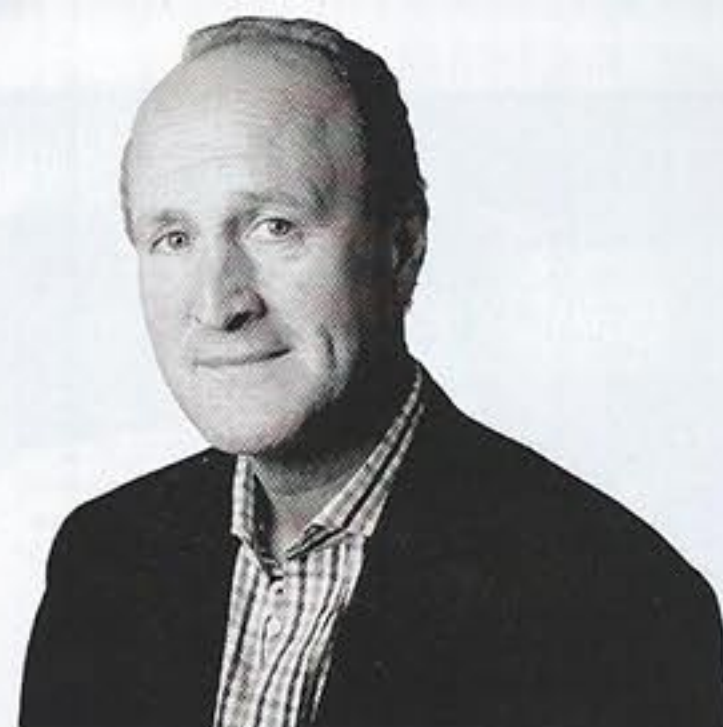


# Peter Bazalgette

## The taste test



### Earl Grey tea

Professional tea buyers judge a sample by brewing it in a bowl, spooning it into their mouths, then sucking air through it in the sort of disgraceful performance that would have earned a slap from your mother. I was looking forward to this. Particularly since I remember being transfixed, as a nipper, watching my grandmother's gardener sucking the tea from his cup through his luxuriant overlapping moustache with the happy result that it captured all the tea leaves, like a sieve. He'd then wipe them off his 'tache with a sweep of his grubby hand.

We had 14 samples of this fragrant tea to try, 10 in bags and four loose-leaf. The Michelin Snapper (MS), the Lebanese Gastronom (LG) and the Gluttonous Pig (GP) were up for it and we prepared ourselves with a scratch 'n' sniff exercise. Postcard Teas with its Gianfranco's Earl Grey had sympathetically sent us a real bergamot orange from Calabria. When we scraped our fingernails across its peel it released the pungent zest, whose oil gives this tea its distinctive odour. This rewarding flavour gave us the strength to finish the tasting when the mouth-puckering tannins from all those teas had almost eroded our palates.

As ever, once we got down to it we found a wide variety of flavours and quality. This undoubtedly owed much to the blend of teas used. In general we found black tea from China was blander than the broader-leaved Indian varieties. Three products that disappointed were the bags from Selfridges ("little taste" – MS), Fortnum & Mason ("antiseptic" – GP) and Twinings ("strange hint of the swimming pool" – GP). Of course, this was the personal verdict of the panel on the day – three thrill-seekers who clearly preferred more robust blends.

We have a trio of eclectic Earl Greys to recommend, ranging from the rich and spicy to the esoterically



#### THE WINNERS

**1. Rare Tea Company  
Limited Edition Rare  
Earl Grey Tea**  
£6.50 (50g)  
[www.rareteacompany.com](http://www.rareteacompany.com)

**2. Harrods Exclusively  
Blended Earl Grey**  
£7.95 (50 bags)  
[www.harrods.com](http://www.harrods.com)

**3. Harney & Sons  
Earl Grey Imperial**  
£6.99 (66g)  
[www.selfridges.com](http://www.selfridges.com)



'We made three cups of this agreeable tea to test the important question: milk, lemon or nothing?'

smoky to the direct and in-er-face. We really liked them all, but narrowly in third place was Harney & Sons' Earl Grey Imperial, made using four teas from both India and China. It comes in those trendy, muslin, see-through bags. If you bury your hooter in it you begin to smell a richness beyond the strong bergamot scent: "strong, good flavour" (MS); "subtle" (LG); "embracing spicy softness and mellow cigar box aroma" (GP). Second came Harrods' Exclusively Blended Earl Grey in traditional opaque paper bags. It only admitted to "black tea" on its packet, but this was something entirely distinctive. To begin with, we thought we might be drinking lapsang souchong: "distinguished aroma" (MS); "really pleasurable" (LG); "smoke alarm but in a good way... and less eye-wateringly tannic" (GP). I cut open the bag to find much finer 'tea dust' compared with the Harney leaves. But who decided to include smoked tea in the blend? Good idea, anyway.

Our winner has a highly wrought name with a very modern conceit: Limited Edition Rare Earl Grey Tea from the Rare Tea Company. This is loose leaf blended with selections from small mountain plantations by the company's founder, Henrietta Lovell: "light and fruity" (MS); "lovely aroma, great drink" (LG); "honest, what-you-smell-is-what-you-taste tea" (GP). We then made three cups of this agreeable tea to test the last important question: milk, lemon or nothing?

Christina Ricci's character, Elizabeth, in the film *Prozac Nation* reacts badly when her boyfriend puts milk in her Earl Grey, as though it's a shocking faux pas. But none of us enjoyed the addition of lemon – it bleached the tea and dominated the delicate bergamot fragrance with its competing citrus thud. LG liked it unadulterated: "au naturel, pourquoi pas?" But MS and GP both preferred the addition of skimmed milk: "softly moderated the tannins" (GP). There you have it: the compleat Earl Grey gospel.

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Photography Rick Pushinsky