# Gongfu Brewing

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Gongfu brewing, in summary:** Gongfu is a method, not a ceremony: high leaf, small vessel, many short steeps, so a good tea is read across its whole arc. What it is and how to do it.

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

**Gongfu cha (???, "tea with great skill") is the Chinese tea preparation that uses a small pot, a high leaf to water ratio, and many short infusions instead of one long steep.** The result: a single portion of leaves yields 6-8 cups, each subtly different, revealing layers that Western "stick a teabag in a mug" brewing flattens. It looks fussy. It isn't, once you've done it twice. It's the brewing method that reveals what a £40 Yunnan or a £6 Yorkshire actually has to offer.

## What gongfu is (and isn't)

Gongfu is a brewing method, not a tea ceremony. It's everyday in Fujian, Guangdong, and Taiwan, what people drink at home or with guests. The name "gongfu" (the same word as "kung fu", both transliterations of ??) means "skill" or "patience", referencing the skilled, attentive preparation, not martial arts.

Gongfu is NOT:

- The Japanese tea ceremony (chanoyu), that's a separate, more ritualised tradition specifically for matcha.
- Reserved for special occasions, Chinese tea drinkers brew gongfu daily.
- Restricted to one tea type, gongfu works for oolong, pu erh, black, white, even green (with adjustments).

## The equipment

### Essential

- **Small teapot or gaiwan (100-150ml).** A gaiwan is a lidded cup with a saucer, the Chinese tea vessel that does a bit of everything. A Yixing clay teapot is the alternative; clay absorbs the tea's character over time and develops a "memory" of one type of tea. Either works; gaiwan is more flexible for beginners.

- **A small pitcher (cha hai).** The brewed tea is decanted into this pitcher before pouring into cups. Equalises the strength.
- **Small tasting cups (30-50ml).** Tiny by Western standards. The point is to taste, sip, taste again, not to mug down volume.
- **A strainer.** Catches loose leaf fragments.
- **Hot water source.** A kettle is fine. Some enthusiasts use a side burner kettle for continuous near boiling water during a long session.

#### Nice to have

- **Cha pan (tea boat / brewing tray).** A ridged tray that catches spills. Lets you pour water freely over the pot without making a mess.
- **Tea pet.** A small clay figurine that lives on the tray. Gets "fed" with tea during the session. Decorative tradition.
- **Aroma cup.** A tall narrow cup that captures the brewed tea's aroma. Sniff before drinking.

## The method (step by step)

#### 1. Warm the equipment

Pour boiling water into the empty pot, swirl, pour out (over the cha pan or down the drain). Repeat for the cups. Warm equipment preserves the tea's heat during brewing.

#### 2. Add the leaves

The leaf to water ratio is the gongfu key:

- Black tea: 4-5g leaves per 100ml of pot capacity
- Oolong (rolled): 5-7g per 100ml, fills the pot ? to ½ when dry
- Pu erh: 6-8g per 100ml
- White tea: 3-4g per 100ml
- Green tea: 3-4g per 100ml (lower temperature too)

For a 100ml gaiwan brewing oolong, that's a generous heaped tablespoon of leaves. A lot more than Western brewing. The high ratio is balanced by the very short infusion times.

#### 3. Rinse the leaves

Pour boiling water over the leaves. Wait 5 seconds. Pour out (don't drink). This "wash" wakes the leaves, removes any dust, and primes them for full extraction. Pu erh and aged oolongs particularly benefit. Some teas (delicate greens, fresh whites) skip the rinse.

#### 4. First infusion

Pour water at the appropriate temperature. Hold for the time:

- Black tea: 95°C, 10-15 seconds for first infusion

- Oolong: 90-95°C, 15-20 seconds
- Pu erh: 95°C, 10 seconds
- White tea: 85°C, 30-45 seconds
- Green tea: 75-80°C, 30 seconds (NOT longer; greens go bitter fast)

Decant immediately into the pitcher (cha hai), then pour from pitcher into cups. The pitcher equalises strength so the first cup poured isn't weaker than the last.

#### 5. Subsequent infusions

Re fill the pot with hot water. Each subsequent infusion gets slightly longer:

- 2nd infusion: +5 seconds
- 3rd infusion: +5 seconds
- 4th-8th: +10-20 seconds each as the leaves give up flavour gradually

Good leaves yield 6-10 infusions. Cheap leaves give up after 2-3. The number of infusions is a quality indicator.

