What Counts as Tea?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **What counts as tea, in summary:** What counts as tea: only Camellia sinensis (black, green, white, oolong, yellow, Pu-erh). Everything else is tisane or hot drink using the word.

The single most clarifying question in this whole cluster: what actually is "tea"? This question anchors our novelty tea pages, alongside herbal tea.

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

The essentials: what counts as tea

Category	The classification
Black tea (English Breakfast, Assam, Ceylon, Darjeeling, Earl Grey)	TRUE TEA, from Camellia sinensis
Green tea (sencha, gunpowder, Longjing, gyokuro)	TRUE TEA, from Camellia sinensis
White tea (Silver Needle, Bai Mudan)	TRUE TEA, from Camellia sinensis
Oolong tea (Tieguanyin, Da Hong Pao, Dancong)	TRUE TEA, from Camellia sinensis
Yellow tea (Junshan Yinzhen)	TRUE TEA, from Camellia sinensis
Pu-erh and dark tea	TRUE TEA, from fermented Camellia sinensis
Purple tea (Kenyan purple)	TRUE TEA: a rare exception, really a Camellia sinensis cultivar
Matcha	TRUE TEA: green tea in powder form (Camellia sinensis)
Rooibos (red bush)	TISANE: not tea, a different plant (Aspalathus linearis)
Chamomile, peppermint, ginger, hibiscus	TISANES: infusions of other plants
Butterfly pea ("blue tea"), banana tea	NOT TEA: food and flower infusions borrowing the word "tea"
Yerba mate	TISANE: Ilex paraguariensis, a relative of holly

The strict definition, and why it matters

True tea is an infusion of Camellia sinensis, the tea plant, and all six tea categories, black, green, white, oolong, yellow and Pu-erh/dark, come from that single species through different processing: black is fully oxidised, green heat-stopped before oxidation, white minimally processed, oolong partially oxidised, yellow lightly oxidised with a "sealing yellow" step, and Pu-erh post-fermented, see the one plant. Two main varietals, the smaller-leaved Chinese sinensis and the larger-leaved Indian assamica, plus hundreds of named cultivars, give the global variety, but the underlying plant is the same. The distinction matters for four practical reasons: caffeine (only true tea contains naturally-occurring caffeine), brewing (true tea has specific temperature and timing needs tisanes do not), health research (most of it is on Camellia sinensis specifically), and expectations (someone wanting "tea for relaxation" gets very different things from a chamomile tisane and a decaf green).

Tisanes, and the borrowed-word cases

Everything else sold as "tea" is either a tisane or not really an infusion at all. Tisanes are infusions of other plants, usually caffeine-free: chamomile, peppermint, rooibos (a South African bush, Aspalathus linearis), ginger, hibiscus, fennel and fruit blends, with yerba mate (a holly relative) the caffeinated outlier, see herbal tea. The colour tea cases are where confusion clusters: butterfly pea ("blue tea") and "blue matcha" are tisanes, not tea, while purple tea is the real exception, an anthocyanin rich Camellia sinensis cultivar, see purple tea. And some products are not even infusions of a tea-related plant, banana "tea" and various "vegetable teas" are hot drinks borrowing the word, often with exaggerated health claims, see banana tea. The rule throughout is to look at the plant species, not the marketing colour or the word on the label.

The pragmatic everyday view

None of this means you must police your own kitchen: everyday British speech uses "tea" loosely to cover true tea, tisanes and the broader hot infusion category, and that is entirely fine for ordinary conversation. The strict definition only needs to come out when something practical hangs on it: when caffeine content matters medically, when scientific research is being cited, when a single origin or authenticity claim should be verifiable, or when an allergy or sensitivity means you really need to know what plant is in the cup. For everything else, "tea" on the label tells you less than the plant does, see the caffeine guide.

What to buy

For true tea, browse black, green, white and oolong; for tisanes, the herbal and fruit infusions and rooibos. Browse the full tea shop; free UK delivery over £35.

Reference noted

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

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Tea or tisane, how you steep it counts for more than where it came from. Careful

brewing can make a budget tisane beat a premium tea made carelessly.

Tea reading

- Herbal tea (tisanes)
- Purple tea
- Butterfly pea (blue tea)
- The caffeine guide

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/