What Is Bergamot? The Citrus Behind Earl Grey

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Bergamot, in short:** What is bergamot? The Calabrian citrus that gives Earl Grey its flavour. Real oil vs synthetic, how it gets into tea, taste and pairings.

If you have ever wondered what makes Earl Grey taste like Earl Grey, the answer is bergamot, and the short version is that bergamot is a small, fragrant citrus fruit whose aromatic oil is used to scent black tea. It is not a tea, a herb or a flavour invented in a lab; it is a real citrus, and almost everything good or disappointing about an Earl Grey traces back to which kind of bergamot was used.

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What it actually is

Bergamot (Citrus bergamia) is a small, sour, intensely aromatic citrus grown mainly in Calabria in southern Italy. It is not eaten as a fruit; the prized part is the fragrant oil in its rind, cold pressed and used in perfumery and to flavour tea, confectionery and Earl Grey. The single most useful distinction is natural cold pressed bergamot oil versus cheaper synthetic bergamot flavouring: both are legal and common, both are simply called "bergamot" on tea, and the difference is mostly told by taste, not the label.

What it tastes like

Bergamot’s aroma is sharp, floral, citrusy and slightly bitter in a pleasant way, brighter and more perfumed than lemon or orange. In a good Earl Grey it lifts the black tea and stays integrated even as the cup cools; cheap synthetic versions can taste soapy or one dimensional and worsen as the cup cools. That cooled cup test is the clearest way to judge bergamot quality, far more reliable than the price or the words on the box.

The health picture

A health note: the trace of bergamot flavouring in a cup of tea is just that, a trace, and is not a supplement. Bergamot has been studied for cholesterol in concentrated supplement form, but that does not transfer to a teabag, and selling Earl Grey as a cholesterol treatment would be fraudulent. One real, specific caveat is worth stating clearly: very high intakes of strongly bergamot flavoured tea have, in rare documented cases, been linked to muscle cramps, because a compound in bergamot can affect potassium handling. This is an extreme consumption edge case, not a worry for normal drinkers, but it is the kind of clear detail a real guide includes.

How to use it well

Use this knowledge to buy and enjoy Earl Grey well: judge it by the cooled cup taste, prefer teas that name natural or cold pressed bergamot, and brew it like the black tea it is, just off the boil, three to four minutes, not stewed, since over brewing exaggerates both the tea tannin and the bergamot bitterness. Bergamot is a real and lovely citrus aromatic; treat a good Earl Grey as a flavour choice, judged on taste, and the one high intake caveat as the footnote it is.

The essentials: bergamot

Question	Short answer
What is bergamot?	A small bitter citrus fruit (Citrus bergamia) grown almost exclusively in Calabria, southern Italy. The oil extracted from its peel flavours Earl Grey tea.
What's in Earl Grey?	Black tea (usually Chinese or Sri Lankan) flavoured with bergamot oil or natural bergamot flavour. Sometimes blue cornflower petals are added for visual appeal.
Is bergamot tea itself a tea?	No, "bergamot" alone is not a tea. The bergamot tree's peel oil is the flavouring; the tea base is true tea (Camellia sinensis) or sometimes a herbal infusion.
What does it taste like?	Floral, citrusy, slightly bitter, distinctive. Lemony but more aromatic and complex than lemon, less sweet than orange.
Where does it come from?	~95% of world's bergamot is grown in Calabria, particularly Reggio Calabria. Smaller production in Côte d'Ivoire, Argentina and Brazil.
Why so concentrated?	Bergamot trees are fussy: need specific climate (mild Mediterranean), soil type, and growing conditions. Calabrian coast happens to be ideal.
Is the flavour artificial?	Varies by brand. Premium Earl Grey uses real bergamot oil; cheaper versions use synthetic "bergamot flavour".
Does it have caffeine?	Bergamot itself is caffeine-free. Earl Grey tea has caffeine from the black tea base (typically 30-50mg per cup).

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea

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