Tea vs Tisane

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea vs tisane, in short:** Tea vs tisane: only Camellia sinensis is tea; chamomile, peppermint, rooibos and the rest are tisanes.

The clear headline is the single most clarifying distinction in the whole drinks aisle: "tea" properly means an infusion of Camellia sinensis (green, black, white, oolong, pu erh); everything else, chamomile, peppermint, rooibos, fruit, ginger, is a tisane, a herbal infusion that is not tea at all. The word "tea" on a herbal box is loose language, and this distinction genuinely matters.

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

What they have in common

What they share: both are plant material steeped in hot water, both drunk hot or cold, both essentially calorie free unsweetened, both hydrating, both carrying real ritual value. At the level of "a warm, flavourful, low sugar drink and a comforting ritual" they are equals, which is why the word gets borrowed.

The real differences

The real differences, and why they matter. Caffeine: true tea contains caffeine; genuine tisanes do not (unless a blend adds tea or a caffeine herb like yerba mate). Compounds: true tea has its characteristic polyphenols and L theanine; tisanes have whatever their own plant contains, which varies enormously, gentle in most, genuinely cautionable in a few (liquorice, concentrated botanicals). Brewing: true tea is fussy about temperature (delicate types scald easily); most tisanes want fully boiling water and a long steep. On health claims: "tea is good for you" does not automatically transfer to tisanes and vice versa, because they are different plants.

Which should you choose

You do not really choose between them as rivals; you choose by need. Want caffeine and tea character: true tea. Want caffeine free, a specific flavour or traditional comfort: a tisane. The practical value of the distinction is accuracy, it stops you assuming a herbal "tea" has tea's caffeine or benefits, or that it is automatically caffeine free if it is actually a tea blend. Read the ingredients.

Quick take

The clear verdict: keep the words straight. Only Camellia sinensis is tea; the rest are tisanes wearing the word. The distinction is not pedantry, it decides caffeine, compounds, brewing and which health claims even apply. Use it as the master filter for every "is it caffeinated / is it good for me" question, and you will read the whole category clearly.

True tea and tisane side by side

	True tea	Tisane (herbal)
Plant	Camellia sinensis only	Any other plant
Examples	Green, black, white, oolong, pu erh	Chamomile, peppermint, rooibos, fruit
Caffeine	Always present	None, unless a blend adds tea/caffeine herb
Compounds	Tea polyphenols, L theanine	Whatever that plant contains
Brewing	Often cooler, fussier	Usually full boil, long steep

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