

Introduction to Tea Tasting

The flavours found in tea are gentle and subtle, but with experience it is possible to discern many different notes. When sampling a tea, professionals evaluate four key aspects:

- the appearance and feel of the dry leaves
- the colour and body of the liquor (the liquid produced by steeping the leaves)
- the aromas
- the flavours

The dry leaves

Dry leaves are assessed for a variety of qualities: whether they are uniform in colour, size and texture, their bloom (lustrous?), what sort of tip they have (golden tips are desirable; a generous amount of leaf-tip produces a more flavourful cup), their shape (curly or "leggy" – long and thin), how well they have been rolled (a leaf that has a "twist" is well rolled), whether the leaves are "whiskery" (covered with a fine, hairy fibre), and whether they're dusty. Particularly undesirable are leaves that are mushy, ragged, grey, dull, light or uneven in shape and size.

Body, aroma and flavour

Although professional tasting involves an appreciation of the colour of the liquor, for most tea drinkers the most pertinent qualities are its body (how it feels in the mouth – its viscosity, thickness, consistency, weight and texture – graded from light- to full-bodied), its aroma (how it smells – the fragrances or "bouquet" that hit the nose and the retronasal passages when you swallow), and its flavour (the flavours that come through as you hold the tea in your mouth and after you've swallowed).

In the West some teas are drunk with milk and/or sugar, but generally tasting follows the Eastern way – a pure infusion with no additives – as described in the method below.

TASTING

When preparing an infusion, it is best to use a ceramic or glass pot to steep the tea leaves (an earthenware or metal pot will impart its own flavour), and to taste from a white ceramic cup. You need to use both your taste buds and your sense of smell to discern flavour and quality. It is important to swill the tea round the mouth so it reaches all parts of the tongue.

Tasting method:

- After draining the leaves, give the liquor a minute to cool off.
- Put your nose close to the tea and inhale deeply to take in the aromas. Breathe out.
- Take a sip, flushing the tea all over your palate.
- Assess the weight or body of the tea in your mouth.
- Continue to hold the tea in your mouth and breathe in through your nose to catch the flavours.
- Swallow the tea. Breathe out.
- Discern the aromas at the back of your nasal passages
- How long do the flavours last after you've swallowed (the "finish")?

When evaluating the flavour of a tea, you are looking for a well-balanced combination of sweet, spicy, bitter and earthy. Each class of tea has a different style: the tea-tasters' vocabulary opposite gives a comprehensive list of tasters' terms; there's nothing to stop you adding your own.

Vocabulary

Aftertaste	The "shadow taste" or "finish" that remains in the mouth after swallowing.
Ample	Of a liquor that is full and round, with flavours that fill the mouth.
Apricot	A flavour suggestive of the fruit. Certain white and oolong teas may develop a tender, mild taste on the tongue reminiscent of apricots.
Aromatic	Has a pronounced, complex fragrance.
Astringent	A lively, pungent quality that produces a drying sensation on your tongue or gums. Comparable to the dryness of wine. This is not to be confused with bitterness.
Bakey	An unpleasant taste caused by using temperatures that are too high during "firing" (the process of drying the tea leaves), which can drive out too much moisture.
Balanced	A subjective term used in tea evaluation. A tea in which all aspects of flavour work together is said to be "in balance".
Big	Robust or full-bodied in flavour and aroma.
Biscuity	A pleasant taste resembling fresh-baked bread. Sometimes found in Assam teas.
Bite	An astringent or tangy quality.
Bitter	A subjective term referring to a sharp, acrid or unpleasant feeling on the taste buds along the sides or back of the tongue. If the bitterness is overwhelming and masks all other flavours, this can be a flaw in the tea itself or a result of oversteeping/incorrect brewing.
Bouquet	The complex fragrance in fine or floral teas.
Brassy	Having an unpleasant, bitter metallic taste indicating improper withering of the leaf.
Bright	A lively, aromatic, uplifting flavour. The tea's appearance can also be described as bright if the liquor looks lively, clear, luminous and sparkling rather than dull and flat.
Brisk	A vivacious, slightly astringent taste as opposed to a flat or soft flavour. This describes the lively quality of an infusion.
Burnt	An unpleasant taste resulting from overfiring of the leaf.
Buttery	A rich heaviness in the mouth.
Chesty	Having a smell or aftertaste from the wooden chest in which the tea was packed.
Chocolate	A rich, deep flavour reminiscent of chocolate. Found in some oolong and black teas.
Citrus/Lemon	Describes tea with subtle citrus fruit undertones.
Clarity	Refers to an absence of cloudiness in a tea's liquor.