#### 6. The session

A gongfu session lasts 30-60 minutes. The pace is slow, pour, wait, sip, smell, talk, brew the next infusion. The same leaves get progressively different over the session: first infusions are bright and sharp, middle infusions deepen, late infusions soften and sweeten.

### Which teas benefit most from gongfu

Tea by tea:

- **Oolong (Tieguanyin, Da Hong Pao, Phoenix Dancong).** Built for gongfu. Multiple infusions reveal totally different layers, first sharp and floral, fifth deep and minerally.
- **Pu erh (sheng and shou).** Classic gongfu tea. Aged pu erh can yield 12-15 infusions.
- **Chinese black (Jin Jun Mei, Yunnan, Keemun).** Gongfu rewards quality black tea, sweet first infusions, malty middle, gentle late.
- **White (Silver Needle, Bai Mudan).** Slow, contemplative gongfu. Multiple infusions reveal hay, melon, soft sweetness.
- **Green (Long Jing, Bi Luo Chun).** Works in gongfu but tolerates fewer infusions (3-4) and lower temperatures.

Indian CTC black teas, supermarket flavoured teas, and most herbal infusions don't benefit much from gongfu, they're designed for one and done Western brewing.

### Common mistakes

- **Too much water.** Filling a Western mug sized pot with gongfu ratios over extracts and bitters fast.

- **Too long an infusion.** 10-15 seconds, not 3 minutes. The high leaf ratio means quick extraction.
- **Not equalising via the pitcher.** Pour from pot to pitcher first. Pour from pitcher to cups. Skipping the pitcher gives the first cup a weaker brew than the last.
- **Wrong temperature.** Boiling water on green or white tea = bitter. Adjust temperature per tea type.
- **Treating it as a ceremony.** Don't bow or chant. Gongfu is everyday brewing.

## Buying gongfu equipment in the UK

- **Mei Leaf (London).** Specialist Chinese tea retailer; sells gaiwans, Yixing pots, full kits. Excellent quality.
- **Postcard Teas (London).** Smaller, equally serious. Some equipment.
- **What Cha (online).** Wide range of single origin teas; some equipment.
- **Amazon UK.** Cheap gaiwans (£10-20) for trying gongfu without committing. Quality varies.
- **Asian groceries.** Often stock basic gaiwans and clay pots cheaply.

## FAQ

**What does gongfu mean?** "Skill" or "patience", the same word as kung fu. Refers to the careful, attentive brewing method.

**Is gongfu the same as the Japanese tea ceremony?** No. Gongfu is everyday Chinese brewing; chanoyu is a Japanese ceremonial tradition specifically for matcha.

**How many infusions can I get?** Quality tea: 6-10 infusions. Premium oolong or pu erh: 10-15.

**Can I gongfu brew a Yorkshire Tea bag?** Technically yes; it'll yield 1-2 weak infusions and won't reveal anything interesting. Gongfu wants whole leaf quality teas.

**Is gongfu hard to learn?** Two practice sessions is enough to get the rhythm. The complexity is in tasting, not in brewing.

*Curator's note: gongfu changed how I taste tea. Sitting with a £20 oolong over an hour of small sips is a different thing from steeping a single bag in a mug. You don't need expensive kit, a £10 gaiwan, a small pitcher, and three good teas will keep you busy for months. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.*

## Gongfu vs Western brewing, at a glance

| Aspect | Gongfu | Western mug |
|---|---|---|
| Vessel | Small gaiwan or pot | Large mug or pot |
| Leaf ratio | High leaf, little water | Low leaf, lots of water |
| Steeps | Many, very short | One, long |
| Best for | Oolong, pu-erh, good whole leaf | Everyday black, bagged tea |
| Payoff | Evolving cup across infusions | Fast and convenient |

Stock leaf that rewards the method from the oolong range, the pu-erh range, or the full tea shop.

FROM THE CURATOR

*teas* · Pick what you'll actually drink every day. A brewing method you use beats a fancier one you only admire.

## Chinese brewing reading

- The gaiwan explained
- The fairness pitcher
- Oolong tea
- How to make tea

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