Chai Spices

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Chai spices, in summary:** Cardamom, ginger, cinnamon, clove and pepper are the common chai spices, but there is no fixed recipe.

The single most useful thing to understand about chai spices is that there is no fixed recipe, and there never was. The mix, the masala, is a guideline shaped by region, season, household and what is in the cupboard. Treat it as a set of building blocks rather than a formula and you can blend a proper chai that really suits your taste instead of chasing someone else's idea of authentic.

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

The core four, and what each one does

Green cardamom is, for most people, the defining note of chai: floral, slightly resinous and cooling. It is the spice most associated with the drink and the one many blends lean on hardest. Always crush the pods so the seeds inside can release; whole pods barely give anything up.

Fresh ginger brings heat and a clean bite that cuts through milk. It is the second pillar of a typical blend and the one that varies most by region, with some households making an aggressively ginger forward cup. Dried ground ginger works but is flatter and warmer; fresh is sharper and brighter.

Cinnamon or cassia supplies the warm, sweet, woody background that makes chai taste comforting. Most supermarket "cinnamon" is in fact cassia, which is stronger and slightly more bitter; either is fine here, but use a little less cassia.

Clove is intense and quickly dominant. One or two per pot is plenty. It contributes the deep, faintly apothecary warmth people recognise in a good chai but cannot usually name, and it is very easy to overdo.

The supporting cast

Beyond the core, blends commonly bring in **black pepper** for a gentle building heat, **fennel** or a little **star anise** for a sweet, aniseed lift, **nutmeg** or **mace** for a rounded, almost custard like warmth, and occasionally a **bay leaf** or, in some regions, a touch of dried rose. None of these are required. They are how you make the blend yours, and how seasonal versions get made: more ginger, pepper and clove for a warming winter pot, lighter cardamom and fennel for a fresher summer one.

A working quantities guide

Quantities matter more than the list of spices. The figures below make a balanced two mug pot; treat them as the centre of the dial, not a fixed point.

Spice	Form	Per 2-mug pot	Character it adds
Green cardamom	Pods, crushed	4	Floral, cooling, signature
Ginger	Fresh, bruised	2cm	Heat, brightness
Cinnamon / cassia	Stick	1 small	Sweet, woody warmth
Clove	Whole	2	Deep, dominant, easy to overdo
Black pepper	Whole	2 to 3	Gentle building heat
Fennel	Seed	1/2 tsp	Sweet, aniseed lift

Whole versus ground, and why bruising matters

Whole spices simmered in the pot give the cleanest, roundest result and do not turn the drink gritty. Ground spices are faster and give a more immediate punch but can make the cup cloudy and slightly powdery, and they fade quickly in storage. Whichever you use, the key step is to bruise or lightly crush whole spices first. Cracking cardamom pods, smashing a knob of ginger and snapping a cinnamon stick dramatically increases the surface area, and the difference, much like brewing technique, between bruised and whole but intact spices in the finished cup is large. A few seconds with the flat of a knife or a quick bash in a mortar is the highest value thing you can do.

Sourcing and freshness

Spice quality is the quiet variable behind a dull home chai. Whole spices keep their oils far longer than ground, which is the main argument for buying them whole and crushing as you go. Green cardamom should look plump and green, not greyish and papery; old pods smell of nothing. Buy from a shop with quick turnover, an Asian grocer or loose leaf specialist is usually far better value and fresher than a supermarket spice rack, store everything airtight and away from light and heat, and accept that ground spice older than a few months is the reason a familiar recipe has stopped tasting of much.

Three blends to start from

Everyday balance: cardamom led with a little ginger, cinnamon and a single clove. The safe house style.

Warming winter: push the ginger, pepper and clove, add a scrape of nutmeg. Heavier, hotter, good after a cold walk.

Fresh and light: cardamom and fennel forward, ginger gentle, clove barely there. Better in summer and with lighter food.

Build your own masala

A sound, balanced dry blend to keep in a jar: 3 tablespoons of green cardamom pods, 2 tablespoons of ground ginger, one 8cm cinnamon stick, 2 teaspoons of cloves, 2 teaspoons of black peppercorns and 1 teaspoon of fennel seeds. Toast the whole spices in a dry pan for a minute until fragrant, cool them, then grind everything together and store airtight away from light. Use roughly half a teaspoon per mug, added

with the tea. Keep it for about two months for the brightest flavour, then make a fresh batch; ground spice does not improve with age, and a tired blend is the usual reason a home chai tastes dull.

A recipe for the same jar: chai spiced shortbread

Your masala is not just for the pot. Cream 100g of soft butter with 50g of caster sugar, work in 150g of plain flour and a rounded teaspoon of your chai blend, bring it together into a dough, press it into a tin, mark into fingers and bake at 160C for about 20 minutes until pale gold. The spice that perfumes the cup gives the biscuit a warm, cardamom and clove character that suits a chai latte that is far more interesting than plain shortbread and pairs beautifully with, of course, a cup of chai. It is a really good thing to bake with children on a cold afternoon, and a quiet argument for keeping real spice and real tea in the house rather than reaching for a coffee.

Green cardamom is not black cardamom

This trips people up often enough to be worth its own note. Green cardamom is the small, pale, floral pod that defines a normal masala chai. Black cardamom is a different spice entirely: large, dark, wrinkled and dried over fire, so it carries a heavy, smoky, almost camphorous note. It belongs in savoury rice and curry far more than in a sweet milky tea, and a single black pod will dominate a whole pot with smoke. If a recipe just says "cardamom", it means green. Reach for black only if you specifically want a smoky, unusual cup, and even then use a fraction of a pod.

Spices to go carefully with

A handful of spices cause most ruined pots. Clove is the chief offender, intense and quick to take over, so one or two per pot is the ceiling for most palates. Black pepper builds heat as it simmers, so what tastes mild at first can sharpen noticeably by the time you pour. Star anise is powerful and turns liquorice-heavy fast; a single point of a star, not a whole one, is plenty for a two mug pot. Powdered turmeric does not belong in a standard masala chai at all; it is the basis of a different drink, golden milk, and will muddy both the colour and the flavour here. When in doubt, underdo the strong spices and add more next time; you cannot take clove back out of a pot.

Common questions

Can I use a shop "chai spice" jar? Yes, as a convenient base, but check how old it is and expect to lift a shop blend with a little fresh ginger, which no dry blend can replace.

Do I need to toast the spices? For a dry blend, a brief toast deepens the flavour. For a fresh pot you are simmering anyway, so it is optional.

Why does mine taste only of clove? Almost always too many cloves. Drop to one per pot and the other spices reappear.

The blend only sings against a tea strong enough to carry it, so the leaf still matters. A malty black from our Assam teas or a ready chai blend is the natural base for a homemade masala chai, with enough body to be tasted clearly through milk, spice and biscuit alike.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health

Shopping notes for this topic: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. The full tea shop is open as ever, and UK orders past £35 are delivered free.

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