Clean	The quality of a thin, fresh flavour that has a smooth finish and has nothing unfavourable about it.
Coarse	An undesirable harsh, biting, bitter taste. This can either be a flaw in the tea or arise as a result of oversteeping or incorrect brewing.
Coloury	Said of a tea that has good depth of colour, sometimes, but not necessarily, indicating full body or taste.
Complex	A multidimensional aroma or flavour profile.
Crisp	A clean and fresh characteristic that is sometimes tart; not soft.
Deep	Having layers of complexity or richness.
Delicate	Has restrained flavours that are neither strong nor intense.
Dry	A tea that finishes parched or dehydrated in the mouth; not sweet.
Dull	A liquor that lacks a lively, bright character in either taste or appearance. Flat or lacklustre.
Earthy	Describes an elemental character, a bit like the smell of damp, forest soil. This is a natural and desirable trait of tea from certain regions; if it is unpleasant, it can indicate improper storage.
Elegant	Gentle, well-rounded and smooth.
Fine	A tea of exceptional taste and quality.
Flat	Lifeless flavour that lacks briskness and body. Soft. This can be the result of tea that is old or has been stored improperly.
Flavoury	Has a pronounced, satisfying flavour. (More generally found in high-grown teas such as Darjeeling, Nilgiri, Kerala and Ceylon.)
Flinty	A dry, mineral-like flavour.
Flowery	An exceptionally aromatic character suggestive of flowers such as jasmine, orchid or rose. This can be either a natural trait of the tea leaves themselves, or as a result of scenting or blending the leaves with flowers during production. Good Darjeelings and some oolongs have this trait.
Fresh	An uplifting, lively, flavour. The opposite of stale.
Fruity	Flavour nuances similar to ripe fruit. Sometimes found in oolong and black teas. Tea can have flavour notes that suggest peaches, apples, pears, grapes, raisins, currants, figs and more. (Also describes fruit-flavoured teas.)
Full	Tea possessing colour, strength and body as opposed to being empty or thin.
Full-bodied	Indicates strong character or mouth-feel.
Generous	Rich in aromas.
Grassy	A bright, strong flavour and aroma reminiscent of fresh-cut grass, herbs or vegetables. A desirable trait found in steamed green teas.

Hard	Tea that has a penetrating strength or sharp flavour (sometimes desirable).
Harmonious	Well-balanced flavour and characteristics.
Harsh	A negative characteristic describing a bitter, unpleasant or offensive taste or sensation. Can also refer to an overabundance of one specific flavour.
Heavy	Tea that possesses a thick, strong liquor with depth of colour but is lacking in flavour or briskness.
Herbaceous	A herbal aroma or flavour reminiscent of herbs, leaves or plants.
Honey	A sweet aftertaste or a silky, nectar-like texture.
Intense	Having strength and duration.
Jasmine	Tea that has floral notes of jasmine, usually a result of added jasmine flowers or a traditional scenting process during production.
Length	A long-lingering taste that remains in the mouth after swallowing.
Light	Indicating a thin character, in terms of texture and weight on the tongue.
Lively	A liquor that is fresh and light with a dominant note that is slightly, and agreeably, acid.
Malty	A desirable, hearty, malted barley taste, often found in Assam tea.
Mellow	Tea leaves which have matured well, producing a harmonious, well-balanced, smooth flavour.
Monolithic	Describes a narrow aromatic palette, where the individual notes are inseparable from each other.
Muddy	A dull infusion lacking in taste.
Muscatel	Rich flavour like that of muscat grapes. This is an exceptional characteristic found in some high-quality Darjeeling teas.
Nutmeg	A characteristic, often associated with Darjeeling teas, that is mild in the first flush and more pronounced in the second flush.
Nutty	Attribute of some teas (such as some pan-fired green teas or certain black and oolong teas) that suggests the roasted aroma of hazelnuts, almonds, roasted nuts, etc.
Opulent	With a rich, heavy and often heady aroma.
Oily	Reminiscent of oil in texture, with a varying degree of delicacy.
Orchid	A taste nuance that resembles the fragrance of fresh-blooming orchids, sometimes found in high-quality oolong or green teas.
Pale	Liquor that does not have depth of colour, but may still have a nice flavour profile. Darjeeling is a good example of this, because its liquor is naturally lighter than other black teas.
Peppery	Spicy texture on the tongue.

