Yerba Mate: Traditions and Brewing Guide

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Yerba mate, in summary:** Yerba mate is the Argentine and Paraguayan caffeine habit: a steady lift, a holly leaf base and the gourd and bombilla tradition.

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

Yerba mate is the traditional South American caffeinated drink that's not technically tea (it's not *Camellia sinensis*) but functions like tea in the cup, in brewing and in daily habit. Made from the dried leaves of the South American holly tree (*Ilex paraguariensis*), yerba mate produces a distinctively bitter, grassy, vegetal cup with caffeine levels comparable to a strong tea or moderate coffee. The drink is the national beverage of Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and southern Brazil; the traditional preparation involves drinking from a hollowed gourd through a metal straw with a built in filter, shared among friends in a social custom that is central to South American cultural identity.

This guide covers everything about yerba mate: the South American heritage, the production process, the proper brewing approach (both traditional and Western friendly), the major commercial products, and how yerba mate fits among other caffeinated drinks.

The yerba mate plant

Yerba mate (*Ilex paraguariensis*) is a species of holly tree native to the subtropical forests of South America, particularly the regions of northeastern Argentina, southern Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. The plant grows naturally in the regional rainforests; commercial cultivation expanded significantly through the 19th and 20th centuries to meet rising demand both within South America and for export.

The leaves contain caffeine (technically "mateine" by some old taxonomies, now recognised as identical to caffeine), theobromine (the same mild stimulant found in chocolate), polyphenols, and various other bioactive compounds. The caffeine content is what makes yerba mate functionally similar to tea or coffee despite the botanical difference; the theobromine adds a distinctive secondary stimulant character.

The drink has been used by indigenous Guaraní peoples for centuries before European contact; Jesuit missionaries adopted yerba mate cultivation in the 17th and 18th centuries, expanding production and helping spread the drink across South American colonial society. Modern yerba mate is one of the defining cultural elements of the Southern Cone (Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, southern Brazil); per capita consumption in Uruguay (around 8 to 10kg per person annually) is among the highest of any beverage in

any country.

The yerba mate production process

Yerba mate is produced through a specific process:

1. **Harvesting:** leaves and small stems are harvested from mature plants (typically 5+ years old)
2. **Sapecado (initial heating)** the harvested leaves are briefly exposed to flame or hot air to halt enzymatic activity; this preserves the green colour and prevents oxidation
3. **Drying:** the leaves are dried at low temperatures over days or weeks; traditional production uses smoke drying which contributes to the distinctive flavour
4. **Crumbling:** the dried leaves are broken into small pieces; this is the cut that affects brewing character
5. **Aging:** traditional yerba mate is aged for 9 to 24 months before consumption; this mellows the flavour significantly
6. **Sorting and packaging:** the aged yerba mate is sorted by particle size and packed

Different producers and regions produce different styles:

- **Argentine yerba mate:** typically aged 12+ months, produces smoother cups; often the most accessible introduction for new drinkers
- **Brazilian (chimarrão) yerba mate:** less aged, more fresh leaf character, brighter and more aggressive
- **Paraguayan yerba mate:** specifically prepared for tereré (cold water yerba mate), distinctive character
- **Uruguayan yerba mate:** often the most aged style, mellower flavour
- **Smoked vs unsmoked:** traditional production used wood smoke drying; modern unsmoked versions are widely available for drinkers who prefer cleaner flavour

The yerba mate flavour profile

Yerba mate has a distinctive flavour profile:

- **Strong vegetal, grassy character:** the dominant note; described as "wet hay", "fresh cut grass", "green leafy"
- **Pronounced bitterness:** particularly in young or under aged yerba mate
- **Slight smokiness** in traditionally smoked versions
- **Earthy undertones**
- **Long bitter finish**
- **Acquired taste:** most Western drinkers need 5 to 10 cups to develop appreciation

The flavour is intense and bitter compared to tea or coffee. South American drinkers often grow up with yerba mate from childhood and find the flavour comforting; Western drinkers typically need to acclimatise. The bitterness can be moderated by aging (more aged yerba mate is less bitter), brewing technique (cooler

water and shorter brewing reduce bitterness), and complementary additions (lemon, mint, sugar in some traditions).

