Masala Chai

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Masala chai, in summary:** Masala chai is brewed spiced black tea with milk and sweetener, an Indian everyday tradition with no fixed recipe.

Order a "chai" almost anywhere outside the West and you will simply be handed tea, because in Hindi, Urdu, Russian, Persian, Turkish and a dozen other languages the word means nothing more than that. What people in Britain usually picture when they say chai is far more specific: **masala chai**, black tea simmered with milk, a sweetener and a mix of warming spices. It is one of the true everyday drinks of the Indian subcontinent, poured by the millions of cups at railway platforms, roadside stalls and kitchen stoves every single morning. It was never a coffee shop invention, and knowing that changes how you judge it.

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A drink with a real history

Tea itself is not ancient in India in the way many assume. Large scale cultivation was pushed by the British in Assam and the Darjeeling hills during the nineteenth century, largely for export. Domestic tea drinking only became a mass habit in the early twentieth century, encouraged hard by the tea industry, and ordinary households did what cooks everywhere do with a new ingredient: they made it their own. Stretching a small amount of expensive tea with milk, water and cheap, plentiful spices turned a colonial export crop into something warm, filling and affordable. The street vendor, the chaiwala, became a fixture, and in parts of India the little unglazed clay cup, the kulhad, is still thrown away after a single use. Masala chai is the result of that adaptation, not a fixed ancient recipe handed down unchanged.

What actually goes into it

At its heart masala chai is a decoction, not a gentle infusion. A strong black tea and a handful of bruised spices are simmered directly in water, milk is added and brought back up to a simmer, the pot is sweetened to taste, and the whole thing is strained into cups. That simmering is the entire point. It is what pulls colour, body and tannin out of the leaf and marries it with the oils released from the spices, and it is exactly the step that the powder and steam cafe method skips.

The spice mix, the masala itself, usually leans on green cardamom, fresh ginger, cinnamon or cassia and clove, very often with a little black pepper. Beyond that there is no single correct formula. A Gujarati household might lean heavily on ginger; a winter blend might add nutmeg or a scrap of star anise; some families keep it to cardamom alone. That variation is the tradition, not a departure from it. Anyone insisting

there is one "authentic" recipe is usually selling you their version of it.

The tea base matters more than people think

Because milk and spice are assertive, a delicate leaf simply disappears underneath them. This is why a brisk, malty Assam or a strong breakfast style blend is traditional: it has the backbone to be tasted through whole milk and a fistful of spice. Use a light, floral tea and you will taste the milk and the cardamom and almost nothing of the tea, which defeats the point. If you intend to make this properly at home, the base leaf is the single component that most improves the result, far more than chasing an exotic spice.

Why the cafe version tastes so different

A real masala chai tastes first of brewed tea, then of warm spice, with the sweetness sitting quietly behind both. A great many takeaway chai lattes are built from a sweetened syrup or a spiced instant powder loosened with steamed milk, which is why they so often taste mostly of sugar and vanilla with a vague warmth. Both drinks can be pleasant. They are simply not the same thing, and the gap between them comes down almost entirely to whether tea was really brewed and how much sugar went in. A large high street spiced latte can carry a startling amount of sugar; the version you simmer at home can have a teaspoon or none. If the cafe kind is all you have ever had, the homemade one is a small revelation, and it costs pennies a cup.

Make a proper one at home

This is the everyday method, scaled for two mugs. Lightly crush 4 green cardamom pods, a 2cm piece of fresh ginger, a small cinnamon stick, 2 cloves and, if you like the gentle heat, 2 black peppercorns. Simmer the spices in 250ml of water for 3 to 4 minutes so they open up and perfume the water. Add 2 generous teaspoons of strong black tea and simmer 2 minutes more, then pour in 250ml of milk and bring it back to a gentle simmer, watching that it does not suddenly climb the pan. Sweeten lightly, simmer a final 2 minutes until it smells fragrant and has gone a deep, even tan, then strain into mugs and drink it hot. Taste it, and adjust everything next time. Stronger tea, more ginger, less sugar: that ongoing adjustment is the tradition working exactly as intended.

The most common ways to ruin it are using too little or too weak a tea, not simmering long enough to build body, and adding the milk before the tea has had a chance to brew in the water. Get those three right and the rest is preference. As a starting point that you can then move away from, the table below scales cleanly up or down.

For 2 mugs	Amount	Note
Water	250ml	Spices simmer in this first
Milk	250ml	More milk = richer; more water = brisker
Strong black tea	2 tsp	Malty Assam or breakfast blend
Green cardamom	4 pods, crushed	The defining note
Fresh ginger	2cm, bruised	Adjust hard to taste
Cinnamon	1 small stick	Warm background

For 2 mugs	Amount	Note
Clove	2	Easy to overdo
Sugar	1 to 2 tsp	Sweeten the pot, not the mug

Regional versions worth knowing

Calling masala chai "Indian tea" flattens a lot of variety. In Kashmir, noon chai (also called pink chai) is a different drink entirely: green tea whisked with bicarbonate of soda until it turns rose pink, then finished with milk and salt rather than sugar. Kahwa, also from Kashmir, is a delicate saffron and almond green tea with no milk at all. In Hyderabad, Irani chai is a softer, milkier style brought by Persian immigrants and served in distinctive cafes. Sulaimani, popular in parts of southern India and the Gulf, is black, milk free and often scented with lime and spice. None of these are masala chai, but they show that there is no single "Indian tea", and that the milky, spiced version Britain adopted is one branch of a much larger family.

A recipe worth your morning: chai spiced porridge

The same masala that flavours the cup is excellent in food, and porridge is the easiest place to begin. Bring 250ml of strained, unsweetened chai base, or 250ml of milk with a quarter teaspoon each of ground cardamom, cinnamon and ginger, to a simmer with 40g of rolled oats and a pinch of salt. Cook for 4 to 5 minutes, stirring, until thick and creamy, then sweeten with a little honey or jam and top with sliced banana or toasted nuts. It is very good on a cold morning when you want warmth and a gentle, even lift rather than a coffee jolt, and it is easy to make with children, who enjoy crushing the cardamom. Britain has drifted hard toward coffee for breakfast over the last decade; a spiced bowl of oats and a real cup of chai is a quieter, cheaper, friendlier way to start the day, and well worth bringing back into the kitchen.

Common questions

Loose leaf or tea bags? Either works. Loose leaf gives more control and a rounder result, but a strong tea bag or two is quite respectable if the tea inside is strong enough.

Can I make it with green tea? You can, but it stops being masala chai in the usual sense and starts heading toward the Kashmiri styles above. Green tea is easily overwhelmed by milk and clove, so keep the spicing very light if you try it.

Why does my milk curdle? Usually because it was boiled too hard, or the tea was extremely acidic and over simmered. Keep it at a gentle simmer rather than a rolling boil and add the milk after the tea has brewed, not before.

How much caffeine is in it? Less than a similarly sized coffee in most cases, though it depends entirely on how much tea you use. Our caffeine in chai page gives the realistic ranges.

If you would like to build a proper chai habit, the base tea is where to spend your attention. You can pick a suitable malty leaf from our Assam and breakfast teas, which are exactly the kind of strong blacks that stand up to milk and spice and make both the cup and the porridge taste of something.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health

Related teas worth a look: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Browse the wider tea range; spend over £35 on chai blacks, single bags upwards, and UK shipping is free.

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teas · For chai, one good loose Assam simmered properly beats five exotic bags dunked in a hurry.

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