Black Tea vs Red Tea vs Rooibos: The Naming Confusion

From the teas.co.uk wiki

Black tea vs red tea vs rooibos, in summary: Black, red and rooibos untangled: Chinese "red tea" is Western black tea, but rooibos "red tea" is a caffeine free herbal. How to read the label.

Few corners of tea cause more confusion than the words "black tea", "red tea" and "rooibos", because the same words mean different things in different countries and one of them is not tea at all. This page untangles the three cleanly so a label never trips you up again.

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

Why the confusion exists

The trouble is that the colour words were coined independently in different cultures and then collided in English. What the West calls "black tea" the Chinese call "red tea" (hong cha), after the colour of the liquor rather than the leaf. Meanwhile, in South Africa and increasingly worldwide, "red tea" is used as a marketing name for rooibos, which is a completely different plant. Three names, two of them overlapping, one of them attached to something that is not tea in the botanical sense at all. Once you see how each name was arrived at, the muddle resolves.

Black tea (Western) = red tea (Chinese)

These two are the same thing. Western "black tea" is fully oxidised *Camellia sinensis*, named for the dark colour of the dry leaf. Chinese "hong cha", literally red tea, is the identical category, named instead for the reddish amber colour of the brewed liquor. An Assam, a Ceylon or a Chinese Keemun is "black tea" on a British shelf and "red tea" in a Chinese one, with no difference in the cup. If a Chinese seller offers you "red tea", they mean what you would call black; the same logic the black tea by origin guide applies throughout.

Rooibos, the "red tea" that is not tea

Rooibos is the odd one out and the source of most supermarket confusion. It is made from *Aspalathus linearis*, a South African shrub, not the tea plant, so it is a herbal infusion (a tisane), naturally caffeine free, with a sweet, woody, slightly nutty character. It is widely marketed as "red tea" or "redbush" because of its red brown brew, which is exactly why people assume it belongs in the same family as black tea. It does not, and that distinction matters for caffeine, brewing and what you are actually drinking, as the dedicated

rooibos vs redbush page explains in full.

Name	What it really is	Plant	Caffeine
Black tea (West)	Fully oxidised tea	*Camellia sinensis*	Yes
Red tea (China, hong cha)	The same as Western black tea	*Camellia sinensis*	Yes
Red tea / redbush (rooibos)	Herbal infusion, not tea	*Aspalathus linearis*	None

Why it matters in practice

The naming is not pedantry; it changes what you get. If you want a caffeine free evening drink and buy a "red tea" that turns out to be Chinese black tea, you have bought a caffeinated cup. If you want a brisk morning black and pick up a "red tea" that is rooibos, you have bought a caffeine free herbal that behaves nothing like black tea with milk. The single reliable habit is to ignore the colour word and read the ingredient: *Camellia sinensis* means real tea with caffeine; rooibos or *Aspalathus* means a caffeine free infusion.

How each one brews

They also want different treatment. Black tea, by either name, takes fully boiling water and three to four minutes and stands up to milk. Rooibos is far more forgiving: boiling water, a long steep, essentially impossible to over brew or make bitter, and pleasant with or without milk. Treating rooibos like delicate tea wastes its robustness, and treating a fine black like rooibos by stewing it makes it harsh, so knowing which "red" you hold tells you how to brew it.

The South Africa and honeybush footnote

Two extra names round out the picture. "Redbush" is simply the English translation of rooibos and the two are interchangeable. Honeybush is a close South African relative of rooibos, similar in being a caffeine free, naturally sweet infusion, sometimes also swept up under "red tea" marketing. None of these are *Camellia sinensis*; they are a small family of South African tisanes that share rooibos's caffeine free, forgiving character.

A note on "green rooibos"

One more wrinkle: rooibos itself comes in two forms. Standard rooibos is oxidised, which gives it the familiar red brown colour and sweet, woody flavour. "Green rooibos" is the unoxidised version, lighter in colour and grassier in taste, a little like the difference between black and green tea in appearance only, since both are still the same caffeine free South African shrub and neither is true tea. It is worth knowing simply so a pale "green rooibos" is not mistaken for a green tea; it behaves like rooibos, not like a green.

The marketing reason "red tea" persists

If the word causes so much confusion, why does it survive? Largely because “red tea” sells rooibos better than “South African bush infusion”: it borrows the familiarity and habit of tea for a product that is not tea, the same soft marketing instinct the tea myths page flags elsewhere. Recognising that the colour word is doing commercial work, not botanical work, is the quickest way to stop being misled by it, and it is why this site

consistently steers you to the ingredient line rather than the front of pack name.

What to actually buy

Decide by caffeine and use, not colour. For a caffeinated black, by either the Western or Chinese name, choose a real Assam, Ceylon or other origin black and brew it hot and strong. For a caffeine free everyday cup that happens to brew red, choose rooibos or redbush and enjoy how forgiving it is. The two answer completely different needs, and the only mistake is letting the shared "red" word make you buy the wrong one.

A quick decision rule

If you remember nothing else: the word "black" reliably means real caffeinated tea; the word "red" means either real caffeinated tea (China) or caffeine free rooibos (South Africa), so it tells you nothing on its own and must be checked against the ingredients. That single rule, applied at the shelf, defeats essentially all of the confusion this page describes and stops you carrying home a caffeinated cup when you wanted none, or a herbal one when you wanted a brisk black with milk.

The takeaway in one line

Black tea and Chinese red tea are one thing under two colour names; rooibos "red tea" is a different, caffeine free plant entirely. Buy by caffeine and use, read the ingredient line for *Camellia sinensis* versus rooibos, and the centuries old colour word muddle simply stops costing you a wrong cup, the same eyes open habit the rest of this origins cluster builds and the rooibos vs redbush page completes.

Common questions

Is red tea the same as black tea? If it means Chinese hong cha, yes, identical to Western black tea. If it means rooibos, no, that is a caffeine free herbal.

Is rooibos really tea? No. It is a herbal infusion from a South African shrub, not the tea plant, and contains no caffeine.

Why do the Chinese call black tea red? They name it for the reddish liquor in the cup; the West names the same tea for the dark dry leaf.

How do I avoid buying the wrong one? Ignore the colour word and read the ingredients line for *Camellia sinensis* versus rooibos.

If you want the real thing rather than a confusing label, it is worth browsing our black teas and single origin Assam for the caffeinated "red/black", and our rooibos and redbush for the caffeine free "red", ideally as loose leaf so the leaf, not the marketing, decides the cup.

Related on the wiki: Teapigs Spiced Winter Red: The Plain Festive Rooibos.

Adjacent teas that pair with this article: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. There is plenty more in the tea shop, and orders above £35 go out with free UK postage.

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teas · Names get muddled, but cost per cup never does. Loose leaf tends to come out cheapest, though a supermarket bag will sometimes beat it.

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