

Tea leaf grading

In the tea industry, **tea leaf grading** is the process of evaluating products based on the quality and condition of the tea leaves themselves.

The highest grades for Western and South Asian teas are referred to as "orange pekoe", and the lowest as "fannings" or "dust". Pekoe tea grades are classified into various qualities, each determined by how many of the adjacent young leaves (two, one, or none) were picked along with the leaf buds. Top-quality pekoe grades consist of only the leaf buds, which are picked using the balls of the fingertips. Fingernails and mechanical tools are not used, to avoid bruising.

When crushed to make bagged teas, the tea is referred to as "broken", as in "broken orange pekoe" ("BOP"). These lower grades include fannings and dust, which are tiny remnants created in the sorting and crushing processes.

Orange pekoe is referred to as "OP". The grading scheme also contains categories higher than OP, which are determined primarily by leaf wholeness and size.^{[1][2]}

Broken, fannings and dust orthodox teas have slightly different grades. CTC teas, which consist of leaves mechanically rendered to uniform fannings, have yet another grading system.



Tea leaves of different sizes just after plucking. Small leaves are more valuable than big ones.



Black tea grading

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General classifications

Orange pekoe

Orange pekoe (/ˈpɛkoʊ, ˈpiːkoʊ/), also spelled pecco, or OP is a term used in the Western tea trade to describe a particular genre of black teas (orange pekoe grading).^{[3][4]} Despite a purported Chinese origin, these grading terms are typically used for teas from Sri Lanka, India and countries other than China; they are not generally known within Chinese-speaking countries. The grading system is based upon the size of processed and dried black tea leaves.

The tea industry uses the term orange pekoe to describe a basic, medium-grade black tea consisting of many whole tea leaves of a specific size;^[3] however, it is popular in some regions (such as North America) to use the term as a description of any generic black tea (though it is often described to the consumer as a specific variety of black tea).^{[5][6]} Within this system, the teas that receive the highest grades are obtained from new flushes (pickings).^[7] This includes the terminal leaf bud along with a few of the youngest leaves.

Grading is based on the "size" of the individual leaves and flushes, which is determined by their ability to fall through the screens of special meshes^[1] ranging from 8–30 mesh.^[8] This also determines the "wholeness", or level of breakage, of each leaf, which is also part of the grading system. Although these are not the only factors used to determine quality, the size and wholeness of the leaves will have the greatest influence on the taste, clarity, and brewing time of the tea.^[9]

When used outside the context of black-tea grading, the term "pekoe" (or, occasionally, orange pekoe) describes the unopened terminal leaf bud (tips) in tea flushes. As such, the phrases "a bud and a leaf" or "a bud and two leaves" are used to describe the "leafiness" of a flush; they are also used interchangeably with pekoe and a leaf or pekoe and two leaves.^[10]

Etymology

The origin of the word "pekoe" is uncertain. One explanation is that it is derived from the transliterated mispronunciation of the Amoy (Xiamen) dialect word for a Chinese tea known as "white down/hair" (白毫; Peh-ōe-jī: *peh-ho*).^[11] This is how "pekoe" is listed by Rev. Robert Morrison (1782–1834) in his Chinese dictionary (1819) as one of the seven sorts of black tea "commonly known by Europeans".^[12] This refers to the down-like white "hairs" on the leaf and also to the youngest leaf buds. Another hypothesis is that the term derives from the Chinese *báihuā* "white flower" (Chinese: 白花; pinyin: *báihuā*; Peh-ōe-jī: *peh-hoe*), and refers to the bud content of pekoe tea.

Sir Thomas Lipton, the 19th-century British tea magnate, is widely credited with popularizing, if not inventing, the term "orange pekoe", which seems to have no Chinese precedent, for Western markets. The "orange" in orange pekoe is sometimes mistaken to mean the tea has been flavoured with orange, orange oils, or is otherwise associated with oranges. However, the word "orange" is unrelated to the tea's flavor.^[3] There are two explanations for its meaning, though neither is definitive:

1. The Dutch House of Orange-Nassau, now the royal family, was already the most respected aristocratic family in the days of the Dutch Republic, and came to control the *de facto* head of state position (Stadtholder) of Holland and Zeeland. The Dutch East India Company played a central role in bringing tea to Europe and may have marketed the tea as "orange" to suggest association with the House of Orange.^[11]
2. Colour: the copper colour of a high-quality, oxidized leaf before drying, or the final bright orange colour of the dried pekoes in the finished tea may be related to the name.^[13] These usually consist of one leaf bud and two leaves covered in fine, downy hair. The orange colour appears when the tea is fully oxidized.

Fannings

Fannings are small pieces of tea that are left over after higher grades of teas are gathered to be sold. Traditionally these were treated as the rejects of the manufacturing process in making high-quality leaf tea like the orange pekoe. Fannings with extremely small particles are sometimes called dusts.^[14] Fannings and dusts are considered the lowest grades of tea, separated from broken-leaf teas which have larger pieces of the leaves. However, the fannings of expensive teas can still be more expensive and more flavourful than whole leaves of cheaper teas.

This traditionally low-quality tea has, however, experienced a huge demand in the developing world in the last century as the practice of tea drinking became popular. Tea stalls in India and the South Asian sub-continent and Africa prefer dust tea because it is cheap and also produces a very strong brew; consequently, more cups are obtained per measure of tea dust.

