk and pay attention to: a single garden Darjeeling, ideally with the flush stated. Many committed drinkers keep both for exactly that reason, using each for the job it is built for rather than treating one as superior.

How to brew each properly

They demand opposite handling. Assam wants fully boiling water and a full three to five minute steep; it is hard to make bitter and takes milk happily. Darjeeling, especially first flush, wants water just off the boil and a moderate steep, tasted as it goes, and is usually best without milk because dairy buries the floral character you paid for. Brewing a fine Darjeeling like an Assam is the single most common way its delicacy is wasted, the same care the cold brew page applies in a different direction.

Value and the over sold warning

Assam, much of it commodity CTC, is generally inexpensive and dependable. Real single garden Darjeeling is a small, premium output, and because the name carries prestige, far more "Darjeeling" is sold than the district produces, so price scepticism and a stated estate and flush matter, just as the Darjeeling guide stresses. Good Assam is easy to buy well cheaply; good Darjeeling needs more care for the money.

Common questions

Is Darjeeling or Assam better? Neither. Assam is strong and malty for milky morning tea; Darjeeling is light and floral for a delicate afternoon cup.

Which takes milk? Assam is built for milk; Darjeeling is usually better without, especially first flush.

Why is Darjeeling pricier? It is a small, high grown, premium output and heavily over sold, so real single garden tea costs more.

What is muscatel? The grape like, slightly winey aromatic note prized in a good second flush Darjeeling.

If you want to taste the contrast, it is worth browsing our Assam teas for the strong malty cup and our Darjeeling teas for the delicate floral one, ideally as loose leaf so each can be brewed the way it actually wants.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · A small, reliable stash of Assam and Darjeeling beats a big, curious one. Rotate two or three Indian teas you really enjoy.

Origin companion reading

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