Green vs Red Tea: The Naming, Explained

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Green and red tea naming, in summary:** Western black tea is Chinese red tea, named for the liquor not the leaf; Chinese black means dark fermented. The naming decoded by the oxidation spectrum.

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

"Green" and "red" are how most of the tea growing world categorises tea by oxidation level. Western "black tea" is China's "red tea" (hóngchá). Western "white tea" is sometimes considered an even less oxidised variant of green. The naming difference reflects which characteristic, leaf colour or brewed cup colour, gets emphasised. This is the working guide to the cross cultural naming.

The Western naming

Western tea names emphasise the appearance of the dried leaf:

- **White tea.** Pale, almost silvery dried leaves with white down (trichomes).
- **Green tea.** Green dried leaves (because the chlorophyll is preserved by stopping oxidation).
- **Oolong.** Partial oxidation; leaves range from green brown to dark.
- **Black tea.** Fully oxidised; leaves are dark brown to black.
- **Pu erh.** Post fermented; leaves can be very dark.

The Chinese naming

Chinese tea taxonomy emphasises the colour of the brewed liquor (with one specific exception):

- **White tea (?? báichá).** Same as Western. Pale liquor, pale leaves.
- **Green tea (?? l?chá).** Same as Western. Green yellow liquor, green leaves.
- **Yellow tea (?? huángchá).** A distinct Chinese category, slightly oxidised, yellow liquor. Rare.
- **Oolong (?? q?ngchá / ?? w?lóng).** "Blue green tea", partial oxidation.
- **Red tea (?? hóngchá).** WESTERN "BLACK TEA." The cup is red amber; the Chinese name reflects this.

- **Black tea (?? h?ichá).** Western "post fermented tea", pu erh and similar. Different category from Western "black tea."

Why this is worth getting right

Three practical reasons:

1. Reading Chinese tea menus

If you're in a Chinese tea shop or reading Chinese tea import labels, "red tea" (hóngchá) is what you'd order in the UK as black tea. "Black tea" (h?ichá) is something else entirely (pu erh).

2. Translating tea tradition recipes

Asian tea recipes calling for "red tea" usually mean Western style black tea. Asian tea recipes calling for "black tea" almost always mean pu erh.

3. Understanding "rooibos = red tea" claims

Some marketing labels rooibos as "red tea." Strictly speaking, this is incorrect:

- "Red tea" in Chinese tea taxonomy = Western black tea (Camellia sinensis, oxidised).
- Rooibos = Aspalathus linearis, NOT Camellia sinensis. Not technically "tea" at all.
- The "red bush" name in English refers to the colour of the dried rooibos plant material.

Calling rooibos "red tea" creates confusion. Rooibos is a herbal infusion, not a tea, and the Chinese "red tea" designation belongs to oxidised Camellia sinensis. Detailed naming explainer here.

The oxidation spectrum

Tea is fundamentally classified by how much oxidation the leaves have undergone:

- **0% oxidation:** White tea, green tea
- **10-30%:** Light oolong
- **30-70%:** Medium oolong
- **60-85%:** Dark oolong
- **80-100%:** Black tea (Western) / red tea (Chinese)
- **Post fermented:** Black tea (Chinese, h?ichá) / pu erh, DIFFERENT process from oxidation

The exception: yellow tea

Yellow tea (?? huángchá) is a specifically Chinese category that doesn't have a clean Western equivalent. It's like green tea but with an extra "yellowing" step, the leaves are wrapped briefly to allow controlled oxidation. The result is a tea that's sweeter and less astringent than green, but still light. Classic example: Junshan Yinzhen ("Silver Needle"). Rare even in China; very specialist in the West.

Working translation guide

Western name	Chinese name	What it actually is
White tea	?? báichá	Minimally processed Camellia sinensis
Green tea	?? l?chá	Unoxidised Camellia sinensis
Yellow tea (rare)	?? huángchá	Slightly post fermented green tea
Oolong	??/??	Partially oxidised Camellia sinensis
Black tea	?? hóngchá ("red tea")	Fully oxidised Camellia sinensis
Pu erh	?? h?ichá ("black tea")	Post fermented Camellia sinensis
Rooibos (NOT tea)	???? (transliterated)	Aspalathus linearis, herbal infusion

Why "red tea" works in Chinese

The Chinese system is internally consistent, all named after the brewed liquor colour. A pot of brewed Western black tea is actually red amber, not black. The Chinese name describes what's in the cup; the Western name describes what's in the bag.

The Western "black tea" name reflects the dried leaf appearance, which makes more sense in a market where consumers often buy tea bags or small loose leaf quantities and don't see the brewed cup as the primary identifier.

FAQ

Is "red tea" the same as "black tea"? Usually yes, Chinese "red tea" (hóngchá) refers to Western black tea. The names emphasise different characteristics (cup colour vs leaf colour) of the same tea.

Is rooibos red tea? Strictly no, rooibos is a different plant entirely, not Camellia sinensis. Calling it "red tea" creates confusion with the Chinese designation for black tea.

What is Chinese "black tea" (h?ichá)? Post fermented teas like pu erh, different processing from Western black tea.

Should I worry about the naming? Only when reading Asian tea menus, recipes, or import labels. In everyday UK tea shopping, "black tea" means what you expect.

Why two systems? Western names emphasise dried leaf appearance; Chinese names emphasise brewed cup appearance. Both are internally consistent.

Curator's note: the green/red naming difference is one of those small linguistic puzzles that becomes important the moment you cross into Chinese tea culture. "Red tea" in a Chinese restaurant menu is not the same as "red tea" on a British supermarket shelf, knowing the difference saves embarrassment. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Explore across the green tea range, the black tea range, or the full tea shop.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Match the tea to the moment. A 6am red tea and a 4pm green tea are simply different cups.

Tea taxonomy reading

- green tea explained
- black tea explained
- Oolong tea
- Pu-erh tea

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