Yerba Mate: Not Tea, But a Shared Caffeine Ritual

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Yerba mate, in summary:** Not tea, but a caffeinated South American tisane (a holly relative) drunk from a shared gourd through a metal straw. The shared custom is the point, and the one real caution is to drink it warm, not scalding.

Yerba mate often sits beside tea on shelves and gets called a "tea", but the key fact is that it is not tea at all: it is a caffeinated drink made from a different South American plant, with its own distinct culture, and one real, specific caution that responsible guidance should not skip. Frankness here is about correct naming, real culture and one careful warning.

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

What it actually is

Mate is an infusion of the dried leaves of Ilex paraguariensis, a holly relative native to South America, not Camellia sinensis, so it is botanically a tisane rather than true tea, though, unlike most tisanes, it really does contain caffeine. It is traditionally drunk in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and southern Brazil, prepared in a hollow gourd (also called a mate) packed with leaf, topped with hot but not boiling water, and sipped through a metal filtered straw (bombilla), refilled many times. It sits near tea, is brewed like tea and is sipped like tea, so shops file it as a "tea", but the plant test settles it: only Camellia sinensis is tea, so mate is a tisane that happens, unusually, to be caffeinated, the distinction the what counts as tea guide keeps. Naming it accurately is not pedantry; it changes what you should expect on caffeine, on health claims and on how it is regulated.

The ritual is the substance

The cultural core is communal. Mate is classically a shared drink: one gourd and one bombilla are prepared by a server (the cebador) and passed around a group, each person drinking the gourd dry in turn before it is refilled and passed on. That sharing is the whole social point, an act of trust, inclusion and unhurried company, comparable in social weight to the hospitality customs of Moroccan, Russian and Iranian tea that the how tea customs differ guide describes. Describing mate without the shared gourd is like describing the Japanese tea ceremony without the philosophy: the shared custom is the substance, not a garnish, and it places mate firmly in the global family of tea as hospitality rather than an exotic curiosity.

What it tastes and feels like

Mate is distinctive: grassy, vegetal, herbaceous and characteristically bitter, an acquired taste that many come to love, sometimes drunk with sugar or herbs, or cold as terere. Its caffeine gives a real stimulant lift, and sipping a steady, sociable caffeine source over a long session does feel different, behaving in caffeine terms like a strong sustained infusion rather than a quick hit. The "unique balanced energy of mateine" marketing overstates it, though, because chemically mate's stimulant is simply caffeine, the same measured reading the caffeine guide applies to every caffeinated drink.

The health caution

This is the careful point a responsible guide must include. Mate itself is, in normal terms, an ordinary caffeinated plant infusion, but there is a real, specific, evidence based caution: regularly drinking mate very hot is associated in research with raised risk of certain cancers of the oesophagus, an effect attributed largely to the heat of the liquid (a risk shared by any scalding beverage) and possibly compounded by other factors. The framing is proportionate, not alarmist: the practical takeaway is to drink mate, and indeed any drink, warm rather than scalding, which sensibly reduces the main identified risk. Beyond that, it is a caffeinated tisane: caffeine, plant polyphenols, water, no miracle, and the popular idea of it as a superfood that burns fat is the usual overreach. Accurately named and accurately cautioned, mate is a rewarding drink, just not tea and not a tonic. This is general information, not medical advice.

Yerba mate at a glance

	Yerba mate
Plant	Ilex paraguariensis, a holly relative, not Camellia sinensis
Category	A caffeinated tisane (not true tea)
Where	Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, southern Brazil
How	Gourd packed with leaf, hot (not boiling) water, sipped through a bombilla, refilled
Taste	Grassy, vegetal, herbaceous, characteristically bitter
Caution	Drink it warm, not scalding (the very-hot-liquid oesophageal risk)

If the grassy, caffeinated style appeals, explore the caffeine-free and caffeinated herbal infusions and the wider tea shop, with free UK delivery on orders over £35.

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teas · Whatever you brew, let very hot drinks cool a minute before sipping. It is the one habit worth keeping from the mate research.

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