Traditional Yerba Mate: The Gourd and Bombilla

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Yerba mate with gourd and bombilla, in summary:** How to prepare yerba mate the traditional South American way with gourd and bombilla. Temperature rules, sharing etiquette, common mistakes.

Our yerba mate guide covers what mate is and what it does; this page covers the part that makes mate different from every other drink in the wiki: the gourd and bombilla tradition.

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

The kit

Traditional mate uses three things: the *mate* (a hollowed gourd, though wood, ceramic and steel versions exist), the *bombilla* (a metal straw with a filter at the submerged end), and the yerba itself, dried and milled to a coarse, dusty blend of leaf and stem. The bombilla is the clever bit: it lets you drink the infusion while leaving the leaf behind, with no separate strainer.

Setting the gourd (the part beginners skip)

Fill the gourd roughly two thirds with yerba. Cover the mouth with your palm, invert and gently shake so the finest dust settles against your hand, then tip the gourd back so the yerba sits at an angle, a slope of dry leaf on one side, a hollow on the other. This shaping is not fussiness; it is what gives you a clean, strong, long lasting brew rather than a clogged, dusty one.

Water temperature decides everything

Use hot but not boiling water, around 70 to 80 C. Boiling water scalds yerba, turns it harsh and bitter, and is the single most common reason newcomers decide they dislike mate. This is the same principle as brewing green tea below the boil, and it matters even more here because you re steep the same leaf many times. Boil the kettle and let it cool with the lid off, checking with a thermometer, or use a temperature kettle.

The first pour and the bombilla rule

Trickle a little cool water into the hollow first to wake the yerba, then add hot water to the same low side. Insert the bombilla into the wet hollow and, the golden rule, do not stir it. Moving the bombilla around clogs the filter and muddies the brew. You drink the gourd dry through the straw, then refill the same side with hot

water and pass it on. One set of leaves gives many refills, the flavour rounding out from strong and bitter to softer and mellow across the session.

The social ritual

Traditionally one person, the *cebador*, pours and the gourd is shared around a circle, refilled and passed, each person drinking it dry before handing it back. The cebador takes the first, strongest gourd, then refills and passes to each guest in turn until everyone signals they are done. Saying "gracias" means you have had enough and want out of the round. It is closer to a shared pot of tea or a hookah in spirit than to a personal mug, and that communal rhythm is a large part of why mate matters culturally across Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and southern Brazil.

Common mistakes

Boiling water (harsh and bitter, and it can scald your mouth through the narrow bombilla); stirring the bombilla (clogged and muddy); not shaping the yerba (dusty and short lived); skipping the cool-water wetting step (heat-shocks the first cup); giving up after one refill (the flavour rounds out over several). Mate has a learning curve of about a week; push through it and the bitterness you first taste becomes the thing you come back for. If you want the caffeine context, our main guide and caffeine guide cover where mate sits between tea and coffee.

What you need to know: Traditional yerba mate preparation

Field	Detail
What it is	Traditional South American method for drinking yerba mate using a gourd and metal straw, in communal sharing format
The gourd	Mate: a hollowed-out gourd (calabash), traditionally lined with cured leather or rough-finished inside
The straw	Bombilla: a metal straw with a perforated filter end that prevents leaves rising into the mouth
Origin region	Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, southern Brazil; the four countries where yerba mate is the dominant daily caffeine drink
Water temperature	75-85C (NEVER boiling); higher temperatures destroy the mate and risk burns
Caffeine per session	70-150mg across the full gourd session; spread over 30-60 minutes of sipping and refilling
Social context	Inherently communal: one gourd is passed between drinkers in a defined etiquette
UK starter kit price	£20-£60 for a basic gourd plus bombilla; £80+ for premium leather-bound or alpaca-silver kits

Why traditional preparation matters

Yerba mate can be made in a tea bag like black tea, but the gourd-and-bombilla method is a completely different drink. The gourd holds two to three times the usual ratio of leaf to water, the same leaves are

refilled five to ten times across a session rather than brewed once, and the sharing is part of what makes mate the cultural anchor it is. The tea-bag version is essentially a yerba-mate-flavoured drink; the gourd is yerba mate as it actually functions across Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina and southern Brazil.

Related on the wiki: Tereré: Cold Yerba Mate, Yerba Mate, Explained.

Reference noted

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

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Match the tea to the moment. A gourd at 6am and a teabag mate at 4pm can both have their place.

Tea reading

For the broader background see the what is yerba mate guide and the yerba mate overview. For the cold preparation see tereré, cold yerba mate. For caffeine context see the caffeine guide.

The bottom line on traditional yerba mate preparation

Worth learning if you're committed to yerba mate as a regular drink; the traditional method delivers a fundamentally different experience from the tea-bag version. A starter kit is a £20-£60 one-off and the leaves are inexpensive ongoing. Master the temperature rule (75 to 85C, never boiling), setting the gourd and placing the bombilla, and you have a daily habit that connects you to the cultural heart of yerba mate. For occasional drinking the tea-bag version is fine; for daily mate drinking, the gourd is the right format.

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