Lapsang Souchong: The Smoked Tea Overview

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Lapsang Souchong, in summary:** Lapsang Souchong is pinewood-smoke-dried Wuyi black tea, generally the world's first black tea, with a polarising bonfire character you love or hate.

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

Lapsang Souchong is the world's first black tea, produced in the Wuyi Mountains of Fujian Province, China, in the early 1600s. The defining feature: leaves dried over smouldering pinewood fires, producing a smoky bonfire aromatic that's polarising and unforgettable. One of the great Chinese specialty teas. Drinkers either love it or actively avoid it; the middle ground is rare.

The history

Lapsang Souchong was created accidentally around 1600 in the Tongmu region of the Wuyi Mountains, Fujian Province. The story (probably part legend): tea workers needed to dry their tea quickly when soldiers were approaching; they used pinewood fires for the speed; the unintended smoke flavour was preserved; the tea became distinctive.

Lapsang is generally credited as the world's first black tea, fully oxidised, then smoke dried. The technique spread; eventually black tea (without smoke) became the dominant Chinese export.

The name

"Lapsang Souchong" is the Anglicised version of the Chinese name "Zhèngsh?n Xi?ozh?ng" (????, "small leaf from the right mountain" or "smoked smaller leaf tea from the original mountain"). The "right mountain" reference is to the Wuyi Mountains; "souchong" indicates smaller leaf grade.

How Lapsang is made

1. Tea leaves picked from Wuyi Mountain estates.
2. Withered briefly.
3. Rolled.
4. Allowed to fully oxidise (like any black tea).

5. Dried over smouldering pinewood fires (the defining smoke step).
6. Sometimes secondary smoking before packaging.

The smoke comes from real pinewood smouldering in dedicated smoke chambers. Premium Lapsang uses specific Masson pine wood; lower tier uses other pine varieties.

What it tastes like

Distinctly smoky. The aroma is the first surprise, the dry leaves smell of bonfire, leather, sometimes lapsang souchong flavoured bacon. The brewed cup carries through:

- **Pine smoke.** Dominant aromatic.
- **Black tea body.** Behind the smoke.
- **Leather and tar notes.** Sometimes.
- **Long finish.** Smoke lingers.

If you've never had Lapsang, expect to be surprised, sometimes pleasantly, sometimes not.

Use cases

- **Pairing with strong flavoured foods.** Smoked salmon, blue cheese, dark chocolate, BBQ, Lapsang holds its own and complements.
- **Cooking applications.** Lapsang rubbed steaks, Lapsang smoked salmon (using Lapsang in tea smoking technique), Lapsang braising liquid. More on cooking with tea.
- **Cocktails.** Lapsang infused gin or whisky for smoky tea cocktails. The Penicillin cocktail (whisky, lemon, ginger, honey) sometimes uses Lapsang.
- **Russian Caravan blends.** Lapsang is often the smoky component of Russian Caravan style blends.

How to brew Lapsang

1. 1 tsp loose leaf or 1 bag per 200ml.
2. Water at full rolling boil.
3. Steep 3-5 minutes. Don't oversteep, smoke can become acrid.
4. Drink black. Milk masks the smoke; don't add unless you want a milky smoky cup.
5. Optional: drop of lemon for brightness.

Caffeine

30-40mg per 200ml cup. Slightly lower than typical British black tea, some caffeine is volatilised during smoke drying.

Variations

Modern Lapsang (lighter smoke)

Some modern Lapsang uses lower intensity smoke for a more accessible cup. Less polarising, more drinkable for newcomers.

"Bohea" or unsmoked Wuyi black

The same Wuyi mountain region produces unsmoked black tea (sometimes called Bohea or Wuyi Black). Very different cup, fruity, malty, no smoke.

Russian Caravan

Black tea blend including Lapsang for smoke. Less smoky than pure Lapsang.

Lapsang blended Earl Grey

Smoky Earl Grey, bergamot + Lapsang. Distinctive specialty.

Buying Lapsang in the UK

- **Twinings Lapsang Souchong.** Mainstream supermarket option. Decent introduction.
- **Whittard Lapsang Souchong.** UK speciality.
- **teas.co.uk, and lapsang can also be found at trade friends such as What Cha, Mei Leaf and Postcard Teas.** Specialist Chinese tea retailers, premium grades, traditional smoking.
- **Asian groceries.** Often best value for everyday Lapsang.

Storage

The smoke aroma fades over time. Best within 6-12 months of opening. Airtight, cool, dark, keep away from other foods (Lapsang's smoke aroma can transfer).

Lapsang in cooking

Lapsang rubbed steak

1. 2 tbsp Lapsang leaves ground in spice mill.
2. 1 tsp salt + 1 tsp brown sugar + 1 tsp cracked pepper.
3. Mix; rub onto thick cut steak 30 minutes before cooking.
4. Sear; finish in hot oven.

Tea smoked salmon

Indoor tea smoking technique using 4 tbsp Lapsang + 2 tbsp brown sugar + 2 tbsp uncooked rice in a foil lined wok. Detailed technique.

Cautions

- **Smoke aroma transfer.** Store separately from other foods; the smoke smell can transfer.
- **Polarising flavour.** Try a small amount first if you're uncertain.

- **Caffeine sensitivity.** Standard black tea level.

FAQ

What is Lapsang Souchong? A smoked Chinese black tea from the Wuyi Mountains. Generally credited as the world's first black tea.

Why does it taste smoky? The leaves are dried over smouldering pinewood fires, producing real smoke flavour.

Is it polarising? Yes, drinkers either love it or actively avoid it.

Best Lapsang UK? teas.co.uk and Twinings for accessible mainstream; friends like Mei Leaf and What Cha for premium.

Caffeine? 30-40mg per cup, slightly lower than typical British black tea.

Curator's note: Lapsang is the kind of tea you'll either fall for completely or shake your head and put back on the shelf. The smoky cup paired with smoked salmon and rye bread on a winter afternoon is a particular pleasure I'd recommend trying. Once. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Lapsang Souchong at a glance

Aspect	The answer
Origin	Wuyi Mountains, Fujian, China, c.1600
Defining step	Dried over smouldering pinewood fires
Taste	Pine smoke, leather, malty base, long finish
Brew	Full boil, 3-5 min, neat (milk masks smoke)
Caffeine	30-40mg, slightly below typical British black
Gentler way in	Russian Caravan blend

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. Browse the full tea range; smoked or not, orders over £35 go free across the UK.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · The smoky tin's price per cup is the one that matters. Loose smoked leaf usually beats bags on that, though supermarket lapsang sometimes keeps up.

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