Herbal Tea vs Real Tea: Is It Actually Tea?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Herbal vs real tea, in summary:** Only Camellia sinensis is really tea; herbal "teas" are tisanes that borrow the word. Why the distinction matters and the chemistry behind both.

Walk down any "tea" aisle and most of what is shelved as tea is not, botanically, tea at all. That is not a criticism, but it is a distinction worth understanding, because it decides caffeine, brewing and what you are actually drinking.

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

The strict definition

"Real" tea, in the precise sense, means an infusion of *Camellia sinensis*, the tea plant. Black, green, white, oolong, yellow and pu erh are all that one species at different points of processing, the spectrum the what counts as tea and green vs black pages map. Everything else brewed in a cup, peppermint, chamomile, rooibos, fruit blends, ginger, is not tea but a tisane: a herbal or fruit infusion that borrows the word "tea" to mean "brewed in hot water", not "from the tea plant".

Why the distinction actually matters

Three practical reasons, not pedantry. Caffeine: real tea contains it, almost all true herbal infusions contain none, so the difference decides whether a drink is suitable late at night. Brewing: real tea, especially green, is sensitive to temperature and time, while most herbal infusions are hardy and near impossible to over brew. And cautions: a few herbal infusions carry specific cautions of their own that real tea does not, which is exactly why pages like herbal tea exist. The shared word hides differences that change how you should treat the cup.

	Real tea	Herbal infusion (tisane)
Plant	*Camellia sinensis*	Anything else (mint, chamomile, rooibos, fruit)
Caffeine	Yes	Almost always none
Brewing	Often temperature sensitive	Usually sturdy and forgiving
Type examples	Black, green, white, oolong	Peppermint, chamomile, rooibos, ginger
"Tea" in the name means	From the tea plant	Brewed like tea

The grey areas

A few cases blur the line and cause most of the confusion. Flavoured real tea (a vanilla black, a jasmine green) is still real tea with caffeine, just scented. A blend of real tea with herbs or fruit is part tea and partly not, and does contain some caffeine. Rooibos, widely sold as "red tea", is a tisane with no caffeine despite the name, the muddle the rooibos vs redbush page resolves. And decaffeinated tea is real tea with most caffeine removed, not a herbal, the line the decaf vs caffeine free page draws. In every case the ingredient list, not the word "tea", tells the truth.

Is herbal "tea" inferior?

No, and that is worth stating clearly. A tisane is not a failed tea; it is a different category of drink with its own virtues: caffeine free, often comforting or refreshing, endlessly varied, and excellent iced. The only mistake is expecting a herbal infusion to behave like real tea (it will not have tea’s body or take milk like a black) or assuming, because it is called tea, that it is automatically caffeine free of cautions. Judged as what it is, herbal infusion is a good thing in its own right, just not the same thing.

Caffeine: the headline practical point

For most people this is why the distinction matters at all. If you want a drink with no caffeine for the evening or for someone avoiding it, a proper herbal or fruit infusion delivers exactly that; a real tea, even a light green, does not, and decaf only reduces rather than removes it. If you want the lift, you need real tea. Reading whether the cup is *Camellia sinensis* or a botanical is the single fastest way to predict how it will affect you, the same logic the caffeine comparison applies.

How to brew each

Real tea is type specific: boiling water and a firm steep for black, cooler water and a short steep for green and white. Most herbal and fruit infusions are the opposite of fussy, fully boiling water and a long steep, often five minutes or more, because the dried botanicals need heat and time and are very hard to make bitter. Treating a sturdy fruit infusion like a delicate green under brews it to thin water; treating a fine green like a fruit infusion scalds it. Knowing which you hold tells you how to treat it.

The common herbal infusions, briefly

It helps to know the main tisanes by behaviour. Peppermint and spearmint are bright and digestive feeling; chamomile is soft and floral; rooibos is sweet, woody and the one most often mis sold as "red tea", the muddle the rooibos vs redbush page resolves; fruit infusions are tart and usually hibiscus led. None contains caffeine, all are forgiving to brew, and a few (such as liquorice containing blends) carry real cautions that the dedicated herbal tea reference page flags. The category is broad, which is its appeal, but it is not interchangeable with real tea.

Why the word "tea" stuck

"Tea" attached to these infusions simply because they are prepared the same way, dried plant matter steeped in hot water, and "tea" had become the everyday English word for that act. It is harmless usage, but it quietly causes the assumptions this page exists to correct: that anything called tea is caffeine free, or that

it brews like the real thing. The fix is not to police the word but to read the ingredient, which is the single reliable signal of what you are drinking, the habit this whole cluster trains.

When each is the right choice

Real tea is the answer when you want a lift, body, or a milky cup; a herbal infusion is the answer when you want caffeine free, an evening drink, a gentle or refreshing character, or simply variety. Many households sensibly keep both, real tea for the day and tisanes for the evening, which mirrors the decaf vs caffeine free logic: choose by what you want the drink to do, not by the shared name on the shelf.

What to buy

For the caffeinated cup, browse our real black and green teas; for properly caffeine free drinks, our herbal infusions and rooibos, reading the ingredient line rather than trusting the word "tea" on the front.

The verdict

Strictly, only *Camellia sinensis* is tea and the rest are tisanes wearing a borrowed word, but the useful conclusion is not pedantic, it is practical. The label "tea" tells you how the drink is made, not what is in it or how it will affect you, so the only reliable habit is to read the ingredient line: real tea means caffeine and tea like body; a herbal or fruit infusion means caffeine free, forgiving brewing and, occasionally, a specific caution worth checking. Neither is superior; they are different categories answering different needs, and a sensible cupboard holds both, real tea for the lift and the milky cup, tisanes for the evening and variety. Get the distinction right and you stop being surprised by a caffeinated "tea" at bedtime or a "red tea" that turns out to be a herb, which is the whole, modest point.

Common questions

Is herbal tea actually tea? Not botanically. Only *Camellia sinensis* is tea; herbal "teas" are tisanes that borrow the word.

Is herbal tea caffeine free? Almost always yes, unlike real tea. Always check, since some blends mix in real tea.

Is rooibos a tea? No, it is a caffeine free South African herbal infusion, marketed as "red tea" but not from the tea plant.

Is herbal worse than real tea? No, just different: caffeine free, forgiving and varied, with its own merits rather than a substitute.

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