The Perfect Cup of Tea: The Six Fundamentals

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The perfect cup, in summary:** A great cup follows six fundamentals: freshly boiled water, the right temperature, one tsp per cup, a covered steep for the right time, leaf removed, milk judged by colour.

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

The ideal cup of British tea: just boiled water, one bag per 200ml mug, a 4 minute steep, a splash of whole milk, optional sugar, and drink it within 10 minutes. Sounds simple, but most British people get at least one variable wrong. The Royal Society of Chemistry actually published a guideline. The science aligns with grandma's instinct. Get the basics right and the same tea is dramatically better.

The Royal Society of Chemistry guidelines (2003)

The Royal Society of Chemistry published "How to make a Perfect Cup of Tea" in 2003, slightly tongue in cheek but with real chemistry. Key points:

- Use freshly drawn water (oxygen content matters).
- Bring water to a vigorous boil.
- Pour onto leaves immediately.
- Steep 3-5 minutes.
- Add milk first (prevents protein denaturation from hot tea).
- Drink at 60-65°C.

The science is sound. Follow it religiously or not; understanding it helps either way.

The variables that matter

Water

- Fresh drawn (not stale water from kettle).
- Filtered if your tap water is heavily mineralised.
- Avoid distilled (no mineral content under extracts).
- Avoid heavily softened water (low calcium under extracts).

Temperature

- Black tea: 95-100°C (just boiled).
- Green tea: 70-80°C (NOT boiling).
- White tea: 80-90°C.
- Oolong: 85-95°C.
- Herbal: 95-100°C.

Tea quantity

- 1 bag per 200ml mug (standard).
- 1 heaped tsp loose leaf per 200ml.
- For pot brewing: 1 bag/tsp per cup + 1 extra "for the pot" (the old saying, actually, modern advice is just 1 per cup).

Steep time

- Black tea: 3-5 minutes.
- Green tea: 1-2 minutes.
- White tea: 4-5 minutes.
- Oolong: 2-4 minutes.
- Herbal: 5-7 minutes.

Milk

- Whole milk works best (semi skimmed acceptable; never skimmed).
- Quantity: ~10-30ml per cup (splash to generous).
- Plant milk: oat is best for British black tea.

Sugar

- 0-3 spoons depending on preference.
- Add after steeping for cleaner extraction.
- Stir well to dissolve.

The step by step "perfect cup"

1. **Fill kettle with fresh drawn water.** Don't reuse old kettle water.
2. **Boil to full boil.**
3. **Place 1 tea bag in mug.**
4. **Pour just boiled water onto bag.** Pour from height (15-30cm) for slight aeration.
5. **Cover the cup.** Saucer or small plate to retain heat and aroma.
6. **Steep 3-5 minutes.** Use a timer.

7. **Squeeze the bag against mug rim.** Recovers more flavour.
8. **Remove bag.** Don't leave in.
9. **Add milk to taste.** Splash to generous.
10. **Add sugar if desired.** 1-2 spoons standard.
11. **Stir well.** 2-3 stirs.
12. **Drink within 10 minutes.** Cold sweet tea is uniquely sad.

The milk first vs milk after debate

Milk first (Royal Society of Chemistry recommendation)

- Milk warms gradually as tea is poured.
- Prevents milk protein denaturation from sudden heat.
- Slightly more flavour mixing during pour.

Milk after (most British people)

- You can adjust milk to actual cup colour.
- Tea brews at full temperature without milk dilution.
- You can choose milk free if preferred.

Both approaches produce drinkable tea. Difference is real but small.

Common mistakes

Water too cool

Green tea benefits from cooler water (70-80°C). Black tea wants just boiled. Using lukewarm water under extracts.

Over steeping

Tannins and bitterness extract aggressively past 5 minutes. Set a timer.

Under steeping

Weak tea, thin flavour. The fix: longer steep, hotter water, more leaf.

Squeezing too hard

Releases tannins. Light squeeze is fine; aggressive squeeze creates harshness.

Reusing kettle water

Multiple boilings deoxygenate water. Result: flatter, duller tea.

Using wrong mug size

Tea bag designed for 200ml. Using larger mug = weaker tea.

Not covering during steep

Heat and aromatic compounds escape. Cover the cup with saucer.

Drinking too cold

Optimal drinking temperature is 60-65°C. Below 50°C, the cup loses character.

The "perfect cup" by tea type

Yorkshire Tea (mass market black)

Just boiled water + 1 bag + 4 minutes + whole milk + 1 sugar = builders' tea perfection.

Earl Grey

Just boiled water + 1 bag + 3 minutes + lemon slice (no milk) = afternoon tea perfection.

Sencha (Japanese green)

80°C water + 1 tsp loose leaf + 90 seconds = sencha perfection.

Premium oolong

90°C water + 5g loose leaf + 30 seconds first infusion (then re infuse) = oolong perfection.

Pukka Three Mint (herbal)

Just boiled water + 1 bag + 6 minutes + cover the cup = herbal perfection.

Matcha

1g matcha + 60ml hot water (80°C) + bamboo whisk = matcha perfection. More on matcha brewing.

Equipment for the perfect cup

Variable temperature kettle

£30-60. Best single tea quality investment for green tea drinkers.

Tea timer

Phone app works. Some prefer dedicated timer.

Quality mug

Ceramic, 300ml capacity, holds heat well.

Loose leaf brewer

Mesh basket infuser or teapot with built in strainer.

Tea caddy

Airtight tin for opened loose leaf or bag stored in original packaging.

Drinking the cup

- Hold the mug warm in your hands.
- Smell before sipping.
- First sip: small, attentive.
- Don't gulp, the tea is partly enjoyed in pace.
- Notice flavour development as it cools.
- Finish before it goes cold.

FAQ

What makes an ideal cup? Just boiled water, 1 bag per 200ml, 4 minutes, splash of milk, optional sugar.

Milk first or last? Royal Society of Chemistry says first; most British people pour after. Both work.

Steep time? 3-5 minutes for black tea.

Best mug? Ceramic, 300ml.

Water temperature? Just boiled for black; 70-80°C for green.

Curator's note: a great cup is easy at home with just boiled water, a 4 minute brew and a splash of milk. The variables are simple but most people get at least one wrong. Get them right and the same tea is dramatically better. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Quick reference: the perfect cup of British tea

Step	The rule
Water	Fresh cold from tap, just-boiled, never reboiled
Leaf	One teaspoon loose or one bag per cup (300ml)
Temperature	95-100C for black; 70-80C for green; 80-90C for oolong
Steep time	Black 3-5 min; green 1-2 min; herbal 5-7 min
Cover the cup	Yes, while steeping (keeps heat, traps aromatics)
Remove bag/leaf	At the right time, never leave in to "get stronger"
Milk (if any)	Add to taste; colour rule (rich mahogany, not pale tan)
Sugar (if any)	Small amount or none; control by brew, not by sweetener

Same shelf, same shop: the English tea range and loose leaf range.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Try a cheap, plain everyday black first and brew it properly. Upgrade only once the basics are giving you a cup you love.

Perfect cup reading

Continue with how to make tea, water temperature, tea mistakes, milk first or after, how much milk and how to judge tea quality.

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

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