Chai Spices: The Six Spice Core

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Chai spices, in summary:** Chai spices follow a six-spice core; cardamom, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, black pepper, plus optional fennel; proportions matter more.

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

Six spices make a chai. Each does a specific job. Get the proportions right and the cup sings; get them wrong and you've got a mug of warm milk that vaguely tastes of cinnamon. This is the spice merchant's guide to every chai ingredient, what each one brings, what to look for at the spice rack, and how the proportions interact.

The six essential chai spices

1. Cardamom (the queen of spices)

What it does: The defining aromatic of chai. Sweet, floral, slightly camphoraceous, with a cooling warming sensation. Cardamom IS chai for many drinkers, when people say a cup tastes "really chai like," they usually mean cardamom forward.

What to buy: Whole green cardamom pods. Each pod contains 5-10 small black brown seeds. Crush the pod lightly before adding (the husk releases its own aromatics, the seeds release the deeper sweetness). Avoid pre ground cardamom, it loses aromatic intensity within weeks. Black cardamom is a different spice, smoky, larger, used in savoury cooking, not the chai variety.

Origin: Native to the Western Ghats of India, primarily grown in Kerala and Karnataka. Guatemala is the world's largest exporter, but Indian grown is generally considered superior.

Quantity: 4-5 cardamom pods per 2 cups of chai. The most important spice to use generously.

2. Cinnamon (the warmth)

What it does: Provides natural sweetness and warming body. Rounds out the spice profile.

Ceylon vs Cassia (CRUCIAL):

- **Ceylon cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*), "true cinnamon".** Lighter colour, soft layered bark, sweet and refined flavour. Lower coumarin content (safer for daily consumption). The cinnamon used in traditional Indian chai. Slightly more expensive.

- **Cassia cinnamon (*Cinnamomum cassia*), "Chinese cinnamon".** Darker, harder bark, bolder flavour. The standard supermarket cinnamon in the UK. Higher coumarin content (avoid heavy daily intake). Works in chai but produces a slightly sharper cup.

Quantity: A small piece of stick (about 2cm) per 2 cups. Use whole stick, snap before adding. Avoid ground cinnamon, it makes the cup gritty.

3. Ginger (the heat)

What it does: Warming heat, brightness, a slightly peppery edge. Cuts through milk fat. Settles digestion.

What to buy: Fresh ginger root. Look for plump, smooth skinned pieces; avoid wrinkled or soft. Slice thin (5mm or less) so the gingerols extract quickly. Powdered ginger is acceptable in a pinch but produces a flatter, slightly dusty cup.

Origin: Native to South Asia, now grown across tropical regions. Indian and Thai ginger are typically the freshest in UK supermarkets.

Quantity: 5-10mm of fresh root per 2 cups. Adjust upward in winter or for sore throat cups.

4. Cloves (the depth)

What it does: Intense, slightly numbing, with a complex sweet savoury character. Used sparingly, cloves dominate fast.

What to buy: Whole dried cloves. They look like tiny dark nails, the unopened flower buds of *Syzygium aromaticum*. The active compound, eugenol, is what makes cloves famously analgesic (the dental numbing effect).

Origin: Indonesia (Maluku Islands historically); also Madagascar and Tanzania.

Quantity: 4-5 whole cloves per 2 cups. More than 6 and the cup turns numbing and harsh fast.

5. Black pepper (the surprise)

What it does: Most home cooks skip it. Chai wallahs don't. Black pepper adds a barely perceptible warmth and rounds out the spice profile. The piperine also enhances absorption of other phytochemicals (cardamom oils, ginger gingerols). Don't expect heat, it's background.

What to buy: Whole black peppercorns. Crack with the flat of a knife or a single grind in a pepper mill before adding. Pre ground pepper has lost most of its aromatic compounds.

Origin: Native to the Malabar coast of India. Vietnam is now the world's largest exporter.

Quantity: 4-5 cracked peppercorns per 2 cups. Trust the recipe, you won't taste them as "pepper", you'll just notice when they're missing.

