Tea Infuser vs Strainer: Which Should You Use?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Infuser vs strainer, in summary:** Tea infuser vs strainer: why the tiny mesh ball ruins loose leaf, when a basket wins, and why brewing loose and straining gives the best cup.

The cheapest, commonest piece of loose leaf teaware is also the one most people choose badly. Infuser or strainer is not a trivial question, because one common type quietly strangles the tea. This page settles it, within the teaware cluster and beside loose leaf vs tea bags.

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

The problem they both solve

Loose leaf needs room to expand and then needs to be separated from the liquor at the right moment. Every infuser and strainer is an answer to that, and the answers differ mainly in how much room they give the leaf, the room principle that runs through this whole cluster.

The villain: the tiny mesh ball

The small clamshell mesh "tea egg" is the worst common option. It crams the leaf into a tight cage where it cannot expand, so it under extracts and tastes thin no matter how good the tea, exactly the failure described in loose leaf vs tea bags. It is cheap and ubiquitous and it has put many people off loose leaf entirely. Avoid it.

Basket infusers

A large basket infuser that sits in the mug or pot and gives the leaf most of the vessel’s room is genuinely good: easy, effective, removable at the right moment. The key word is large; a roomy basket is one of the best everyday solutions, a cramped one is just a bigger tea egg.

Strainers

A separate strainer takes the opposite approach: let the leaf brew completely free in the pot or jug with total room, then pour through the strainer to catch it. This gives the best extraction of all because nothing constrains the leaf, and it is why the simple handmade bamboo strainers from Tunta often beat fancier gadgets. It is the method behind gongfu brewing.

The verdict

Best everyday: a large basket infuser or a brew loose and strain approach. Best for serious loose leaf: brew free and strain, or a gaiwan. To avoid: the small mesh ball. The single decision that most improves loose leaf tea, after the water, is giving the leaf room, and choosing the right one of these is how you do it, the practical heart of teaware essentials.

Material and care

Stainless steel is neutral, durable and the safe default; bamboo is gentle, traditional and pleasant; food-grade silicone is fine. Material matters less than room, but it is flavour-critical to keep clean: tannin and oil build an invisible film on the mesh that taints later brews, so rinse with very hot water after each use, never strong detergent on bamboo, and dry it fully where air can reach it. The care principle runs through the whole cluster.

The options side by side

Type	Room for the leaf	Best for	Verdict
Tiny mesh ball	Almost none, leaf strangled	Nothing	Avoid
Large basket infuser	Most of the vessel	Everyday loose leaf	Excellent
Brew loose and strain	Total, unconstrained	Serious loose leaf	Best extraction
Gaiwan	Full, with control	Fine tea, re steeping	Specialist, superb

The science of room

Whole leaf rehydrates to roughly three times its dry size, and extraction depends on water moving freely past every surface. Confine the leaf and two things go wrong at once: the outer leaf packs tight so water channels around it rather than through it, and the inner leaf never fully opens, so a large fraction of what you paid for is still locked in the spent leaf you throw away. That is the whole mechanism behind a thin cup from good tea, and why a cramped mesh ball fails on flavour while using the same leaf as a method that works. Room is not aesthetic; it is the difference between extracting most of the leaf and a fraction of it.

Common questions

Is the little mesh ball ever fine? Only for a quick cup you accept will be thin. For anything you care about, it under extracts no matter how good the leaf.

Do I even need an infuser? No. Brewing loose and pouring through a strainer is the best extraction of all and needs no infuser at all.

Basket or strainer for daily use? A roomy basket is the easiest everyday option; strain from loose is the best cup if you do not mind the extra step.

Does material change the taste? Only if it taints. Use a neutral material, rinse without detergent, and room matters far more than what it is made of.

The bottom line

The decision that most improves loose leaf tea, after the water, is giving the leaf room. A large basket infuser or a brew loose and strain approach wins; a gaiwan is the specialist's answer; the small mesh ball is the one to avoid. Browse basket infusers and strainers and loose leaf tea at teas.co.uk, or the full tea shop. Buy on the cup and the description, check the per cup price, and free UK delivery is over £35.

Related on the wiki: Tea Strainer vs Infuser.

Related teas worth a look: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. For more, the full tea shop ships free across the UK over £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Take the simplest thing on this page that fits your routine. Range and ritual are for week two.

More teaware reading

- The history of tea
- Loose leaf vs teabag
- Tea tasting for beginners
- Tea and caffeine
- Herbal tea
- Green tea
- Tea storage
- Tea ethics & sustainability

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.