Because of the small size of the particles, a tea infuser is typically used to brew fannings.^[15] Fannings are also typically used in most tea bags, although some companies sell tea bags containing whole-leaf tea.^[16]

Some exporters focus primarily on broken-leaf teas, fannings, and dusts.^[14]

Grades



Tray bins of dried tea leaves: O.P. (Orange Pekoe), B.O.P. (Broken Orange Pekoe), and dust graded black teas at a Sri Lankan tea factory



Wilson Ceylon Earl Grey F.B.O.P. (Flowery Broken Orange Pekoe)



A black tea with white "hairs" plainly visible on its surface.

Choppy contains many leaves of various sizes. Fannings are small particles of tea leaves used almost exclusively in tea bags. Flowery consists of large leaves, typically plucked in the second or third flush with an abundance of tips. Golden flowery includes very young tips or buds (usually golden in colour) that were picked early in the season. Tippy includes an abundance of tips.^[17]

Whole leaf grades

Grade	Description
OP	Orange Pekoe Main grade, consisting of long wiry leaf without tips.
OP1	More delicate than OP; long, wiry leaf with a light liquor.
OPA	Bolder than OP; long leaf tea which ranges from tightly wound to almost open.
OPS	Orange Pekoe Superior Primarily from Indonesia; similar to OP.
FOP	Flowery Orange Pekoe High-quality tea with a long leaf and few tips, considered the second grade in Assam, Dooars, and Bangladesh teas, but the first grade in China.
FOP1	Limited to only the highest quality leaves in the FOP classification.
GFOP	Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe Higher proportion of tip than FOP. Top grade in the Milima and Marinyn regions, but uncommon in Assam and Darjeeling.
TGFOP	Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe The highest proportion of tip, and the main grade in Darjeeling and Assam.
TGFOP1	Limited to only the highest quality leaves in the TGFOP classification.
FTGFOP ^[a]	Finest Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe Highest quality grade.
FTGFOP1 STGFOP SFTGFOP	Special Finest Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe Limited to only the highest quality leaves in the FTGFOP classification.

Broken leaf grades

Grade	Description
BT	Broken Tea Usually a black, open, fleshy leaf that is very bulky. This classification is used in Sumatra, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and some parts of Southern India.
BP	Broken Pekoe The most common broken pekoe grade; from Indonesia, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Assam and Southern India.
BPS	Broken Pekoe Souchong Term for broken pekoe in the Assam and Darjeeling regions.
FP	Flowery Pekoe High-quality pekoe. Usually coarser with a fleshier, broken leaf. Produced in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Southern India, as well as in some parts of Kenya.
BOP	Broken Orange Pekoe Main broken grade. Prevalent in Assam, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Southern India, Java, and China.
FBOP	Flowery Broken Orange Pekoe Coarser and broken with some tips. From Assam, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Indonesia, China, and Bangladesh. In South America, coarser, black broken.
FBOPF	Flowery Broken Orange Pekoe Fannings The finest broken orange pekoe, with a higher proportion of tips; mainly from Ceylon's "low districts".
GBOP	Golden Broken Orange Pekoe Second grade tea with uneven leaves and few tips.
GFBOP1	Golden Flowery Broken Orange Pekoe 1 As above, but with only the highest quality leaves in the GFBOP classification.
TGFBOP1	Tippy Golden Flowery Broken Orange Pekoe 1 High-quality leaves with a high proportion of tips; finest broken First Grade Leaves in Darjeeling and some parts of Assam.

Fannings grades

Grade	Description
PF	Pekoe Fannings
OF	Orange Fannings From northern India and some parts of Africa and South America.
FOF	Flowery Orange Fannings Common in Assam, Dooars, and Bangladesh. Some leaf sizes come close to the smaller broken grades.
GFOF	Golden Flowery Orange Fannings Finest grade in Darjeeling for tea bag production.
TGFOF	Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Fannings
BOPF	Broken Orange Pekoe Fannings Main grade in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Southern India, Kenya, Mozambique, Bangladesh, and China. Black-leaf tea with few added ingredients, uniform particle size, and no tips.

Dust grades

Grade	Description
D1	Dust 1 From Sri Lanka, Indonesia, China, Africa, South America, Southern India, and Bangladesh.
PD	Pekoe Dust
PD1	Pekoe Dust 1 Mainly produced in India.

Other terms

- Musc. – Muscatel
- Cl. – Clonal
- Ch. – China varietal
- Qu. – Queen jat
- FBOPF Ex. Spl. – Finest Broken Orange Pekoe Flowery (Extra Special)
- FP – Flowery Pekoe
- PS – Pekoe Souchong
- S – Souchong
- BOF – Broken Orange Fannings
- BPF – Broken Pekoe Fannings
- RD – Pekoe Dust / Red Dust
- FD – Fine Dust
- GD – Golden Dust
- SRD – Super Red Dust

- SFD – Super Fine Dust
- BMF – Broken Mixed Fannings

See also

- Food grading
- ISO 3103, a standardized method of tea brewing used to compare tea leaf flavor and aroma characteristics
- Maofeng, an equivalent tea term in China
- Tea blending and additives

Notes

- Also used facetiously among tea aficionados to mean "Far Too Good for Ordinary People".

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