6. Star anise (optional but excellent)

What it does: Liquorice leaning sweetness, depth. Not in every traditional chai but increasingly common in Western chai blends.

What to buy: Whole dried star anise pods. Distinctive eight pointed shape. Use one full star or a single point depending on intensity desired.

Origin: Native to southern China and northern Vietnam.

Quantity: 1 point or ¼ of a whole star per 2 cups. Very assertive, use sparingly.

Optional supporting spices

- **Fennel seeds.** Sweet liquorice anise notes. ¼ tsp per pot. South Indian style.
- **Nutmeg.** Light dusting. Adds a creamy warm dimension. Use sparingly.
- **Mace.** The outer covering of nutmeg. Subtler, more aromatic than nutmeg itself.
- **Bay leaf.** One small leaf for additional aromatic depth. Common in Punjabi chai.
- **Saffron.** A few threads turn chai into Kashmiri influenced "kahwa style" tea. Pricey but transformative.
- **Vanilla.** Western addition. Half a vanilla pod scraped into the milk gives a dessert leaning cup.

The proportions matter more than the spices

Most failed home chai is failed proportions. The standard balance for 2 cups:

- Cardamom: 5 pods (the dominant note)
- Cinnamon: 2cm stick
- Ginger: 5mm fresh slice
- Cloves: 4-5 whole
- Black pepper: 4-5 cracked
- Star anise: 1 point (optional)

Adjust upward on cardamom for floral chai, upward on ginger for warming chai, upward on cloves for a sharper, clove led chai, upward on cinnamon for a sweeter chai. Always adjust one spice at a time, change three and you'll never figure out what worked.

Where to buy

- **UK supermarkets.** Convenient, expensive (£3-5 per spice).
- **Indian and South Asian groceries.** Far better value. Whole cardamom for £2-3 instead of £6. Fresher stock turnover.
- **Online specialists.** Spice & Herb Bazaar, Steenbergs, Seasoned Pioneers. High quality, mid range pricing.
- **Indian markets in major UK cities.** Tooting (London), Sparkhill (Birmingham), Manningham (Bradford). Chai tier whole spices for a fraction of supermarket prices.

Storage

Whole spices airtight, dark, cool. Cardamom and cloves fade fastest (replace at 6 months for peak flavour). Cinnamon and pepper hold longer (12+ months). Once ground, all spices fade within weeks regardless of storage, buy ground only what you'll use within a month.

FAQ

What spice is most important in chai? Cardamom. If you skip one, never skip cardamom.

Ceylon or Cassia cinnamon for chai? Ceylon is the traditional Indian choice and produces a softer, sweeter cup. Cassia works at a pinch.

Can I use ground spices instead of whole? Yes, but the cup will be flatter. Use ¼ tsp of each ground spice per cup.

How long do whole chai spices keep? 6-12 months airtight, dark, and cool. Replace when aroma fades.

Where to buy chai spices in the UK? Indian groceries are best value. Online specialists like Steenbergs for premium quality.

Curator's note: a £15 trip to a Tooting Indian grocer gives you enough whole chai spice to last six months and outperform every premium chai bag on the market. The spices ARE the chai, get the spices right and everything else falls into place. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

What you need to know: chai spices

Spice	The role
Cardamom	Top-note floral aromatic; the signature
Ginger	Warming pungent base; essential
Cinnamon	Sweet woody warmth; supporting layer
Cloves	Dark spice depth; measured doses
Black pepper	Sharpness and warmth; closing punch
Fennel (optional)	Sweet aromatic; sometimes added
Star anise (optional)	Licorice-anise note; Chinese-influenced
Nutmeg (optional)	Indian-restaurant chai signature; warmth

More on chai

- Masala chai
- Masala chai recipe
- How to make masala chai
- Chai tea

Reference noted

- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health

Easy picks alongside this one: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. More in the tea shop; chai spice baskets over £35 come with free UK delivery.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Homemade chai costs pennies per cup, which is the price to watch. Loose tea and whole spices usually win, though chai bags sometimes keep up.

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