How to brew yerba mate (traditional method)

The traditional South American method using a gourd and bombilla:

1. **Prepare the gourd:** a properly cured calabash gourd or modern equivalent; fill 2/3 to 3/4 full with yerba mate leaves
2. **Tilt and shake:** tilt the gourd to one side so the yerba forms an inclined surface; shake gently to bring the finer particles to the top
3. **Insert the bombilla:** the metal straw with built in filter inserted into the lower side of the inclined yerba
4. **First wetting:** pour cool water (or room temperature) into the empty space beside the bombilla; let absorb for a minute
5. **Add hot water** around 70 to 80°C (never boiling); fill the empty space
6. **Drink through the bombilla:** the metal straw filters out the leaves while you drink
7. **Refill:** refill with hot water as needed; the same yerba serves multiple refills until the flavour exhausts (usually 10 to 20 refills)
8. **Share:** traditionally yerba mate is shared among a group; one person prepares and refills, the gourd is passed around

The traditional method is social at heart; sharing yerba mate is a defining custom in South American friendship and family life. For Western drinkers exploring yerba mate, trying the traditional method at least once provides cultural context that's part of the drink's identity.

How to brew yerba mate (Western method)

For Western drinkers without specialist gourd and bombilla equipment:

1. **Measure out 1 to 2 teaspoons of yerba mate** per 200ml cup, in a tea infuser, French press, or similar
2. **Use water at 70 to 80°C:** never boiling; boiling water makes yerba mate dramatically more bitter
3. **Steep for 3 to 5 minutes**
4. **Strain or remove the leaves**
5. **Drink neat or with additions**; lemon juice, fresh mint, or honey all complement yerba mate
6. **Re brew if desired** French press yerba mate gives 2 to 3 reasonable infusions

Mate aside, each tea family has its own temperature in the water temperatures guide.

Tereré (cold yerba mate)

The summer Paraguayan tradition of cold yerba mate:

1. Prepare the gourd with yerba as for traditional hot mate

2. Use ice cold water (often with ice cubes added)
3. Often combined with lemon juice, mint, or other fresh herbs
4. Drink through the bombilla as with hot mate

Tereré is one of the most refreshing summer drinks in the world; the cold temperature reduces some of the bitterness while keeping the caffeine kick. For Western drinkers in summer, tereré style preparation provides accessible introduction to yerba mate without the full intensity of hot preparation.

Caffeine and stimulant character

Yerba mate has distinctive stimulant character:

- **Caffeine per cup** 40 to 80mg depending on preparation; comparable to strong tea or moderate coffee
- **Theobromine content:** mild stimulant similar to chocolate; produces gentler stimulation than caffeine alone
- **No L theanine:** unlike true tea; tea's softer, focused lift isn't present in yerba mate
- **Effect described as "energetic alertness":** between tea's relaxed clarity and coffee's sharp jolt
- **Long lasting effects:** the combination of caffeine and theobromine produces effects that last 4 to 6 hours

For drinkers wanting a strong caffeinated drink that's neither tea nor coffee, yerba mate provides a distinctive third option. The stimulating character is part of why it is so culturally important in South America; office workers, students and shift workers all use yerba mate to stay awake across long working sessions. See the ultimate caffeine guide.

Health considerations

Yerba mate has some specific health considerations:

- **Antioxidant content:** naturally rich in polyphenols, like many plant infusions
- **Cancer concerns (specific to traditional preparation)** some studies have suggested associations between heavy traditional very hot yerba mate consumption and esophageal cancer; the mechanism appears related to the high temperature damage to esophageal tissue rather than the yerba mate itself. Drinking yerba mate at sensible temperatures (70 to 80°C as recommended) eliminates this concern
- **Pregnancy:** the caffeine and other compounds make yerba mate inappropriate during pregnancy; specifically flagged in pregnancy guidance
- **Drug interactions** may interact with caffeine related medications and some others; standard caffeine cautions apply

For most healthy adults using yerba mate at sensible temperatures and reasonable consumption levels, side effects are uncommon. The cancer concern specifically applies to traditional very hot consumption; modern moderate temperature drinking eliminates this concern.

What we stock

Browse the herbal tea range. Yerba mate availability in mainstream British retail varies; specialty South American importers and some major brands offer yerba mate products.

For comparisons across the wider tea landscape, see also: Pukka, Yogi, Twinings.

Why yerba mate deserves a slot

Yerba mate is the South American caffeinated drink that's worth knowing about as an alternative to tea and coffee. The combination of distinctive flavour, strong stimulant effects, deep cultural heritage and a broad polyphenol load makes it one of the more interesting options beyond tea and coffee for drinkers seeking variety in caffeinated drinks.

For Western drinkers approaching yerba mate, the bitter character requires acclimatisation; most drinkers need 5 to 10 cups to develop appreciation. The traditional gourd and bombilla method provides cultural context but isn't necessary; Western brewing produces good cups at lower complexity.

