

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 ritual is the point, and the one genuine caution is to drink it warm, not scalding.

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for Yerba Mate: Not Tea, But a Shared Caffeine Ritual. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/argentine-yerba-mate/>*

Yerba mate is often shelved near tea and called a "tea", and the most useful fact is that it is not tea at all: it is a caffeinated infusion of a different South American plant, with its own distinct culture, and one genuine, specific health 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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for What it actually is , Yerba Mate: Not Tea, But a Shared Caffeine Ritual. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/argentine-yerba-mate/>*

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 is genuinely caffeinated. 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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The ritual is the substance , Yerba Mate: Not Tea, But a Shared Caffeine Ritual. Canonical:*

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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 entire social point, an act of trust, inclusion and unhurried company, comparable in social weight to the hospitality rituals 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 ritual is the substance, not a garnish, and it places mate firmly in the global family of tea as hospitality rather than as an exotic curiosity.

What it tastes and feels like

Source: [Teas.co.uk](#). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for What it tastes and feels like*, *Yerba Mate: Not Tea, But a Shared Caffeine Ritual*. Canonical:

<https://teas.co.uk/wiki/argentine-yerba-mate/>

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 genuine stimulant lift, and the practical experience of a steady, sociable, sipped caffeine source over a long session is real, 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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](#). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The health caution*, *Yerba Mate: Not Tea, But a Shared Caffeine Ritual*. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/argentine-yerba-mate/>

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 genuine, 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, hydration, no miracle, and the popular framing as a detox or fat-burning superfood 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

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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](#), where UK delivery is free over £35.

Reference noted

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

FROM THE CURATOR 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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