George Orwell Tea Rules

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Orwell's 11 tea rules, in summary:** Orwell's 1946 eleven rules for tea: the sound technical core, the dated dogma, and what he got right and wrong. Take the method, weigh the opinion.

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

In January 1946, George Orwell published a 600-word essay called "A Nice Cup of Tea" in the Evening Standard, laying out his 11 strict rules for making tea properly. Some of his rules are excellent. Some are dated. One is still hotly debated. Reading Orwell on tea is a window into 1940s British tea culture, and a useful prompt for thinking about what actually matters in a cup.

The 11 Orwell rules

Orwell's rules, paraphrased clearly:

1. "First of all, one should use Indian or Ceylonese tea."

Orwell was firmly against Chinese green tea, claiming it lacked stimulation and didn't produce a "valiant" cup. **Modern verdict:** reflects 1940s British prejudice. Chinese green tea is a different drink, not an inferior one.

2. "The tea should be made in small quantities, that is, in a teapot."

Orwell advocated for properly sized teapots, typically 4-6 cups. **Modern verdict:** holds up. A teapot makes better tea than a single tea bag in a mug, but the practical convenience of bagged tea has won the daily battle.

3. "The pot should be warmed beforehand."

Pour boiling water into the empty pot, swirl, pour out. THEN add tea and fresh boiling water. **Modern verdict:** excellent advice. Cold pots drop water temperature significantly, which weakens extraction.

4. "The tea should be strong."

Orwell suggests "six heaped teaspoons" per quart (about 2 teaspoons per 200ml). **Modern verdict:** stronger than modern standard. 1 teaspoon per 200ml is the modern norm. Orwell's ratio produces a punishingly strong cup.

5. "The tea should be put straight into the pot."

No tea balls, no infusers, let the leaves swim. **Modern verdict:** partially correct. Loose leaves swimming gives more contact area; a fine mesh strainer at pour time captures them. Tea bags are the modern compromise.

6. "One should take the teapot to the kettle, not the other way about."

Pour the boiling water over the tea while it's still at a rolling boil. **Modern verdict:** correct. Water dropping below boiling point during the walk from kettle to pot meaningfully affects extraction.

7. "After making the tea, one should stir it, or better, give the pot a good shake."

Mix the leaves with the water for full extraction. **Modern verdict:** sound. Stirring once during brewing improves extraction.

8. "One should drink out of a good breakfast cup, that is, a cylindrical type of cup, not the flat, shallow type."

Tall narrow cups retain heat better than wide shallow ones. **Modern verdict:** correct on heat retention. Practically, any decent mug works.

9. "One should pour the cream off the milk before using it for tea."

The cream off bottled milk in 1946 made tea unpleasantly fatty. **Modern verdict:** obsolete. Modern milk is homogenised; this isn't a problem anymore.

10. "One should pour tea into the cup first."

Tea first, then milk, the British tradition. Orwell argues this lets you regulate milk strength visually. **Modern verdict:** the most controversial of his rules. The "milk in first" camp argues that adding milk to hot tea denatures milk proteins, while milk then tea protects the milk. Some scientists support MIF; many drinkers don't notice. Orwell took a side; modern practice is divided.

11. "Tea, unless one is drinking it in the Russian style, should be drunk WITHOUT SUGAR."

Orwell's most contentious rule. He argued sugar destroys tea's flavour. **Modern verdict:** a matter of taste. Many UK drinkers disagree vehemently. Modern view: drink it however you like; Orwell was being a snob.

The single best Orwell rule

Rule 6, taking the pot to the kettle, is the rule that most modern British drinkers ignore and shouldn't. Pouring boiling water onto leaves is the moment when extraction begins. Lukewarm water from a kettle that boiled 90 seconds ago produces a noticeably weaker, less complex cup. Fresh from the kettle matters.

The single most dated rule

Rule 1, only Indian or Ceylonese tea. Orwell's essay was written when British tea drinking was overwhelmingly Indian Ceylon black tea with milk. The modern UK tea shelf includes Chinese, Japanese, Kenyan, Sri Lankan, African, Indonesian, and South American teas. To exclude Chinese green tea

categorically is to miss out on Long Jing, Bi Luo Chun, Jasmine Pearl, and dozens of other excellent traditions.

The hidden rule Orwell missed

Orwell had nothing to say about water quality. Modern British tea drinkers, especially in hard water areas, should consider:

- Filtered water for premium teas
- Slightly stronger blend (or longer steep) in hard water areas
- Freshly drawn water (not water that's been sitting in the kettle)

What Orwell got fundamentally right

- **Tea is worth taking seriously.** The whole essay is premised on the idea that making a "nice cup of tea" is a craft worth practising.
- **Strong tea beats weak tea.** Properly extracted tea is recognisably better than tea flavoured water.
- **Hot water matters.** Multiple rules emphasise temperature, and he's right.
- **The cup is part of the experience.** Mug shape and warmth do affect drinking.

What Orwell got wrong

- **Anti Chinese tea snobbery.** Reflects 1940s British insularity; doesn't survive modern tea education.
- **Anti sugar absolutism.** Personal preference, not universal rule.
- **Strength ratios.** His 2tsp/200ml is overkill for most modern drinkers.

The whole essay in one sentence

Take tea seriously, use freshly boiled water, pour the boiling water onto the leaves (not the leaves into water), brew strong, drink from a decent cup, and ignore most of his other prescriptive opinions.

FAQ

What did Orwell write about tea? A 600-word essay called "A Nice Cup of Tea" published in the Evening Standard, January 1946, listing 11 rules for proper tea making.

Are Orwell's tea rules still valid? Some yes (warm pot, freshly boiled water, tea taken seriously). Some are dated (anti Chinese tea bias, milk cream issue). The most controversial (sugar, milk first) remain live debates.

Did Orwell drink tea with sugar? No, he was firmly opposed and argued vehemently against it.

What's the most useful Orwell rule today? "Take the teapot to the kettle." Freshly boiled water onto the leaves matters more than most British drinkers realise.

What did Orwell think of milk in tea? Pro milk, but with the "tea first, then milk" approach, and he insisted on skimming the cream off bottled milk first (obsolete advice now).

Curator's note: Orwell's essay is the most quoted bit of British tea writing for good reason, opinionated, specific, and grounded in actual practice. Read it once, then ignore the bits that don't work for your kettle and your cupboard. The man who wrote 1984 is allowed to be slightly bossy about tea. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Orwell's rules, judged at a glance

Orwell said	The verdict
Indian/Ceylon tea, strong	Sound: a sturdy base is the point of this style
Warm the pot, loose leaf in the pot	Sound: the most useful technical core
No sugar	His dogma; a preference, not a rule
Milk after tea, tea strong first	Defensible; in-cup brewing makes order minor
Tiered/very strong throughout	The dated, combative part; adjust to taste

A natural follow-on: the English tea range and loose leaf range.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Take Orwell's advice where it improves your cup and drop it where it doesn't. Curiosity is the only reliable guide.

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