Afternoon Tea: History and How It Works

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **British afternoon tea, in summary:** British afternoon tea was invented in the 1840s by the Duchess of Bedford: three tiers of sandwiches, scones and cakes, served with loose leaf tea.

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

Formal afternoon tea is one of Britain's most recognisable cultural exports, finger sandwiches, scones with clotted cream and jam, fine pastries, and quality tea served in fine china at hotels, tea rooms, and stately homes. The tradition dates from 1840 (Anna, 7th Duchess of Bedford). Modern UK afternoon tea is a hospitality industry worth millions, with bookings at top venues 6-12 months ahead.

The history

Origin (1840)

Anna, 7th Duchess of Bedford, found herself hungry in mid afternoon. She began having a small meal of tea and pastries between lunch and dinner. The practice spread among aristocratic friends, then to the broader upper class.

Late Victorian (1870s-90s)

Afternoon tea became a formal social occasion. Hotels, tea rooms, and private houses developed elaborate traditions.

20th century

Afternoon tea moved from private to public, hotels (The Ritz, The Savoy, Claridge's) became destinations. The afternoon tea hospitality tradition became globally recognisable.

Modern revival

The 1990s-2010s saw a revival of formal afternoon tea. Hotels, restaurants, and dedicated tea rooms now offer extensive afternoon tea menus.

The structure

Sandwiches

Three or four small sandwich types:

- Cucumber and cream cheese (the classic).
- Smoked salmon and crème fraîche.
- Egg and cress.
- Coronation chicken.
- Ham and mustard.

Cut into small finger sandwich form, crusts removed.

Scones

Plain or fruit scones served warm with:

- Clotted cream (Cornish or Devon).
- Strawberry jam (typically).

The cream or jam first debate is regionally fierce: Cornwall says jam first; Devon says cream first.

Pastries

2-4 small sweet pastries:

- Battenberg cake.
- Macarons.
- Fruit tartlet.
- Eclair.
- Lemon cake.
- Profiterole.

Hotel afternoon teas often have signature pastries.

Tea

The tea selection typically includes:

- English Breakfast.
- Earl Grey.
- Darjeeling.
- Assam.
- Lapsang Souchong.
- Various herbal options.
- Specialty seasonal blends.

Loose leaf in bone china pots is standard for premium venues.

Optional addition: champagne

Many UK hotels offer "Champagne Afternoon Tea", adds a glass of champagne or sparkling wine. Premium pricing.

Best UK afternoon tea venues

The Ritz London

London's most famous afternoon tea. Bookings 6-12 months ahead. Premium pricing (£70+).

The Savoy

Historic London hotel. Thames Foyer afternoon tea is famous.

Claridge's

Foyer afternoon tea is highly rated. Premium pricing.

The Dorchester

Afternoon tea in the Promenade. Classic London experience.

Brown's Hotel

One of London's oldest hotel afternoon teas.

Fortnum & Mason

The Diamond Jubilee Tea Salon offers a classic Fortnum afternoon tea.

Bettys (Yorkshire)

Celebrated tea rooms based in Yorkshire. Multiple branches across Yorkshire.

The Wolseley

London's grand café tradition; afternoon tea served daily.

Sketch (London)

Quirky modern afternoon tea experience.

Other London hotels

Many London 5-star hotels offer afternoon tea, Connaught, Park Lane, Berkeley.

Pricing

- Mid tier hotel afternoon tea: £35-50 per person.
- Premium London hotel: £55-90 per person.
- Plus champagne: add £15-25.
- The Ritz, Claridge's tier: £70-100+ per person.

Booking afternoon tea

- Premium venues: book 3-6+ months ahead.
- Mid tier hotels: 2-4 weeks ahead.
- Tea rooms: typically walk in or 1-2 weeks ahead.
- Special occasions (Mother's Day, Christmas): 6-12 months ahead.

Dress code

Most premium hotel afternoon teas require smart casual minimum. Some require jacket for men. Trainers and casual t shirts are usually not acceptable.

The afternoon tea timing

Traditional afternoon tea is served between 2:30pm and 5:30pm. Most hotels have 90-120 minute slots.

Variations

High Tea

Different from afternoon tea, high tea is an evening meal (Northern English working class tradition). Heartier food, less ceremonial. Often confused with afternoon tea internationally.

Cream Tea

Simpler version, just tea and scones with cream and jam (no sandwiches or pastries). Cornish and Devon tradition.

Strawberry Tea

Summer variation with strawberries.

Christmas / Festive Tea

Seasonal version with mince pies, Christmas themed pastries, mulled wine option.

Vegan Afternoon Tea

Most premium UK venues now offer vegan afternoon tea, vegan scones, dairy free cream, plant based sandwiches and pastries.

Gluten free Afternoon Tea

Available at most premium venues with notice.

Home afternoon tea

Many British people do "home afternoon tea" for special occasions:

1. Buy or bake scones.
2. Quality clotted cream and jam.

3. Make finger sandwiches.
4. Buy or bake small pastries.
5. Brew loose leaf premium tea.
6. Use fine china if possible.

Home afternoon tea is a popular celebration format for birthdays, Mother's Day, baby showers, retirement.

Afternoon tea as gift

Vouchers for hotel afternoon tea are popular UK gifts:

- Mid tier hotel voucher: £80-100 (covers 2 people).
- Premium hotel voucher: £150-200 (covers 2 people).
- Ritz/Claridge's voucher: £150-220.

Modern afternoon tea trends

- Themed afternoon teas (literary, film, art).
- Cocktail afternoon tea (with tea infused cocktails).
- Vegan and gluten free options expanding.
- Boutique tea room afternoon teas (cheaper, less formal).
- Outdoor afternoon tea (gardens, terraces).

The cultural function

Afternoon tea provides:

- Special occasion British hospitality.
- Tourist experience.
- Mother daughter bonding.
- Friend group catch up.
- Romantic occasion.
- Birthday celebration.
- Retirement marker.

FAQ

What's afternoon tea? Formal mid afternoon meal, sandwiches + scones + pastries + tea.

When was it invented? 1840 by Anna, 7th Duchess of Bedford.

How much does it cost? £35-100+ per person at hotels.

Best venue? The Ritz London for traditional luxury; Bettys for Yorkshire authentic.

How to book? Premium venues 3-6 months ahead; mid tier 2-4 weeks.

Curator's note: formal afternoon tea is one of Britain's great hospitality traditions. Worth experiencing at a premium venue at least once. Home afternoon tea is achievable for special occasions with quality scones, cream, jam, and good tea. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

The essentials: British afternoon tea

Element	The note
Invented	1840s by Anna, 7th Duchess of Bedford
Time	3-5pm; the gap between lunch and dinner
Three tiers	Finger sandwiches, scones with clotted cream and jam, small cakes/pastries
Tea	Single-origin loose-leaf in pots; classic teas like Darjeeling or Earl Grey
Modern UK price (London hotel)	£50-95 per person
High tea	Different thing: working-class evening meal, not afternoon tea
Booking	Weeks ahead at top venues; Saturdays book solid
Best as	Special occasion, gift, or once-a-year treat

More tea reading

Continue with the afternoon tea tradition and British tea culture.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

Common picks around this topic: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Have a wander through the tea range; spend over £35 and UK delivery costs nothing.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Hosting tea? The per cup price is what counts. Loose leaf often wins on it, and supermarket bags sometimes match it.

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

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/