Boba Pearls and Tapioca Explained

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Boba pearls and tapioca, in summary:** What tapioca pearls are, how to cook them so they come out right, the syrup soak, and every reason a batch goes wrong, with fixes.

The pearls are the part of bubble tea everyone asks about and the part most home attempts get wrong. They are not a mystery once you know what they are and how they behave. This page is the full explainer; the drink they go into is covered in how to make bubble tea at home and the overview in our boba and bubble tea guide.

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

What boba pearls actually are

Classic boba pearls are made from tapioca, a starch extracted from the cassava root. Tapioca starch is mixed into a dough, rolled and cut into small balls, and dried. Cooked, they swell and turn translucent and chewy with the distinctive springy bite the Taiwanese call QQ. They are essentially flavourless on their own, which is why they are soaked in sweet syrup after cooking, the pearl carries sweetness and texture, the tea carries flavour.

Tapioca versus the alternatives

Traditional black tapioca pearls get their colour from added brown sugar or caramel, not from any flavour of their own. There are variants: clear or white tapioca, smaller pearls, and entirely different toppings such as popping boba (fruit-juice-filled spheres with a thin skin that burst), grass jelly, aloe, and fruit jelly. Popping boba is not tapioca at all and behaves completely differently, it is a sphere of liquid, not a chewy starch ball. Knowing which topping you actually want changes everything about preparation, and the full range of flavour toppings is in bubble tea flavours explained.

How to cook them so they are perfect

The method matters more than the brand. Use a large volume of vigorously boiling water, far more than seems necessary, so the pearls move freely and do not clump or stick. Add the dried pearls to already-boiling water, stir gently to separate, boil for the time on the packet as a guide, then turn off the heat and let them rest covered for a similar length of time so the centre finishes cooking through. They should be uniformly translucent with no white, hard core. Drain, rinse briefly, and transfer immediately into a sweet

syrup.

The syrup soak is not optional

Freshly cooked plain pearls are bland and, left dry, they harden quickly as the starch retrogrades. Resting them in a sugar or brown sugar syrup does two jobs: it sweetens them and it keeps them soft and glossy for the few hours they are good for. Brown sugar syrup also gives the popular caramel character and the tiger-stripe look, covered fully in brown sugar boba.

Why your pearls went wrong

Hard, chalky centre: undercooked, or rested too short, or refrigerated after cooking. Mushy and dissolving: overcooked, or left sitting in hot water too long. Clumped into a lump: too little water, or not stirred at the start, or sat undrained. Hardened within an hour: not kept in syrup, or refrigerated, cold is the enemy of cooked tapioca. Each fault has one cause and one fix, and the single golden rule is that cooked pearls do not refrigerate, they must be made fresh and used the same day, ideally within a few hours.

Quick-cook and instant pearls

There are five-minute and instant pearls sold for convenience. They really do save time and are fine for an everyday homemade drink, though purists find the texture slightly less springy than slow cooked traditional pearls. For a first attempt they remove the hardest variable and are a sensible place to start before graduating to traditional ones.

Portion, straw and serving

A third of a cup of cooked pearls per drink is a generous standard serving. They must be served with a wide-bore straw, a normal straw will not pass them, which is why bubble tea has its signature fat straw. Add the pearls to the glass first, then ice, then the drink, so they sit at the bottom and rise as you drink.

Are tapioca pearls vegan and gluten-free

Plain traditional tapioca pearls are made from cassava starch and are typically both vegan and gluten-free, which is part of their appeal, though the drink around them may not be (dairy milk, certain syrups). Popping boba and some flavoured jellies have different ingredients, so check if it matters to you. The calorie and sugar question is handled in is bubble tea bad for you.

Storing dried pearls

Dried, uncooked pearls keep for months in a sealed bag in a cool dry cupboard, like any dried starch. It is only the cooked pearls that are perishable within hours. So the practical pattern is to keep a bag of dried pearls in, and cook a small batch fresh whenever you make a drink, which fits the make-ahead approach in how to make bubble tea at home.

Why your pearls went wrong, in one table

Symptom	Cause	Fix

Hard, chalky centre	undercooked, rested too short, or refrigerated	cook fully, rest covered, never chill
Mushy, dissolving	overcooked or left sitting in hot water	time it, drain promptly
Clumped into a lump	too little water, not stirred at the start, left undrained	lots of water, stir in, drain
Hard within an hour	not kept in syrup, or refrigerated	rest in syrup, use same day
No tea flavour	base brewed too weak	roughly double the leaf

The bottom line on pearls

Tapioca pearls are simple once demystified: a flavourless chewy starch ball, cooked in lots of boiling water, rested, then kept in sweet syrup and used fresh the same day. Get that right and the rest of the drink, the tea base from best tea for bubble tea and the assembly from the method page, is straightforward.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · If a topping here appeals, try it a single time. One cup of bubble tea says more than twenty articles.

Tea reading

- How to make bubble tea at home
- Brown sugar boba
- Bubble tea flavours explained
- Is bubble tea bad for you

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.

