Rooibos Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Rooibos in brief:** Rooibos is the South African Aspalathus linearis herbal-infusion; zero caffeine, sweet and nutty; the single best caffeine-free everyday brew.

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

Rooibos (pronounced ROY boss) is South African red bush, a small leafed shrub native to the Cederberg mountains of the Western Cape. It's not technically tea. The plant is *Aspalathus linearis*, no relation to *Camellia sinensis*. But it's brewed and consumed exactly like tea, and it has built a strong following on the British shelf as the natural, completely caffeine free alternative for evenings, pregnancy, and anyone trying to cut caffeine without giving up the cup of tea habit.

You'll see rooibos sold under several names, often interchangeably:

- **Rooibos** , the South African name, the technically correct one
- **Redbush** , the English translation, used by Tetley and most UK supermarket brands
- **Red tea** , informal name in some markets, can be confused with Chinese black tea

They are the same thing. The names are a marketing choice, not a difference in the leaf. See the dedicated redbush range for the British shelf naming and the rooibos range for the wider category.

Where rooibos comes from

Rooibos grows only in the Cederberg region of South Africa, a roughly 100km stretch of mountainous terrain north of Cape Town. The plant has never successfully been cultivated commercially anywhere else, partly because it needs the specific Mediterranean meets arid climate of that area, and partly because the wild plant has a deep taproot that resists transplanting.

The harvest is a manual process. Workers cut the bush to about 50cm above ground, the cuttings are bruised, oxidised in the sun (which gives red rooibos its characteristic red colour), then dried. Green rooibos is the same plant but the oxidation step is skipped, leaving the leaf its natural pale green and giving a lighter, grassier cup.

Indigenous origins and Fair Trade

Rooibos has been used by the Khoisan peoples of the Cederberg for centuries; commercial cultivation only began in the early 20th century, after the settler Benjamin Ginsberg recognised its commercial potential. The

plant cannot be grown outside its native range, attempts in Australia, the southern US and China have all failed, which makes South Africa effectively the sole producer. A 2019 traditional-knowledge benefit-sharing agreement now means South African producers pay royalties to the Khoi and San communities for their ancestral knowledge of the plant. Tick Tock, Clipper and Pukka all source within that framework; cheaper supermarket rooibos may not, so check the labelling if Fair Trade matters to you.

Red rooibos vs green rooibos

	Red rooibos	Green rooibos
Processing	Oxidised in sun for 8 hours	Steamed and dried, no oxidation
Cup colour	Deep red brown	Pale gold to light green
Taste	Earthy sweet, slightly woody, hint of vanilla	Lighter, grassier, vegetal, similar to a delicate green tea
Antioxidant load	High in aspalathin and nothofagin	Higher still , oxidation reduces some compounds
Availability in UK	Common, every supermarket	Specialist shops only

Red is what almost everyone in the UK means when they say "rooibos". Green rooibos is a niche product, mostly sold by specialist tea retailers.

How rooibos is processed

1. Pluck whole shoots (leaves, stems, small twigs).
2. Cut to small pieces.
3. Bruise (rolling) to release the enzymes.
4. Allow oxidation (turns the leaves red-brown).
5. Sun-dry.
6. Sort and package.

How to brew rooibos

Rooibos is the most forgiving brew on the shelf. It does not get bitter no matter how long you leave it, and it tolerates boiling water without any of the bitterness problems green tea has.

- **Temperature:** 95 to 100°C, freshly drawn. Boiling is fine. See the water temperatures guide for the full breakdown.
- **Steep:** 5 to 7 minutes for full character. Longer is fine, the cup keeps developing without going harsh.
- **Leaf:** One bag per mug, or 1g of loose leaf per 50ml of water.
- **Milk:** Optional. Red rooibos takes a splash of milk well, especially the vanilla and chai variants. Green rooibos is better drunk black.
- **Re infusions:** Most rooibos teabags exhaust on the first cup, but loose leaf rooibos can be re infused once.

The "leave it as long as you like" character is what makes rooibos a kitchen workhorse. Forget you made the cup, come back 20 minutes later, the tea is still drinkable. Try that with a green tea and you'll regret it.

Caffeine and other chemistry

Rooibos is naturally **caffeine free**. Not "decaffeinated", not "low caffeine", but caffeine free by nature, because the plant never contained caffeine in the first place.

This is the single most important reason rooibos has built an audience in the UK. The use cases that drive most rooibos purchases:

- **Evening cup** , no risk of disrupting sleep
- **Pregnancy** , NHS advice is to keep caffeine under 200mg a day during pregnancy; rooibos lets you keep the cuppa habit without counting
- **People cutting caffeine** , rooibos is the closest non tea alternative to a cup of black tea, far closer than herbal infusions like chamomile or peppermint
- **Children** , rooibos is widely given to children in South Africa from infancy; the lack of caffeine and tannins means no iron absorption interference

Rooibos is also low in tannins compared to true tea, which means it doesn't have the iron absorption interference that black or green tea does. For people with iron deficiency anaemia, rooibos is the safer option to drink alongside meals. For more on the caffeine context across all tea families, see the ultimate caffeine guide.

