What Is Guayusa? The Amazon's Caffeinated Holly Leaf

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Guayusa, in short:** What is guayusa? Amazonian holly leaf with real caffeine. Indigenous use, smoother than coffee, L-theanine synergy, sustainability angle.

Guayusa is one of the trendier "natural pick me up" drinks; put simply, it is a properly caffeinated leaf infusion from an Amazonian holly relative, real, smooth and stimulating, but not the magic jitter free plant the marketing implies.

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

What it actually is

It is an infusion of the leaves of Ilex guayusa, a holly family tree native to the Amazon, closely related to yerba mate and, like mate, naturally caffeinated despite not being true tea (Camellia sinensis). So it sits in an unusual category: a tisane that really does contain caffeine. It has a long traditional use among Amazonian communities, often drunk in the early morning.

What it tastes like

Guayusa tastes smooth, earthy and mildly sweet, generally rounder and less aggressively bitter than yerba mate, which is part of its appeal, it delivers caffeine without the sharp grassy bitterness mate can have. It is pleasant on its own and takes well to blending.

The health picture

The plain picture: guayusa contains real caffeine, so it does give a stimulating lift; that part is true. It also holds the same broad polyphenols as many leaves and, like mate, compounds related to L theanine that may give a subjectively smoother feel, the fair basis for the "smooth, clear headed lift" descriptions. What is overstated is the idea that its caffeine is somehow different, "cleaner" or jitter proof; it is caffeine, and a strong brew is a real dose. In short: a caffeinated, pleasant, smoother tasting daytime drink, not a magic stimulant. The same proportionate caution as mate applies, very hot drinks of any kind are best not taken scalding.

How to use it well

Use it as the caffeinated drink it really is: brew the dried leaves in hot water for a smooth, lively cup, treat it as a daytime lift rather than an evening drink, and enjoy its rounder character if mate is too bitter for you. Credit the real, smooth caffeine kick and the long tradition; ignore the "clean, no crash, magic" framing, which is the usual overreach on an otherwise good drink.

The cultural context

The traditional preparation by Amazonian indigenous communities involves brewing strong guayusa overnight in a clay pot over embers. The drink is shared in the early morning, often before sunrise, before hunting or work begins. Community members share stories, interpret dreams, and discuss the day ahead while drinking guayusa together. Hunters drink it to stay sharp and for what they describe as clearer concentration and "dream keeping" abilities.

The Kichwa, Achuar, Shuar and other Ecuadorian Amazon peoples have used guayusa for at least 1500 years; archaeological evidence from burial caves in southern Ecuador dates ceremonial guayusa bundles to the 4th century. It is deeply woven into morning custom and knowledge of forest life.

Sustainability angle

Guayusa is often cited as a sustainability success story, and with good reason. The tree grows wild in the Amazon understorey, so cultivation typically uses agroforestry without clearing forest. Indigenous communities in Ecuador have organised cooperatives (the RUNA project, founded 2009, is the best known) to commercialise guayusa as a way to sustain forest livelihoods, and the plant's habit of growing in shade means certified guayusa farms preserve rather than destroy rainforest.

The caveats are worth keeping in view: scale is still small compared with coffee, palm or other major crops, and mass-market guayusa products from large brands do not always trace back to indigenous-managed forest. Check the supply chain and certification claims if sustainability is your motivation.

What you need to know: guayusa

Question	Short answer
What is guayusa?	An herbal infusion made from leaves of Ilex guayusa, a holly species native to the Amazon rainforest, particularly Ecuador.
Does it contain caffeine?	Yes, naturally. About 50-75mg per cup, similar to green tea or mild black tea.
Is it related to yerba maté?	Yes. Both are species of Ilex (holly genus), both contain caffeine, both have indigenous South American use. Guayusa is gentler-tasting than maté.
What does it taste like?	Smooth, slightly sweet, earthy, mild grassy notes, less bitter than yerba maté. Some compare to weak green tea.
Traditional use?	Used by Amazonian Kichwa, Achuar and Shuar peoples for centuries as a morning stimulant before hunting. Often brewed and shared as a community drink.
Health claims?	Contains caffeine, theobromine and L-theanine in unusual combination. Real but modest polyphenol content; claims of a smoother lift are plausible but not strongly proven.

How to brew?	Hot water just below boiling, 1-2 teaspoons per cup, 5-7 minutes. Can be brewed multiple times. Often drunk hot in the morning.
Cautions?	Contains caffeine; same considerations as other caffeinated drinks (sleep, pregnancy limit 200mg/day, etc.). Avoid in late evening.

Reference noted

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)

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teas · If you finish the guayusa, it was the right cup. Leave other holly drinks such as mate until that is settled.

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