

# Herbal Tea vs True Tea: It Comes Down to the Plant

From the Teas.co.uk wiki

**Herbal tea vs true tea, in summary:** True tea is *Camellia sinensis* and caffeinated; herbal "tea" is a tisane of other plants, usually caffeine free. The shared word "tea" hides that, and it decides both caffeine and brewing.

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for Herbal Tea vs True Tea: It Comes Down to the Plant. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/herbal-tea-vs-true-tea/>*

This is the most fundamental "vs" in the whole subject. This sits in the comparison cluster beside [rooibos vs black tea](#).

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

## The definition that settles it

This is the most fundamental distinction in the whole subject, and almost every other comparison depends on getting it right first. True tea, black, green, white, oolong, yellow and dark, is all one plant, *Camellia sinensis*, processed differently; herbal "tea" is a tisane, an infusion of entirely different plants, which is why it is not tea in the botanical sense at all, the literacy the [what counts as tea](#) guide exists to give. Whether something is true tea or a tisane decides its caffeine, how it should be brewed, and what it can reasonably be expected to do, so settle the definition and most caffeine and brewing confusion resolves itself.

## Side by side

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for Herbal Tea vs True Tea: It Comes Down to the Plant. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/herbal-tea-vs-true-tea/>*

	True tea	Herbal tisane
Plant	<i>Camellia sinensis</i>	Other plants entirely
Types	Black, green, white, oolong, yellow, dark	Camomile, peppermint, rooibos, etc
Caffeine	Caffeinated	Usually caffeine free
Brewing	Often needs cooler water, shorter steep	Usually full boil, long steep, no bitterness

## True tea

## Herbal tisane

Exception Purple tea is genuinely *Camellia sinensis*; most novelty "teas" are tisanes

### Why the word "tea" misleads

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Why the word "tea" misleads*, *Herbal Tea vs True Tea: It Comes Down to the Plant*. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/herbal-tea-vs-true-tea/>

"Tea" is used loosely in everyday speech for any hot infusion, and that is fine to say but it genuinely misleads on two practical points. People assume a "tea" is caffeinated when most herbal tisanes are naturally caffeine free, and they assume it brews like true tea when most tisanes take full boiling water and a long steep without turning bitter, where delicate true teas need cooler water and care. Naming the botanical reality first, rather than letting the shared word blur it, is half the answer, the framing the [caffeine guide](#) and [temperature guide](#) both rely on.

### The purple tea exception

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The purple tea exception*, *Herbal Tea vs True Tea: It Comes Down to the Plant*. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/herbal-tea-vs-true-tea/>

One useful caveat keeps the rule clear: a few "colour" teas confuse the picture. Purple tea is genuinely *Camellia sinensis*, a real tea cultivar, despite sounding like a novelty; meanwhile most viral "blue" and herbal "teas" are tisanes wearing the word, the exception the [purple tea](#) guide documents. The reliable test is always the plant, not the colour or the marketing name: if the ingredient is *Camellia sinensis* it is true tea and caffeinated; if it is camomile, peppermint, rooibos or another plant it is a tisane and usually caffeine free.

### What herbal tisanes can and cannot do

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for What herbal tisanes can and cannot do*, *Herbal Tea vs True Tea: It Comes Down to the Plant*. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/herbal-tea-vs-true-tea/>

A fair account credits tisanes for what they are without inflating them. They are pleasant, usually caffeine free, hugely varied, and genuinely useful as enjoyable zero-caffeine drinks; they are not, on the evidence, the medicines the strongest marketing implies, the stance the [herbal tea](#) guide keeps. True tea gets the same even hand: good for you mostly by being a near calorie-free drink you enjoy, not a cure. Naming both fairly is the point, not ranking one above the other.

### Common questions

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Common questions*, *Herbal Tea vs True Tea: It Comes Down to the Plant*. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/herbal-tea-vs-true-tea/>

**Is herbal tea actually tea?** Not botanically. True tea is *Camellia sinensis*; herbal "tea" is a tisane of other plants. The shared word is loose speech.

**Is all herbal tea caffeine free?** Most common ones (camomile, peppermint, rooibos) are. A few infusions are not, so check, but the large majority are zero.

**Does herbal tea brew differently?** Usually yes, full boiling water and a long steep without bitterness, where delicate true teas need cooler water and care.

**Is purple tea herbal?** No, it is genuinely true tea, a real *Camellia sinensis* cultivar, despite the novelty-sounding name. The plant is the test.

### Stock both kinds, knowingly

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Stock both kinds, knowingly*, *Herbal Tea vs True Tea: It Comes Down to the Plant*. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/herbal-tea-vs-true-tea/>

Keep a caffeinated [black tea](#) for the lift and a caffeine-free [rooibos](#) or wider [herbal range](#) for the evening. Read the actual plant on the box, buy on the per-cup price rather than the marketing, and free UK delivery is over £35.

[Browse the tea range](#)

### Reference noted

- [EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine \(2015\)](#)

**FROM THE CURATOR** *teas* · Start cheap, stay cheap until something stops you. Most rich teas reward patience, not budget.

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for Herbal Tea vs True Tea: It Comes Down to the Plant*. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/herbal-tea-vs-true-tea/>

### More from the tea wiki

- [Rooibos vs black tea](#)
- [What counts as tea](#)
- [Purple tea](#)
- [Ideal water temperatures](#)
- [Herbal tea](#)

- [The caffeine guide](#)

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