A note on health

Rooibos contains two unusual compounds, aspalathin and nothofagin, which have been studied for various effects. The evidence is modest: any benefits are small, and nothing here is a reason to treat the cup as medicine.

The supplement industry sells rooibos extracts at high doses with claims about everything from skin health to cancer prevention. For a cup of tea drinker the reality is simpler: rooibos is a low-calorie, naturally caffeine-free, polyphenol-rich drink that tastes good. That is the case for drinking it; treat the bigger health claims with the same scepticism you would apply to any superfood marketing.

Rooibos blends, the British shelf

Plain red rooibos is the workhorse. It also blends extraordinarily well with sweet, warming and spice flavours because the natural sweetness in the leaf carries them. The most common blends on the UK shelf:

- **Vanilla rooibos** , the classic dessert leaning version, the warming pairing of vanilla and the natural rooibos sweetness
- **Rooibos chai** , the caffeine free alternative to traditional masala chai, same spice canon (cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, clove, black pepper) but on rooibos rather than black tea
- **Earl Grey rooibos** , bergamot oil on rooibos, the caffeine free version of Earl Grey
- **Rooibos with citrus or fruit** , lemon, orange, berry blends

- **Honeybush blends** , pairing rooibos with the related but sweeter honeybush plant from the same region

What we stock

Browse the full rooibos and redbush range. The most bought lines:

- Dragonfly Organic Lively Lemon and Ginger, 20 Tea Bags 34g
- Dragonfly Organic Cape Chai Rooibos, 40 Tea Bags 80g
- Tetley Redbush Pure, 40 Tea Bags 100g
- Dragonfly Organic Vanilla Rooibos, 40 Tea Bags 100g
- Dragonfly Organic Pure Rooibos, 40 Tea Bags 100g
- Teapigs Rooibos Creme Caramel, 15 Tea Bags, 37.5g

Recommended brands in the rooibos space: Dragonfly for organic + Fairtrade across the range, Tetley for the everyday supermarket tier Redbush range, Pukka for premium organic blends.

Rooibos vs the actual tea families

Rooibos is a different plant altogether from *Camellia sinensis* tea. The comparison:

	Rooibos	Black tea	Herbal infusions
Plant	*Aspalathus linearis* (legume family)	*Camellia sinensis*	Various, mostly mints, fruits, flowers
Caffeine	None	40 to 70mg	None
Tannins	Very low	High	Variable, mostly low
Cup body	Earthy sweet, slightly woody	Malty, brisk	Light, depends on ingredients
Takes milk	Yes (especially flavoured rooibos)	Yes	Generally not
Brews bitter if over steeped	No	Yes	Generally not

The closest cup experience to rooibos is actually a lightly brewed black tea with a splash of milk and a pinch of cinnamon. Once you've drunk both side by side, the differences are obvious, but rooibos is the family that's most likely to satisfy a black tea drinker who needs to cut caffeine.

For the wider tea family map see the black tea overview, the green tea overview, and the herbal and fruit infusions guide. For the caffeine context across all families the caffeine across teas.

Why rooibos suits sensitive drinkers

One plain, practical reason rooibos appears so often in gentle recommendations is structural rather than medical: it is naturally caffeine free and naturally low in the tannins that make strong true tea astringent, which makes it easy on people who find black or green tea harsh, acidic or over stimulating. It is a South African plant (Aspalathus linearis), not Camellia sinensis, so it is technically a tisane rather than a tea, see

what counts as tea. It takes milk or lemon, brews without a bitterness penalty even if over steeped, and is widely used as an everyday or evening alternative when caffeine is unwanted. None of that makes it a treatment; it simply makes it a comfortable, low irritation cup, which is exactly the modest, plain claim worth making rather than the inflated claims often attached to it.

The essentials: rooibos tea

Aspect	Plain note
What it is	South African Aspalathus linearis; herbal, not true tea
Native to	Cederberg mountains, Western Cape, South Africa
Caffeine	Zero; 24/7 drinkable
Red rooibos	Oxidised; the classic mahogany-red cup
Green rooibos	Unoxidised; lighter, more vegetal, a different compound profile
Taste	Sweet, nutty, gentle; lower tannin than black tea
Common blends	Vanilla, caramel, Earl Grey rooibos, chai rooibos
Buying signal	Whole-leaf rooibos over dust-grade for fullest flavour

Source noted

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

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teas · Pick the rooibos that pleases you, whatever the shelf suggests. Curiosity is the only reliable guide.

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