Tea Flavours: How to Choose by Taste

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea flavours, in summary:** Tea flavour families, the tasting vocabulary, and how brewing and storage change the cup: how to choose tea by the taste you actually want.

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

Tea flavour vocabulary covers an enormous range, vegetal marine (sencha), malty rich (Assam), bright citrussy (Ceylon), smoky leather (Lapsang), umami sweet (gyokuro), earthy complex (pu erh), floral fruity (oolong). Knowing the vocabulary helps drinkers describe what they like and find more of it.

The major flavour families

Malty rich

Body forward; cereal like notes; milk friendly. Examples: Assam, Yorkshire Tea, English Breakfast.

Bright citrussy

Sharp, acidic leaning; lemon and bergamot notes. Examples: Ceylon, Earl Grey.

Vegetal marine

Grassy, ocean savoury, umami. Examples: Japanese sencha, gyokuro.

Floral fruity

Aromatic blossoms; fruit leaning. Examples: Tieguanyin oolong, jasmine green tea, premium first flush Darjeeling.

Smoky leather

Bonfire, pine, leather notes. Examples: Lapsang Souchong, Russian Caravan.

Earthy complex

Mushroom, soil, aged wood notes. Examples: aged sheng pu erh, shou pu erh.

Umami sweet

Savoury sweetness; broth like notes; concentrated L theanine character. Examples: premium sencha, gyokuro, premium Tieguanyin.

Toasty roasted

Toast, popcorn, coffee adjacent notes. Examples: hojicha, genmaicha, dark roasted oolong.

Spicy warming

Cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, clove. Examples: chai, chai blends, Christmas spice teas.

Sweet natural

Honey, vanilla, caramel without added sugar. Examples: rooibos, honeybush, vanilla rooibos.

Tart fruity

Cranberry like, hibiscus tart. Examples: hibiscus, rosehip, fruit infusions.

Floral aromatic

Lavender, chamomile, rose. Examples: chamomile, lavender, rose green tea, Lavender Earl Grey.

Mineral roasted

Wuyi rock teas; specific mountain terroir character. Examples: Da Hong Pao, Wuyi rock oolongs.

The tea tasting vocabulary

Body

How "thick" or "thin" the cup feels. Light = thin; full = substantial. Black tea typically full bodied; white tea typically light.

Astringency

The mouth puckering sensation from tannins. Black tea has more; rooibos has very little.

Briskness

Bright, lively character. Ceylon is brisk; aged pu erh is mellow.

Maltiness

Cereal like sweet character. Assam is malty; sencha isn't.

Floral

Blossom aromatic. Tieguanyin is floral; Yorkshire Tea isn't.

Vegetal

Plant leaf, grassy. Sencha is vegetal; black tea typically isn't.

Umami

Savoury "fifth taste", broth like. Premium green tea has umami; black tea less so.

Mouthfeel

How the cup physically feels, silky, syrupy, watery, oily.

Finish

What lingers after swallowing. Long finish = aftertaste persists; short finish = clean.

Mouth coating

How the cup coats the palate. Premium oolong and aged pu erh are mouth coating.

Flavour by tea type

Tea type	Typical flavour profile
Yorkshire Tea	Malty, strong, milk friendly
Earl Grey	Citrus floral (bergamot), perfumed
Darjeeling	Muscatel, floral, almond blossom
Assam	Strong, malty, dark
Ceylon	Bright, citrussy, clean
Sencha	Vegetal, marine, umami
Gyokuro	Concentrated umami, sweet, low bitter
Matcha	Intense umami, vegetal, slightly bitter
Tieguanyin	Floral, milky, fruity
Da Hong Pao	Mineral, roasted, complex
Lapsang Souchong	Pine smoke, leather, intense
Aged sheng pu erh	Earthy, mushroomy, fruity
Shou pu erh	Cooked earth, mellow, dark
Rooibos	Sweet, woody, vanilla honey
Chamomile	Apple like, floral, gentle
Peppermint	Cooling, sharp menthol
Hibiscus	Tart, cranberry like, vivid
Chai (masala)	Cardamom led spice, milk rich

How brewing affects flavour

- **Higher temperature.** Extracts more compounds, including bitter ones. Hot water bitters delicate teas.
- **Longer steep.** Same effect, extracts more, including tannins.
- **More leaf.** Concentrated cup; same flavour profile but stronger.
- **Repeat infusions.** Each successive infusion is slightly different, the same tea reveals layers.

How storage affects flavour

- **Air exposure.** Oxidation degrades aromatics over time.
- **Light.** UV breaks down catechins; cup becomes flatter.
- **Heat.** Accelerates degradation.
- **Aroma transfer.** Tea absorbs surrounding smells.

Properly stored tea (airtight tin, cool dark cupboard) retains its flavour profile longer. More on storage.

Developing palate vocabulary

To develop tea tasting vocabulary:

1. Brew teas systematically, one at a time.
2. Take notes on body, flavour, finish.
3. Compare similar teas side by side (different Earl Greys, for example).
4. Try at least 5-6 cups before judging, your palate adjusts.
5. Read reviews and tasting notes to learn vocabulary.
6. Discuss with other drinkers.

FAQ

What flavours should I look for in tea? Body, astringency, brightness, maltiness, floral notes, finish, all worth paying attention to.

Best tea for trying different flavour families? Buy small samples across categories, one Assam, one Ceylon, one Darjeeling, one sencha, one oolong, one pu erh, and compare.

Why does the same tea taste different sometimes? Brewing variables (water, temperature, time, ratio); storage condition; individual palate variation.

Can I improve my palate? Yes, tasting attentively across many teas builds vocabulary and discrimination.

Where to start exploring? Buy a tea sampler or advent calendar, exposure to many flavours quickly.

Curator's note: tea flavour vocabulary is one of the most rewarding aspects of tea drinking. Worth slowing down for some cups; taking notes; building the palate. The variety is enormous; the language helps navigate it. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Explore the families across the black tea range, the green tea range and the wider herbal range, or browse the full tea shop (free UK shipping over £35).

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Spend less on prestige, more on freshness. Two months in a supermarket bag is fresher than three years in a gift tin.

Tasting vocabulary reading

- How to make tea
- Black tea
- Green tea
- How to store tea

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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