For drinkers wanting an alternative to coffee that delivers similar energy with different character, yerba mate is a meaningful option. The stimulant profile (caffeine plus theobromine, no L theanine) sits between tea and coffee, with a distinctive lift that matches neither exactly. For sustained working sessions where coffee causes anxiety but tea isn't strong enough, yerba mate provides a useful middle ground.

The summer tereré tradition is really refreshing and worth trying; iced yerba mate with lemon and mint makes one of the more distinctive summer drinks available, with a strong kick that suits hot weather activity.

Frequently asked questions

Is yerba mate the same as tea? No; tea comes from *Camellia sinensis*, yerba mate comes from *Ilex paraguariensis* (a South American holly). Functionally similar (caffeinated brewed leaves) but botanically unrelated. The cup, the routine and the caffeine profile feel close enough to tea that yerba mate sits comfortably alongside green and black tea in most cupboards.

How much caffeine is in yerba mate? 40 to 80mg per cup depending on preparation; broadly comparable to a strong tea or a moderate cup of coffee. Combined with theobromine (the chocolate stimulant), the total stimulant effect is sustained over 4 to 6 hours. See the caffeine across teas.

Why does yerba mate taste so bitter? The combination of caffeine, theobromine, polyphenols, and the specific yerba mate compounds produces an intensely bitter, vegetal cup. Aging mellows it; cooler brewing water reduces it; lemon, mint, or honey moderate it. Most Western drinkers need 5 to 10 cups to develop the taste.

Does yerba mate have L theanine? No; that smoothing of focus is specific to *Camellia sinensis*. Yerba mate's stimulant character is more direct than tea's, sitting between tea and coffee in strength. Drinkers who get anxiety from coffee but find tea too gentle often land on yerba mate as the middle ground.

Is yerba mate safe in pregnancy? Generally not recommended; the caffeine content alone exceeds typical pregnancy guidance for daily intake, and yerba mate is specifically flagged in pregnancy advice. Switch to rooibos or other caffeine free options during pregnancy.

Is the cancer risk real? The cancer concern is specifically tied to traditional very hot drinking (drinking water at 90 to 100°C through a metal straw causes thermal damage to the esophagus, which over decades raises cancer risk). Drinking at the recommended 70 to 80°C eliminates this concern. The yerba mate itself

is not the carcinogen; the temperature is.

Can I drink yerba mate cold? Yes; tereré (cold yerba mate, popular in Paraguay) is one of the most refreshing summer drinks. Use ice cold water, add lemon and mint, drink through the bombilla or strain into a glass. Excellent in hot weather. See the cold brew guide.

What food pairs with yerba mate? South American empanadas, alfajores, dulce de leche desserts, grilled meats and strong cheeses all work; the bitter character holds up to hearty foods better than gentle teas would. Avoid pairing with delicate fish or fresh fruit.

Can I add milk to yerba mate? Some traditions do (mate cocido is sometimes served with milk in Argentina), but the typical preparation is neat or with lemon and herbs. Milk dampens the kick.

Buying yerba mate in the UK

Yerba mate availability in British supermarkets is limited; specialty South American importers, large independent tea retailers, and some health food shops carry the major Argentine and Uruguayan brands. The teas.co.uk herbal tea range sits within the wider teas.co.uk shop; above £35 UK delivery is free, and each card's per cup figure lets you compare mate pack sizes at a glance. For wider brand context across the herbal and caffeinated drink sections see Pukka, Yogi, about Twinings, Clipper, and Dragonfly.

For the wider context see the herbal tea overview, the green tea overview, the black tea overview, the best tea for focus guide, the best tea for energy guide, the tea vs coffee caffeine comparison, the ultimate caffeine guide, the water temperatures guide, and the cold brew tea guide.

Quick reference: yerba mate

Field	Detail
Origin	South America (Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, Uruguay); cultivated holly leaf (Ilex paraguariensis)
Caffeine	~70-85mg per 250ml cup (between black tea and a single espresso)
Active compounds	Caffeine, theobromine, theophylline, chlorogenic acid, saponins
Traditional vessel	Gourd (mate) and metal straw (bombilla), drunk in social shared sessions
UK availability	Online specialists, some health-food shops, Brazilian and Argentine grocers

What to buy now

To start, buy a quality yerba mate in the unsmoked Argentine "aire libre" style (more grass, less harsh) rather than the heavily-smoked Brazilian chimarrão style if you have not had it before. A traditional mate gourd and bombilla set runs £15 to £40 and is the authentic vessel; a simple teapot also works for the Western brewing method. For a milder daily route, try mate blends with mint or lemon, which Anglophone drinkers tend to prefer.

Reference cited

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

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