Tea Strainer vs Infuser: Give the Leaf Room

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea strainer vs infuser, in summary:** A strainer filters the leaf at pouring time; an infuser confines it inside a cage while it brews. The distinction matters in the cup: a cramped infuser actively worsens good loose leaf. Give the leaf room and filter at the end.

"Strainer" and "infuser" are used interchangeably but are genuinely different tools that do almost opposite things, and the distinction matters in the cup: the wrong one, especially a cramped infuser, actively worsens good loose leaf tea. Getting this straight is a small piece of knowledge with a disproportionate effect on flavour.

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

The core difference

A strainer is held over the cup or pot at pouring time and catches leaves after the tea has brewed loose in the water. An infuser is a perforated container (basket, ball, sphere) you put the leaves inside, which sits in the water during brewing and is then lifted out. The crucial difference: with a strainer the leaves brew freely in the full body of water; with an infuser the leaves brew confined inside a small cage. That confinement is the entire issue.

Why a cramped infuser ruins good leaf

Whole leaf tea needs to expand and move freely in plenty of water to release its flavour fully and evenly; that circulation is part of proper extraction. A small ball infuser or tight mesh packed with leaf prevents the leaves from opening and the water from circulating, so the tea brews unevenly and weakly while you compensate by over-steeping, getting bitterness instead of body. This is why good loose tea brewed in a tiny tea ball is so often disappointing: the tool, not the tea, is the problem. The cramped-infuser mistake is one of the commonest unrecognised reasons people think loose tea "is not worth it".

Which to actually use

Best for most loose leaf tea: let the leaves brew free in the pot or vessel and use a strainer when pouring, or use a large basket infuser that fills most of the pot so the leaves still have room to expand and circulate, functionally close to free brewing. Avoid small tea balls and tightly stuffed infusers for anything but the most robust, broken tea. The principle is simple and consistent with the brewing pages: give the leaf room,

constrain it as little as possible, and only filter at the end.

The exceptions

For very broken tea, or where convenience genuinely outweighs optimum flavour (a quick desk mug, travel), a roomy infuser is a reasonable, clear compromise; the point is not purism but knowing the trade-off. A travel vessel with a genuinely large basket works, while a thumb-sized cage fails for the same reason the tea ball does. Robust teas tolerate confinement far better than delicate whole leaf ones. The clear rule is "match the tool to the leaf and the priority", not "infusers are always bad", which would be its own overstatement.

How to care for them

Rinse metal strainers and infusers promptly so tannin and fine leaf do not bake on and clog the mesh; an old, oil-and-tannin-clogged strainer taints the tea and slows pouring. Let them dry fully. Fine mesh is the part that fails (clogs or tears); treat it gently. That is essentially all the care required.

Are they worth it

A good strainer or a generous basket infuser is genuinely worth it and cheap: it is the difference between loose leaf tea tasting like its potential and tasting thin or bitter. The waste of money is the cramped novelty tea ball that quietly sabotages good leaf. Buy a fine strainer or a large basket, give the leaves room, and you have removed one of the most common hidden reasons home-brewed loose tea underwhelms, the practical, careful frankness of this wiki's equipment pages.

Strainer and infuser side by side

	Strainer	Large basket infuser	Small ball infuser
Leaf room	Total, brews free	Most of the pot	Almost none, cramped
When used	At pouring time	During the steep	During the steep
Cup result	Fullest extraction	Close to free brewing	Thin, then over-steeped bitter
Verdict	Best for most loose leaf	Excellent everyday	Avoid for good leaf

Reference noted

- Britannica: Tea (beverage)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Buy on the cup, not on the label. The wider shelf is there for when you know what you like.

More from the tea wiki

- Infuser vs strainer: what to buy first
- Teaware essentials
- Loose leaf tea
- One-cup brewing
- How to make tea
- Gongfu tea
- Fairness pitcher

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/