

OMG WTF is SFTGFOP?

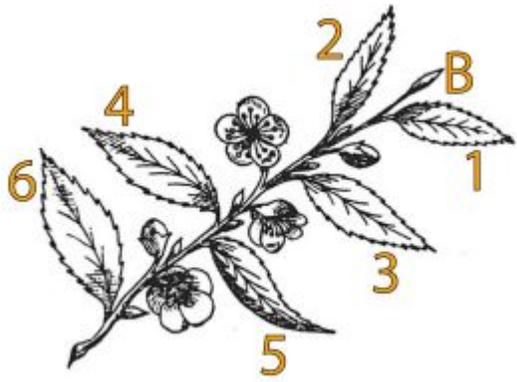
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No, *Orange Pekoe* does not taste or smell like orange. *Fine* is usually expensive, and *Super Fine* is usually more so. There's *Flowery* and *Golden Flowery*, as well as *Tippy* and *Golden Tippy*, so there's *Tippy Golden Flowery* but also *Golden Tippy Flowery*, which is different. Annoying, isn't it? These terms are, by far, the most confusing obstacle to the new tea drinker; today's essay will let you in on what they mean.

These many designations are called **leaf grades**. They serve a simple purpose - when tea is packaged and sold, it is sold in large lots by auction, in closed cases. Those cases are not all opened and inspected, because exposing the tea to air damages it and this is to be avoided. Therefore, the tea industry uses these grades to describe the tea leaves contained in the chests being put up for auction; the grower is expected to have properly sorted and separated their leaves to the correct grades, and the buyer knows, more or less, what to expect they are buying without having to look inside.

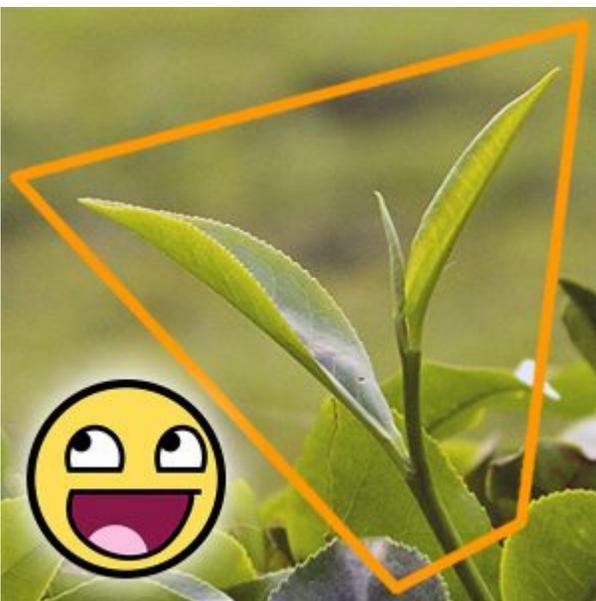
From the top

To understand the leaf grades, we'll need a basic understanding of the leaf. Let's take a nice simple illustration (which is not exactly accurate, but useful enough) - this is a drawing of the tea plant from Mew & Ashton¹, slightly modified for this essay:



So, let's start with the obvious: plants grow from the ground up. Therefore, the "highest", or outermost, parts of the plant are the youngest, the most fresh and undamaged by life (*wistful sigh*). The tea plant is an evergreen, whose leaves alternate - *i.e.*, leaves do not grow next to each other in pairs, but one after the other, on each side, up the length of the branch. You see that, right? Just checking.

Most tea is made from the *leaves* (1-6) of this branch, which are plucked and then dried, steamed, roasted, or otherwise somehow prepared. We also love the *bud*, the little nub at the end (B), the absolute youngest part of the branch. Buds are still green, supple, and brimming with nutrients the plant needs for growth, and are prized for their delicate and desirable flavors. Most if not all fancy/expensive/rare teas are made from "two leaves and a bud" - the bud and the two youngest leaves to its sides:



Down the branch

The leaves on a tea plant alternate, each one larger than the younger one above it, since, obviously, it has grown longer. We value the smallest, youngest leaves most (1-2), because larger, older leaves (5-6), in the process of growing strong and tough, have built up thicker cell walls, and spent their nutrients to strengthen and repair themselves, leading to a 'rougher' taste than a younger, more pliable leaf. It's kind of like how we grade veal and beef, if you're a carnivore and need a metaphor. (A meat-aphor? (I'm so sorry.))

Leaf grades are simply a shorthand for the leaf's size, age, and delicacy, which (usually) correspond to its position along the branch. We start from the bud - the best part - and count down the branch:

1. Orange Pekoe (OP)
2. Pekoe (P)
3. Pekoe Souchong (PS)
4. Souchong (S)
5. Congou (C)
6. Bohea (B)



There, that wasn't so bad, was it? **Was it!?**

When tea leaves are picked, they are not separated right away, but are all gathered in the same baskets and then sorted out later. Tea is sorted by passing it through sieves, or meshes, of varying sizes. The smallest leaves are removed by using a fine mesh, the next leaves with a slightly coarser mesh, and so on.

