Tea Pets Explained

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea pets, in summary:** Small unglazed Yixing clay figures fed tea during gongfu sessions, slowly developing a patina. A charming Chinese tradition: ritual and craft, not superstition.

A tea pet is one of the most charming objects in Chinese tea culture. This sits in the novelty cluster beside what counts as tea.

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

In short: tea pets

Detail	Fact
What it is	Small unglazed clay figure kept on tea tray during Chinese gongfu sessions
Clay type	Typically Yixing zisha (purple clay) from Jiangsu, China
Surface treatment	Unglazed, porous; absorbs and is "fed" tea over time
Function	Ritual, decoration, luck symbol; aesthetic patina-development project
Common forms	Animals (toads, pigs, cats), mythical figures, dragons, Buddhist symbols
Famous trick variant	"Pee pee boy" sprays water when temperature rises (clever heat-trick toy)
Care	Tea and hot water only; never soap; rinse after sessions; allow natural patina
Time to develop patina	Months to years of regular tea-pouring for visible darkening
Cost range	GBP 5-50 typical; collectible Yixing pieces can cost much more
Cultural meaning	Chinese tea-tradition aesthetic; not magic, not superstition

What a tea pet is, and the patina

A tea pet is a small unglazed clay figure, typically Yixing zisha (purple clay) from Jiangsu, that lives on the tea tray during a gongfu session and is "fed" by pouring spare tea or rinse water over it, see gongfu brewing. The unglazed, porous surface is the whole point: over months and years of regular feeding the clay absorbs tea oils and develops a deeper, often glossy patina, visibly darker after six to twelve months and fully mature over years, with a pattern unique to each pet because the pouring varies. That slow transformation, not any function, is the project, much like seasoning an unglazed pot.

Forms, and how to care for one

Tea pets come in many forms: animals (the three-legged toad for luck and wealth, plus pigs, cats, dragons and fish), mythical and Buddhist figures, and clever "trick" pets, most famously the "pee pee boy" that sprays water as the temperature rises, a neat demonstration of brewing-water heat. Care is genuinely simple and the same logic as an unglazed teapot: only ever tea and hot water, never soap or detergent, which would wreck the patina; rinse with hot water after a session, let it air-dry on the tray rather than wiping it, and keep it away from fragrance, kitchen oils and any non-tea liquid, which the porous clay would hold as off-flavours. Kept that way a pet lasts decades and keeps developing, see unglazed care.

Ritual, not superstition

The tradition is folk custom and aesthetic pleasure rather than magic. Some drinkers attribute luck or prosperity to particular pets, the three-legged toad especially, but these are cultural beliefs rather than verifiable powers, and the sensible approach is to enjoy the ritual and the craft without buying the superstition. The genuine appeal is real on its own terms: the slow patina is a meaningful, satisfying project, and the small act of feeding the pet adds focus to the session, none of which needs the luck claims to work, see Chinese tea culture.

What to buy

Tea pets run from a few pounds to collectible Yixing pieces, the point being the ritual rather than the price; pair one with a gaiwan or Yixing teapot and a premium oolong or Pu-erh for gongfu sessions. Browse the full tea shop; free UK delivery over £35.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (beverage)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Pick what you'll actually drink every day. A tea you reach for is worth more than a tea you admire.

Tea-culture reading

- Gongfu brewing at home
- Chinese tea culture
- Yixing teapot care
- What counts as tea

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.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/