How to Make Chai at Home

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **How to make chai, in summary:** Decoct tea and spices in water and milk, sweeten to taste, strain. The simple method for real chai.

Real chai is one of the most forgiving things you can cook, which is fortunate, because there is no single correct way to do it. The principle never changes: simmer a strong black tea and bruised spices in water, add milk, simmer again, sweeten to taste and strain. Learn that rhythm once and you can make a proper masala chai stronger, milkier, spicier or barely sweet for the rest of your life without ever reading a recipe again. Everything below is detail hung on that one frame.

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

The master method

For two mugs: lightly crush your spices, a starting point being 4 green cardamom pods, a 2cm knob of fresh ginger, a small piece of cinnamon and 2 cloves. Simmer them in 250ml of water for 3 to 4 minutes. Add 2 heaped teaspoons of a strong black tea and simmer 2 minutes. Pour in 250ml of milk, bring back to a gentle simmer, sweeten in the pot, and let it go a final 2 to 3 minutes until it is fragrant and a deep, even colour. Strain and drink immediately. That is the whole thing. The numbers are not sacred; the order is.

The three mistakes that ruin it

Almost every disappointing home chai fails in one of three predictable ways. The tea is too weak, so the milk and spice swamp it and you get sweet beige milk. The simmer is too short, so the brew never builds the body that defines the drink. Or the milk goes in too early, before the tea has properly brewed in the water, which is the most common error of all and the reason supermarket "just add milk" attempts taste of nothing. Strength is the entire point of chai. Timid chai is disappointing chai, every time.

Getting the variables right

The tea. Use a sturdy, malty leaf. A delicate or floral tea is wasted here because milk and spice will bury it completely. A strong breakfast blend or a brisk Assam is the traditional and sensible choice. Loose leaf gives more control than bags, but a strong bag works if you use enough of it.

The milk. Whole dairy milk gives the rounded, slightly sweet body most people expect. Semi skimmed is lighter and works well. Of the plant milks, oat behaves best because it has the body and gentle sweetness to stand in for dairy; thin nut milks tend to split or taste watery against the spice and the long simmer.

The water to milk ratio. Equal parts water and milk is the everyday default. More water gives a brighter, more tea forward cup; more milk gives the rich, almost dessert like version sold on many streets in India. Both are correct. It is a dial, not a rule.

The sweetener. Sugar is traditional and dissolves cleanly in the hot pot. Jaggery or a dark sugar adds a faint molasses note that suits the spice. Honey works but should go in off the heat. Crucially, sweeten the pot, not the mug, so it is carried evenly through the drink rather than sitting at the bottom.

Troubleshooting

When a pot goes wrong it is almost always one of a small number of faults, and each has a clean fix.

Problem	Likely cause	Fix
Weak, beige, milky	Too little tea, or milk added too early	More tea; brew tea in water before milk
Bitter and harsh	Over simmered after the milk went in	Shorten the final simmer
Thin, watery body	Simmer too short overall	Give the spices and tea longer in the water
Curdled or grainy milk	Boiled too hard	Gentle simmer only, never a rolling boil
Gritty in the cup	Ground spice, or no straining	Use whole bruised spice and strain well

Equipment, and the dairy free version

You need almost nothing: a small saucepan, something to crush the spices (the flat of a knife is enough) and a fine sieve. A dedicated chai pan is pleasant but not required. For a fully dairy free pot, oat milk is the standout because it has the body and faint sweetness to behave like whole milk through a long simmer; barista style oat milk is more stable still. Soya works but can catch a slightly beany note against the clove. Thin almond and rice milks are the weakest choice here, splitting or vanishing under the spice. Whatever the milk, the rule that the tea must brew in the water first matters even more, because plant milks dilute flavour faster than dairy.

Scaling up and making it ahead

Chai scales beautifully for a crowd: keep the ratios, use a bigger pan, and give it slightly longer to come up to a simmer. For weekday speed, make a concentrate. Simmer a strong batch of spiced tea in water only, with no milk, for about ten minutes, strain it, and keep it in the fridge for up to five days. Each morning you simply heat milk, add a measure of the concentrate to taste, sweeten and drink. It turns a fifteen minute routine into a ninety second one without resorting to syrup. There is a full walkthrough on our chai concentrate page if you want to batch it properly.

Two recipes that earn their place

Chai overnight oats. The night before, stir 40g of rolled oats into 120ml of strong, cooled, unsweetened chai concentrate (or milk with a quarter teaspoon each of ground cardamom, ginger and cinnamon), add a spoon of yoghurt and a little honey, and leave it covered in the fridge. By morning it is thick, gently spiced and ready, no cooking and no rush. It is an excellent thing to prep with children the evening before.

Chai poached pears. Peel firm pears, stand them in a pan of strong sweetened spiced chai, no milk, and simmer gently for fifteen to twenty minutes until tender, turning once. Reduce the poaching liquid to a syrup and spoon it over. Served warm with cream or yoghurt it is a quietly impressive pudding made almost entirely from store cupboard spice and a good tea. Baking and cooking with tea this way is far more interesting than the equivalent done with coffee, and a good reason to keep a proper leaf in the cupboard.

Why street chai tastes different from home chai

If your home chai never quite matches the cup from a good stall, the gap is usually technique rather than ingredients. Street chaiwalas tend to boil the pot harder and for longer than a home cook dares, building a deep, almost caramelised intensity, then aerate the finished chai by pouring it from height between two vessels, which cools it to drinking temperature and lifts the aroma. Their tea is also typically a strong, broken leaf style ground for fast extraction, and the sugar level is frankly higher than most people make at home. You do not have to copy the sugar, but a slightly harder boil, a longer simmer and a stronger broken leaf tea will take a timid home cup a long way toward that street character. This boiled hard, strong, sweet style is often called kadak chai; a gentler, milkier, lightly brewed version exists too, and neither is more correct than the other.

Adapting the strength through the day

One of the quiet advantages of making your own is that you can move the drink through the day. A brisk, water forward, strongly brewed pot with less milk suits the morning and stands up to food. A milkier, gentler, lightly spiced version is the afternoon cup. Toward evening, the same method with a decaffeinated black tea gives you the same spiced cup without the caffeine, which a fixed cafe menu cannot offer. The recipe never changes; only the dials do.

Common questions

Can I make a single mug? Yes, but very small quantities scorch easily. Halving the recipe in the smallest pan you own, watched closely, works better than trying to make a third of a pot.

Microwave chai? It is possible in a pinch but you lose the simmer that builds body, so it always tastes thinner. Treat it as the emergency version, not the method.

How long does a made pot keep? A fully made, milky chai is best drunk straight away and dulls within a day even refrigerated. Concentrate, with no milk, is the format to make ahead.

Since the base tea is what every one of these stands on, it is worth choosing well. A strong, dependable leaf from our breakfast teas is exactly the sort of malty black that holds its own against milk, spice and a long simmer, in the cup and in the pan alike.

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. Browse the wider tea range; UK shipping costs nothing on baskets above £35.

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