So the leaf's grade is specifically the *size of the leaf*, in relation to the other leaves of that harvest. Therefore it is possible that a leaf designated Pekoe wasn't actually in the second position on its branch - but it was the same size as other such leaves from this harvest, and possesses a comparable quality and delicacy.

Where do the names come from?

To be honest, nobody is entirely sure of the etymology of these names, and hardly anyone worries about it any more, as nothing can be proved definitively. We know one thing for sure - the names are not of Chinese origin. While China is gradually adopting these terms today in order to facilitate business, the names are the creation of the Europeans, particularly the Dutch and British, in the early decades of the tea trade.

Pekoe is most usually stated to be a derivative of 白毫 *báiháo*, meaning "white hair". This refers to a soft white fuzz that is visible on the underside of young tea leaves. As leaves get older, they lose this baby fuzz, so a leaf that contains Pekoe in its name usually refers to a leaf that is still young enough to have its white baby fuzz visible upon it.

Nobody is really sure where the "Orange" part of **Orange Pekoe** came from - it has absolutely nothing to do with oranges, a common misconception. One theory is that the "Orange" was added by the Dutch East India Company for marketing purposes (orange was a royal color of the Netherlands and would signify high quality). A more likely explanation is that the leaves themselves turn an orange-like color during oxidation. Unfortunately, the Lipton Tea Company has long sold a brand of tea called "Orange Pekoe" as if it were a distinct flavor or type of tea, which has confused people for

generations.

Souchong is believed to be a corruption of 小種 *xiǎozhǒng*, “small sort” or “small type”. The “small” doesn’t refer to the size of the leaf, but rather its rarity. Souchong was at one time a very highly-prized leaf because it was the largest (heaviest) leaf that still had many desirable qualities of a young Pekoe leaf – in other words, a great leaf for the farmer selling tea by weight! The word has lost that meaning now, and consumers rarely hear it outside of the name [Lapsang Souchong](#).

Congou is the easiest for westerners to remember – it’s a corruption of the rather famous Chinese words *kung fu*, believe it or not. *Kung fu* (really, *gōngfu*) simply means “hard work” or “craftsmanship”, and this refers to the fact that Congou is not an easy leaf to work with. Its bold, rough flavors can be difficult to work with; today most Congous are used for making scented teas, such as [Lychee](#) and [Rose](#).

Lastly, **Bohea**, one of the oldest of the European tea words, has gone through multiple meanings, but the word itself is simply a corruption of the Chinese name *Wuyi*, the mountains where [red tea](#) are said to originate from. Bohea was a generic word for red tea, but gradually morphed into meaning the oldest, roughest leaves on the plant.

Should I avoid Congou or Bohea?

NO, absolutely not! One of the tricks here is that many people believe that the youngest leaves are the best – but that does not mean they actually are the best, or that the other leaves are bad. Tea leaves aren’t simply grown, they are also prepared, and good or bad work in the preparation can render a young leaf unsuitable for drinking, and a rough old leaf can transform into a complex, fantastic beverage. You cannot assume that a certain designation of leaf means a designation of *quality*, because it does not. It simply describes the size, and associated characteristics, of the leaf itself.

Another way to put this is that younger leaves have more delicate flavors than older leaves, whose flavors are characterized as rough. But rough does not mean bad! A 'rough' leaf is not going to be used for fragrant and delicate white or green teas, but the more complex, darker flavors may be perfect for being prepared into oolong or [red tea](#). Also, teas that are meant to be blended with milk ("breakfast" teas) rely on the hearty strength of older leaves. The point is that all tea leaves can result in excellent tea, but different leaves are better for different preparations.

The leaf grades are, honestly, far more important for the tea manufacturer, who need to know that the leaves they are working with are a specific size and tenderness. This is why leaves are sorted prior to preparation, so the firing process dries and locks the leaves' flavors in consistently.

Now, granted, a lot of tea snobs will assert that "higher" grades are better quality tea, and hey, maybe that's true for them. But personally, I don't believe in that approach to tea at all. Different teas serve different purposes, different flavors provide different pleasures and challenges. You should try any tea that grabs your interest and let your palate decide what's good! Once you know your preferences, sure, then you can use the grades to select future teas. But don't pre-judge based on labels, that's just plain silly.

What about Tippy, Golden, Flowery?

So you know that *Orange Pekoe* refers to the youngest leaves at the top of the plant which grow around a bud. If the leaves are picked with the bud, they are designated **Flowery** - *i.e.*, they contain the bud along with them.

Tippy refers to the wholeness of the leaf. Tea leaves are subjected to some pretty crazy weather during their growth cycle, as well as dealing with insects, animals, humans, wind, and so on. Few leaves will be completely "whole". You'll notice that the tea leaf is serrated, having sawtooth edges, so as you can guess, tippy means leaves that still have

their sharp, defined tips on them. Sharp tips means a more complete leaf which has not lost its more delicate flavors - again, the outermost edge of the plant is the youngest and tenderest, so that's why we have this designation.

