

Review

Plants known as *té* in Spain: An ethno-pharmaco-botanical review[☆]Manuel Pardo de Santayana^{*}, Emilio Blanco, Ramón Morales

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Abstract

Although the word *té* (tea) in Spanish is derived from the Chinese *tscha* and refers to the oriental plant *Camellia sinensis*, it is popularly used throughout Spain to refer to at least 70 different plant species. These are usually collected in the countryside, boiled dry or fresh, and drunk after meals. The drinking of *té* is a social habit that encourages conversation in a relaxed atmosphere. *Tés* are also commonly used as *digestifs* and stomachics, and in some cases as laxatives, antidiarrhoeics, and to reduce the blood pressure. They are not used as stimulants. It appears that the habit of drinking *Camellia sinensis* afforded the cognitive context for drinking other infusions with no specific medicinal purpose. Some *té* species are very common in Spain (and their use is quite extended), others are endemic, and others still are allochthonous that now live in the wild. The majority of these species belong to the families Asteraceae and Lamiaceae. The most important and widely distributed are *Jasonia glutinosa*, *Sideritis hyssopifolia*, *Lithospermum officinale*, *Chenopodium ambrosioides* and *Bidens aurea*. Other remarkable but more locally used *tés* include *Cruciata glabra* (only in the Pyrenees), *Inula salicina* and *Mentha arvensis* (in the Central Mountain Range of Madrid), and *Potentilla caulescens* (in Tarragona).

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[☆]The aim of this paper is to highlight the relevance of plants called *té*. They include some of the most popular medicinal Spanish species, many of them still very commonly gathered and even marketed, mainly used as *digestifs*. Many of these species have a very high informant consensus and are also consumed as social beverages. Many pharmacological studies have indicated that most of them have digestive properties.

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1. Introduction

The Spanish word *té*, like tea in English, *Tee* in German, *tè* in Italian and *thé* in French, comes from the Chinese *tscha* (pronounced “tai”, “cá” or “chai”). The term eventually entered into use in Japanese, Hindi, Turkish, Russian and Portuguese. Indeed, the names given to *Camellia sinensis* (L.) Kuntze (Theaceae) in most languages stem from the original Chinese.

It seems that tea was introduced into Europe by the Dutch East India Company at the beginning of the seventeenth century, under the name *thee*. In 1666, it was taken to England by Arlington and Ossory (Kazuko, 1944). The Portuguese introduced it into their country where it became known as *cha*—more similar to the Chinese word. The remaining European languages, including Spanish, usually incorporated the word as a derivative of *thee*. The species' first scientific name was *Thea sinensis* L.

In English and Latin American Spanish, the term ‘tea’ can mean an infusion prepared with *Camellia sinensis* leaves and boiling water, or any other infusion prepared with herbs. The popular meaning of *té* in Spain is not so wide: it is not usually used as a synonym of infusion, although it is applied to a great number of herbs used to make *digestifs* and stomachics, as well as regular tea made with *Camellia sinensis*. *Té* is also used to refer to certain plants with no digestive properties at all, and to the infusions prepared with them. As an example of the folk meaning of the term *té*, a shepherd from Broto (Huesca) is recorded as identifying *Armeria alpina* as *té*, the use of the term being linked to this species' preparation as an infusion for its digestion-aiding properties (Villar et al., 1987).

The consumption of *Camellia sinensis* is not tremendously popular in Spain, especially in rural areas. In fact, in many Spanish rural regions people use expressions such as “bag tea” to refer to *Camellia sinensis*; to them, *té* is a term best applied to other species such as *Jasonia glutinosa* or *Sideritis hyssopifolia*. Font Quer (1962) relates an interesting story that occurred in 1934 in San Carlos de la Rápita (Catalonia), when he, Braun-Blanquet and a number of other botanists asked for tea at breakfast; and were served an infusion of *Jasonia glutinosa*. He asked the innkeeper what kind of tea this was; the reply he received was: “Tea, the best tea, rock tea!”.

Numerous ethnopharmacological surveys record that gastrointestinal disorders are the main concern of many popular

pharmacopoeias around the world (see Ankli et al., 1999; Bonet, 2001; Pardo de Santayana, 2003; Scarpa, 2004). Most of the plants used to treat gastrointestinal problems help the process of digestion, and many have known pharmacological properties that make this possible: their bitter-tasting ingredients stimulate the flow of saliva and the secretion of gastric juices; other substances act as anti-inflammatory agents or analgesics at the gastric mucosa; antacids (e.g., mucilage) help neutralize stomach acidity either mechanically or chemically; certain compounds with antispasmodic activity may help avoid excessive intestinal peristalsis while others may produce the opposite effect, helping the food bolus move along by stimulating rhythmical contractions of the gut wall; certain antiseptic compounds help prevent unwanted fermentations that lead to foul smelling faeces; choleric and cholagogic ingredients stimulate both the production and secretion of bile (which provides the classic colour to faeces and encourages stool firmness); and finally, carminative agents help to eliminate air from the digestive tract.

About 130 plant species have been traditionally gathered in Spain for preparing digestive infusions (J. Tardío personal communication), about half of which are known as *té*. Another important group of digestive herbal teas goes by the name of *manzanilla* (camomile), which in its strictest sense refers only to *Matricaria recutita* L. and *Chamaemelum nobile* (L.) All. (Asteraceae), but popularly covers more than 20 species. It is not easy to say why people should consider some plants with digestive properties to be described under the generic term *manzanilla* while others are classed as *té*. However, *tés* are usually beverages drunk for their pleasant flavour quite apart from their facilitating digestion. *Manzanillas*, on the other hand, which are usually made from ligulate *Anthemideae* or other *Asteraceae*, are usually taken for their cholagogic and choleric properties. Another large group is formed by the *poleos* or *mentas* (more than 20 species). Strictly speaking the term refers to species of the genus *Mentha*, but it is also applied to many other members of the Lamiaceae family that have a minty smell, such as *Calamintha nepeta* or *Lycopus europaeus*.

This paper compiles the available information on the common names and uses of all plants in Spain that fall under the popular term *té*; common properties of these species were also sought. Some of the most popular Spanish medicinal plants are included among the *tés* (e.g., *Jasonia glutinosa*,

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