Oolong vs Black Tea: Where Does Oolong Sit?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Oolong vs black tea, in summary:** Oolong is partially oxidised and occupies the whole range between green and full black tea. Why it is not weak black, the milk line, and how to brew it.

Oolong is the tea most British drinkers have heard of but never quite placed. The clearest way to understand it is by comparison with black tea, because oolong is defined by sitting deliberately short of it on the one scale that matters: oxidation.

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

The oxidation scale, in one idea

Tea character is set largely by how far the leaf is oxidised after picking. Green tea is barely oxidised; black tea is fully oxidised; oolong is partially oxidised and, crucially, anywhere along that middle, the framework the green vs black and what counts as tea pages set out. Black tea is a destination; oolong is a whole adjustable region between green and black, which is why "where does oolong sit" has no single answer.

What that means in the cup

Black tea is sturdy, malty or brisk, deep in colour and built to take milk, a strong Assam or a bright Ceylon being typical. Oolong is more complex and more variable: a lightly oxidised oolong is floral, green and delicate, close to a green tea; a heavily oxidised, often roasted one is dark, toasty and almost black tea like. The single word "oolong" therefore covers a far wider range of cups than "black" does, which is its fascination and its confusion.

	Oolong	Black tea
Oxidation	Partial (wide range)	Full
Character	Floral to roasted, complex	Strong, malty or brisk
Milk	Almost never	Often
Re steeping	Excellent, many infusions	Limited
Water	Just off boil, gentle	Fully boiling

Why oolong is not just "weak black tea"

A common misreading is that oolong is a mild black. It is not on the way to black tea and stopped early in a quality sense; it is a deliberately different style with its own processing, including the bruising and partial oxidation that create flavours, orchid, honey, roasted nut, that full black tea does not have. Treating it as a lesser black misses the point, the same way treating green as failed black does, a parallel the oolong vs green tea page draws from the other side.

The re steeping difference

One of oolong's great practical advantages over black is that good oolong re steeps beautifully, giving many short infusions that evolve cup to cup, the pleasure the re steeping page describes. Most black tea gives one strong cup and little after. So per gram, a good oolong can be both better value and a longer, more interesting session than black, which reframes its higher shelf price.

Milk: the clean dividing line

Black tea is frequently built for milk; oolong almost never takes it. Oolong's appeal is its aromatic complexity, which milk simply erases, so it is drunk neat, like a fine green or white. If your tea habit is fundamentally a milky mug, black is your family; if you are happy drinking tea black and paying attention to it, oolong opens a door black tea does not, the occasion logic the origins guide applies across styles.

How to brew oolong

Treat oolong gently and repeatedly: water just off the boil, a fair amount of leaf, short steeps, and multiple infusions, tasting as the character shifts. Brewed once, long and with boiling water like a builder's black, it turns harsh and gives up only a fraction of what it has. The single most common reason people are underwhelmed by oolong is brewing it like black tea; brewed like the partially oxidised speciality it is, it is one of the most rewarding teas there is.

Caffeine and the everyday question

Oolong sits in a broadly moderate caffeine range, generally below a strong builder's black and well below matcha, with the usual rule that brewing strength matters more than type, the point the caffeine in tea vs coffee page makes. It is not chosen for a caffeine hit but for flavour and the long, evolving re steeped session, which is a different kind of value from the quick strong mug black tea is built for.

Common questions

Is oolong a black tea? No. It is partially oxidised and sits between green and black; black is fully oxidised.

Does oolong taste like black tea? A dark, roasted oolong can be close; a light one is nearer green. Its range is much wider than black's.

Can I put milk in oolong? Almost never; milk buries the aromatic complexity that is the whole point of oolong.

Is oolong better value than black? Often, because good oolong re steeps many times, unlike most black tea.

If you want to taste where oolong sits, it is worth browsing our oolong teas against a strong black or single origin Assam, ideally as loose leaf so the oolong can be re steeped the way it is meant to be.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Start with whichever oolong or black on this page suits your routine. Gongfu kit and wider oolongs can wait until week two.

Oolong-vs-black reading

- The history of tea
- Loose leaf vs teabag
- Tea tasting for beginners
- Tea and caffeine
- Herbal tea
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