Golden is exactly what it sounds like - **Golden Flowery** means that the bud has a golden tinge to it, while **Golden Tippy** means the leaves themselves have a golden tinge to them. Why we are fascinated by the golden tinge, I really have no idea - 'golden' tea is not somehow better than other tea, but some believe so, and tradition has evolved that these buds and leaves are separated from their non-golden compatriots and are more highly prized (priced) by many tea sellers. Since the 'golden' adjective could be applied to either the leaf or the bud, a tea could be marked as:

- **Tippy Golden Flowery (TGF)** = green leaves, golden bud
- **Golden Tippy Flowery (GTF)** = golden leaves, green bud
- **Golden Tippy Golden Flowery (GTGF)** = golden leaves, golden bud

Put them all together and you can now understand what the following "advanced" grades mean:

- **FOP = Flowery Orange Pekoe.** Topmost youngest leaves, with bud, normal colors.
- **TGFOP = Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe.** The two youngest leaves, with defined tips, normal color, with golden-tinged bud.

What about Broken?

My least favorite Nine Inch Nails album, actually.

Anyway, you remember that grades are about the size of the leaves, which affects how they are sorted when they are run through sieves of different sizes, right? In the old days, *Orange Pekoe* referred to the youngest, smallest leaves at the top of the plant. But the next leaves were “just about as good” and would often end up being broken into small pieces during gathering and sorting, so they’d end up getting through the sieves and being mixed in with the smaller whole leaves. If this happened, the resulting tea was designated **Broken Orange Pekoe (BOP)**, to let the buyer know that it is not entirely whole-leaf tea, but does include broken leaves as well.

What about...

Yeah yeah I know I know, there are other grades you’ll see and we haven’t covered them all. The system I’m describing here is one of the “classic” old systems but it is not universal today - in fact, there *still* is no universal system. Most tea-producing areas use this same nomenclature to classify their teas, but may use the terms differently depending on local standards, maybe only using some of the terms, or even putting them in a different order.

In the modern age we are starting to see greater standardization of tea terminology, but we’re a long way off from everyone using exactly the same terms - this is primarily because tea is grown and processed quite differently from one place to the next (making green tea in China is quite different than making red tea in India), and generations of dedicated cultivation has resulted in a wide variety of tea plants with differing leaves and qualities.

But anyway, here are some other grades and terms you are likely to come across in your adventures:

- **Fannings** are not whole leaves, but rather fairly small bits of broken leaf, too small to be graded as *Broken*. In the old days, leaves would be sorted out on a

table by hand, and the remaining stuff on the table would be fanned into sacks to be collected.

- **Dust** is true tea dust left over from leaf sorting and preparation. Tea is never sold directly to consumers in this way; it is used by tea manufacturers to stuff into tea bags. This is convenient because the tea dust still contains many flavors and qualities, and steeps extremely quickly. Unfortunately there is little ‘delicacy’ of flavor in the dust, basically only the most robust, roughest flavors tend to come through.
- **Fine** and **Super Fine** are modifiers. **TGFOP (Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe)** is, generally, the “highest” grade of tea, and these leaves are further separated by growers into Fine and Super Fine to designate the quality, integrity, beauty, desirability, what-have-you, of the leaves. Super Fine is “higher” than Fine, but again, this is in reference to the leaves, not a statement of quality of the tea itself. The terms are most used by tea growers in India and Sri Lanka (Ceylon), and result in the abbreviations **FTGFOP (Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe)** and **SFTGFOP (Super Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe)**.
- To add even more layers to the nonsense (because humans will *always* try to find a way to say they’re better than their competition), you will often see the number **1** added to these abbreviations, indicating “1st grade”, which is yet another way for a grower to say “these leaves are super fantastic so I’m charging you more for them”.

So now you know what **SFTGFOP1** stands for, right?²

Finitione

Seriously, I cannot stress this enough – **grades do not mean that one tea is *better* than another** just because the leaves were finer or tippier or goldener or anything like that. These grades are used by growers, sellers and buyers to indicate the size, shape, and color of the leaves themselves, which are associated with flavor and aroma qualities. This is important in the tea industry for the purposes of processing, blending, packaging,

and so on. But there are wonderful Congous in the world and yes, unfortunately, there are teas marked Super Fine 1st Grade Mega-Awesome Tippy Top Bestest in Show that you may simply not like very much. It happens. Life sucks. That's why I drink tea.

Leaf grades just let you know what you're going to see when you open up your bag of loose tea, and nothing more. **Always let your palate be your guide.**

And thanks for reading all this!

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1. Mew, James, and John Ashton. "Tea." In *Drinks of the World*, 242. London, 1892.
 2. **SFTGFOP1** = **S**uper **F**ine **T**ippy **G**olden **F**lowery **O**range **P**ekoe **1**st Grade, of course!