

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.

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for What Counts as Tea?. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/what-counts-as-tea/>*

The single most clarifying question in this whole cluster: what actually is "tea"? This sits at the centre of the novelty cluster beside [herbal tea](#).

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

The essentials: what counts as tea

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The essentials: what counts as tea, What Counts as Tea?. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/what-counts-as-tea/>*

Category	The classification
Black tea (English Breakfast, Assam, Ceylon, Darjeeling, Earl Grey)	TRUE TEA - <i>Camellia sinensis</i>
Green tea (sencha, gunpowder, Longjing, gyokuro)	TRUE TEA - <i>Camellia sinensis</i>
White tea (Silver Needle, Bai Mudan)	TRUE TEA - <i>Camellia sinensis</i>
Oolong tea (Tieguanyin, Da Hong Pao, Dancong)	TRUE TEA - <i>Camellia sinensis</i>
Yellow tea (Junshan Yinzhen)	TRUE TEA - <i>Camellia sinensis</i>
Pu-erh and dark tea	TRUE TEA - <i>Camellia sinensis</i> (fermented)
Purple tea (Kenyan purple)	TRUE TEA - rare exception, genuinely <i>Camellia sinensis</i> cultivar
Matcha	TRUE TEA - powdered green tea (<i>Camellia sinensis</i>)
Rooibos (red bush)	TISANE - not tea, different plant (<i>Aspalathus linearis</i>)
Chamomile, peppermint, ginger, hibiscus	TISANES - infusions of different plants

Category	The classification
Butterfly pea ("blue tea"), banana tea	NOT TEA - food/flower infusions wearing the word "tea"
Yerba mate	TISANE - Ilex paraguariensis (related to holly)

The strict definition, and why it matters

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The strict definition, and why it matters, What Counts as Tea?. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/what-counts-as-tea/*

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 varieties, 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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Tisanes, and the borrowed-word cases, What Counts as Tea?. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/what-counts-as-tea/*

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 genuine exception, a real 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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The pragmatic everyday view, What Counts as Tea?. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/what-counts-as-tea/*

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 perfectly fine for ordinary conversation. The strict definition only needs to come out when something practical hangs on it, when caffeine content is medically relevant, when health research is being cited, when a single-origin or authenticity claim should be verifiable, or when an allergy or sensitivity means you genuinely 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 \(2015\)](#)

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FROM THE CURATOR *teas* · The infusion is more important than the shop. A short careful brew can lift a budget bag past a careless premium one.

Tea reading

- [Herbal tea \(tisanes\)](#)
- [Purple tea](#)
- [Butterfly pea \(blue tea\)](#)
- [The caffeine guide](#)

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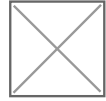
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