- Pointy** A desirable brightness and acidity often associated with Ceylon teas.
- Port** A flavour found in some teas that is reminiscent of the rich, sweet, grape flavours found in dessert wines.
- Powdery** Describes a very slight astringency on the palate that leaves an impression of a fine powder in the mouth.
- Pungent** A bright liquor that has a pleasant, pronounced briskness and a strong, astringent flavour. This is a desirable quality, but must be well balanced.
- Rasping** Said of very astringent teas, often of poor quality or infused for too long.
- Refined** Harmonious, elegant, and well-balanced.
- Rich** A pleasantly thick and mellow flavour.
- Robust** A very full-bodied tea.
- Round** A full, smooth-tasting liquor.
- Short (in the mouth)** A too-brief taste or finish that ends abruptly after swallowing.
- Silky** A smooth, slightly oily quality, reminiscent of silk.
- Simple** Flavours and aromas that have only a single layer of sensation; not complex.
- Smokey** Refers to the flavour a tea acquires from being "fired" (dried) over smokey flames, imparting a woody or smoked flavour.
- Spicy** A fragrance or flavour reminiscent of spices like cinnamon, black pepper or clove. Can be a natural attribute of the tea leaves themselves, or a result of added spices in the case of blended teas.
- Stale** Tea that has an unpleasant, flat, lifeless or "off" taste because it is old or has been stored in damp conditions.
- Structured** Describes a predominantly tannic, "mouth-filling" liquor.
- Supple** A liquor that is more velvety than astringent.
- Sweet** Free from excessive acidity. A pleasant flavour or aftertaste on the tip of the tongue; suggestive of honey, sugar or liquorice root.
- Tannin** A natural substance found in plants that imparts a puckery mouth-feel and produces the structure and texture in many teas.
- Tart** An intensely sharp sensation along the sides of the tongue. This can be a positive or negative trait depending on the type of tea and the intensity. For example, hibiscus leaves are prized for their natural, exceptionally tart flavour.
- Thick** Tea that has good body as opposed to being thin – more like oil or cream than water. Black teas often produce a thick liquor with a heavy, dense texture.

- Thin** Tea that lacks body. This is not necessarily a bad trait, as certain teas (such as Darjeeling or some white teas) are celebrated for their thin yet flavoury liquors. However, teas from Assam should never have a thin liquor.
- Unctuous** Rounded in the mouth and slightly oily.
- Vanilla** Having a sweet flavour suggestive of vanilla beans or vanilla extract.
- Velvety** Describes a slightly thick liquor, reminiscent of velvet.
- Vigorous** A firm, flavour-forward quality.
- Watery** Of a liquor without astringency or a sense of texture.
- Weak** A tea lacking in character.
- Weedy** A flavour suggestive of wet hay or straw.
- Winey** A mellow, complex character developed by mature Darjeelings and Chinese black teas.
- Woody** Tea that has a sawdust-like character.
- Woody** An aroma or flavour reminiscent of tree bark, cedar, pine or oak.
- Yeasty** An aroma or flavour suggestive of baked bread.