Smoky Teas: Lapsang and the Pine Smoke Family

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Smoky teas, in summary:** Smoky teas are pine-wood-smoke-cured black-tea family; Lapsang Souchong, Russian Caravan, tarry Lapsang; a polarising acquired-taste category.

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

Smoky tea is a real and divisive category, black teas dried over smoke (Lapsang Souchong) or blended with smoke influenced teas (Russian Caravan). The cup carries real bonfire, pine and leather aromas. Polarising; drinkers either love or actively avoid the style.

The major smoky teas

Lapsang Souchong (the original)

Wuyi Mountains, Fujian Province, China. Tea leaves dried over smouldering pinewood fires. The defining smoky tea. More on Lapsang.

Russian Caravan

Blend of Lapsang Souchong + Keemun (sometimes Yunnan or oolong). Less smoky than pure Lapsang; more accessible. References the historical overland Russia China tea trade.

Tarry Lapsang

Heavier smoked variant of Lapsang. More aggressive bonfire character.

Smoked Earl Grey

Specialty variant, Earl Grey + Lapsang. Smoke meets citrus; distinctive.

Modern Wuyi (Bohea)

Wuyi black tea WITHOUT the smoke step. Same region as Lapsang but unsmoked. Fruity, malty, no smoke.

What smoky teas taste like

- **Pine smoke.** Dominant aromatic.
- **Leather and tar notes.** Sometimes.

- **Black tea body.** Behind the smoke.
- **Long smoky finish.**

Some drinkers describe it as "drinking a campfire", accurate and not always meant negatively.

How smoke gets into tea

Lapsang Souchong is dried in dedicated smoke chambers using:

- **Masson pine wood (premium).** Specific Chinese pine that produces the cleanest smoke.
- **Other pinewood (mid tier).** Slightly different aromatic.
- **Smouldering, not flaming.** Low temperature smoke, not direct fire.
- **Time and exposure.** Hours of smoke contact.

Modern variations include lighter smoked versions for less aggressive cups.

Use cases

Pairing with strong flavoured foods

Smoked salmon, blue cheese, dark chocolate, BBQ, smoky tea complements rather than competes.

Cooking applications

Tea smoked salmon, Lapsang rubbed steaks, smoky braising liquids. More on cooking with tea.

Cocktails

Lapsang infused gin or whisky for smoky tea cocktails. The Penicillin cocktail (whisky based) sometimes incorporates Lapsang.

Russian Caravan as everyday smoky

Less aggressive than pure Lapsang; better for daily smoky tea drinking.

Winter / cold weather

The bold character of smoky tea suits winter drinking.

How to brew smoky teas

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 specifically want a milky smoky cup.
5. Optional: lemon for brightness.

Caffeine

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

UK smoky tea brands

- **Twinings Lapsang Souchong.** Mainstream supermarket. Decent introduction.
- **Whittard Lapsang Souchong.** UK speciality.
- **teas.co.uk, plus Mei Leaf, What Cha and Postcard Teas among our trade friends.** Premium specialist Chinese options.
- **Twinings Russian Caravan.** Mainstream Russian Caravan.
- **Specialty smoked Earl Grey.** From premium retailers.

Storage

Smoky teas' smoke aroma fades over time. Best within 6-12 months of opening. Keep airtight, separated from other foods (smoke aroma transfers).

The "polarising tea" reality

Smoky tea isn't for everyone. Many drinkers actively dislike the bonfire character. Try a small amount first; don't commit to a large purchase before knowing your preference.

Cautions

- **Smoke aroma transfer.** Store separately from other foods.
- **Sensitive individuals.** Some find smoky character triggers asthma or sensitive throats.
- **Pregnancy.** Within NHS caffeine limits is fine.

FAQ

What makes tea smoky? Drying over smouldering pinewood fires (Lapsang Souchong) or blending with smoked tea (Russian Caravan).

Is it artificial smoke? Real smoke from real pinewood. Not synthetic flavouring.

Best for beginners? Russian Caravan, less aggressive than pure Lapsang. Easier introduction.

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

Where to buy in UK? Twinings for accessible mainstream; specialist Chinese tea retailers for premium.

Curator's note: smoky tea is the love it or hate it category. Worth trying once with proper food pairing, smoked salmon + Lapsang on a winter afternoon is one of the small civilised pleasures. Just don't commit before you know your preference. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

What you need to know: smoky teas

Tea	The note
Lapsang Souchong	Chinese pine-smoked black; the smoky flagship

Tea	The note
Russian Caravan	Blended; lighter smoke, Lapsang-and-Keemun base
Tarry Lapsang	Extra-heavy-smoke variant; intense pine-tar
Zheng Shan Xiao Zhong	Original Wuyi smoked black; the authentic version
Smoked Da Hong Pao	Occasionally-smoked Wuyi oolong; rare
Smoke source	Pine wood traditionally; some modern producers use cedar
Use cases	Whisky pairings, savoury food pairings, winter drinking
The read	Polarising; love-or-hate; an acquired taste category

Picks from the same corner: the English tea range and loose leaf range.

Reference noted

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Spend less on prestige, more on freshness. Smoke fades too: a two month old lapsang beats a three year old gift tin.

Smoky tea reading

Continue with Lapsang Souchong, Russian Caravan tea, black tea, Wuyi tea, Chinese tea and whisky tea pairing.

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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