Egyptian Tea Culture

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Egyptian tea culture, in summary:** Egypt runs on shai: strong, sweet, milkless and constant, in two black styles, with tart red karkade as the caffeine-free counterpart. The picture.

Egypt runs on shai: strong, sweet, constant and socially essential. It is one of the world tea culture pages, close to Persian tea culture.

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

The Egyptian cup, at a glance

Style	What it is	The note
Koshary	Black tea steeped, Cairo and Delta style	Lighter brew, strong and very sweet
Saiidi	Black tea boiled hard, Upper Egypt style	Intense, almost bitter, heavily sugared
Karkade	Hibiscus infusion, hot or iced	Tart, deep red; the caffeine-free national drink
Sugar	Central, not optional	Part of the recipe, not an afterthought
Milk	Essentially absent	Egyptian shai is taken black and sweet

The two black styles, and the role of sugar

To read Egyptian tea fairly you take it on its own terms rather than against a British milky cup, and the place to start is a real split between north and south. In Cairo and the Delta the dominant style is Koshary, black tea steeped rather than boiled, a strong but comparatively clean cup. In Upper Egypt the Saiidi style boils the leaf hard and long into an intense, dark, almost bitter brew, drinkable because, like Koshary, it is very heavily sweetened. That is the key cultural fact: sugar in Egyptian shai is not a personal addition as it is in Britain but part of the recipe, matched to the strength of the brew, so judging Saiidi without its sugar is judging an unfinished drink, see sugar in tea. Milk is essentially absent, equally deliberate rather than an omission, and the result is strong, sweet, black tea drunk constantly through the day as the default medium of hospitality, see how customs differ.

Karkade, and reading it on its own terms

Alongside the black styles sits karkade, an infusion of dried hibiscus, tart and a deep ruby red, drunk hot in winter and iced in summer and carrying none of shai's caffeine, which is why it doubles as both an everyday refresher and the celebratory cup of weddings and feasts, see hibiscus tea. It is easy to file hibiscus as merely a caffeine-free alternative, but in Egypt it has its own status, so treating it as a lesser substitute misses its weight. Egypt is a good teacher for the general skill: almost everything about its cup contradicts a British default yet is internally coherent, the strength is the point, the sugar completes a deliberately intense extraction, the missing milk keeps the tea's own character. The traveller's rule that falls out of it is short and useful: do not import your own habits, watch what the host does and follow it, and accept the cup as offered, strong, black and sweet, or a tall red karkade. The single most common visitor error is to ask for milk or refuse the sugar, both of which quietly reject the drink as the host actually makes it; the offer itself is the message.

Want to actually buy a good one?

Try the styles for yourself with a strong base from the black tea range and a hibiscus tea for karkade, or browse the full tea shop. Whatever the tea culture, the rule is the same here: the cup and its description first, then the cost of a cup, and free UK delivery applies over £35.

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