Dirty Chai: The Complete Guide

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Dirty chai, in summary:** Dirty chai is a chai latte with a shot of espresso: the cardamom and coffee combination, how it is made, and why it is a high-caffeine drink, not a gentle pick-me-up.

A dirty chai is a chai latte with a shot of espresso added. That is the whole definition, and everything interesting about it follows from that single addition: what it tastes like, how much caffeine it carries, and why people either love it or find it does not quite work.

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

Where the name comes from

The "dirty" in dirty chai is café slang for "with espresso added", the same convention as a "dirty martini" (with olive juice). It refers to the espresso muddying an otherwise milky, pale, spiced drink, both in colour and in flavour. Café baristas in the early 2000s coined it as shorthand as espresso bars looked for ways to vary a tea drink they already had on the menu. It tells you exactly what is in the cup.

Add a single shot and you have a dirty chai. Add a double and it becomes a filthy chai. "Mucky chai" appears in some UK independent cafés. All are variations of the same idea.

The caffeine reality

A dirty chai stacks two caffeine sources: the black tea in the chai base and the espresso shot on top. The rough figures: chai latte 30-50mg, single espresso 60-80mg, total roughly **90-130mg per cup**, comparable to a strong filter coffee. The direction is not in doubt.

Drink	Caffeine sources	Approximate level
Chai latte	Black tea	Low to moderate (30-50mg)
Flat white	One espresso shot	Moderate (60-80mg)
Single dirty chai	Black tea plus one shot	High (90-130mg)
Double ("filthy") chai	Black tea plus two shots	Very high (150-200mg)

That is fine for many people and a lot for some. If you are sensitive to caffeine, or it is late in the day, this is the drink to be careful with. A decaf espresso shot keeps the flavour idea intact. Don't drink dirty chai after 2pm if caffeine affects your sleep. NHS pregnancy caffeine limit (200mg/day) accommodates one dirty chai

with significant headroom, but multiple cups daily would push the limit. For the wider picture of how much is in a normal cup of tea, our caffeine in chai page lays it out.

How the flavours actually interact

Espresso and chai spice can work together well. The roasted bitterness of the coffee gives the sweet, milky, cardamom and clove profile something to push against, much as a little salt sharpens caramel. The pairing draws on traditions that predate the café version:

- Espresso + cinnamon (a classic Italian afternoon combination)
- Coffee + cardamom (a Middle Eastern tradition)
- Coffee + cloves (a Yemeni tradition)

Whether it succeeds depends almost entirely on the chai underneath. A syrup-based, very sweet café chai plus espresso often just tastes of sweet coffee with a vague warmth. A properly brewed, spice-forward chai plus a clean shot tastes layered and deliberate: spice, then milk, then a roasted edge underneath. The coffee does not rescue a weak chai; it exposes it. The chai milk softens espresso's intensity; the espresso lifts chai's sweetness; the resulting cup is more interesting than either alone.

How to make dirty chai at home

Build a strong spiced tea first. Both the tea and the coffee need to be assertive or the milk flattens the whole thing. Three routes:

Method 1: From scratch (the proper version)

1. Brew 1 espresso shot (or 30-40ml very strong moka pot or filter coffee).
2. In a saucepan, simmer 100ml water with 4 cardamom pods, half a cinnamon stick, 4 cloves, 1 thin slice of ginger, and a pinch of black pepper. Hold 3 minutes.
3. Add 1 tsp CTC Assam tea. Steep 4 minutes.
4. Add 200ml whole milk and 1 tsp sugar. Heat just below boiling.
5. Strain into a mug. Add the espresso shot. Stir once and drink.

Method 2: Concentrate based (fast)

1. Brew 1 espresso shot.
2. Pour 100ml chai concentrate into a mug. Top with 100ml steamed milk.
3. Add the espresso shot. Stir. Dust cinnamon on top if you like.

Method 3: Sachet based (fastest)

1. Brew 1 espresso shot.
2. Empty a Drink Me Chai sachet into a mug.
3. Add 200ml hot water and the espresso shot. Stir vigorously.

More on from-scratch chai brewing here.

Iced dirty chai

An excellent summer drink, and arguably easier to balance iced because the bitterness reads softer over ice. Build a strong, slightly over-sweetened spiced tea, chill it, pour over ice with cold milk, then pour a cooled espresso shot over the top so it streaks through the milk. Brew everything stronger than you think you need to, ice and chilling mute both the spice and the coffee. For the full cold build, see our iced chai page.

Variations worth trying

Vegan dirty chai

Same recipe with oat milk. Oat milk handles steaming and espresso especially well; many cafés serve oat milk dirty chai by default.

Dirty chai with vanilla

Add half a teaspoon of vanilla extract to the milk. Smoother, sweeter cup.

Decaf dirty chai

Decaf espresso plus decaf chai. Caffeine load drops to roughly 10mg total. Same flavour profile, sensible for afternoons.

Dirty chai affogato

Put a scoop of good vanilla or coffee ice cream in a small glass. At the table, pour over a small shot of very strong hot spiced tea immediately followed by a hot espresso shot. The cold ice cream, the spice and the bitter coffee fold together into an adult dessert that takes thirty seconds and feels more considered than it is. An excellent way to finish a dinner.

Dirty matcha

The matcha equivalent: matcha latte plus an espresso shot. Different drink, similar concept. Polarising.

Related drinks worth knowing

The dirty chai sits in a small family of tea and coffee hybrids. A red eye chai pushes the idea further, using filter coffee rather than espresso for a longer, less concentrated coffee presence. A chai shakerato is the cold, shaken version: a strong spiced tea and a chilled espresso shot shaken hard over ice until foamy, with little or no milk, keeping the spice and coffee sharp rather than softened by dairy.

Temperature, and why so many are disappointing

A surprising number of poor dirty chais fail on temperature rather than recipe. If the spiced tea and the espresso are both very hot and then a large volume of hot milk is added, the drink arrives flat and tepid, and the coffee crema, which carries a lot of the aroma, has been stirred away to nothing. The better approach: keep both the tea and the coffee strong and hot, use less milk than you think, and add the espresso last so

its surface is not immediately drowned.

Common mistakes

- **Too much sugar.** Café concentrate dirty chais are often heavily sweetened. Make at home and you control the sugar.
- **Espresso too late.** If the chai is too cool when the espresso lands, the drink loses its character. Build it quickly.
- **Forgetting to stir.** Layered dirty chai (espresso on top) looks good but tastes wrong. Mix before drinking.
- **Using a weak base.** The coffee does not rescue a thin chai; it exposes it. Build from a real spiced tea.
- **Burning the espresso.** Bad espresso ruins the cup. The chai softens but does not hide a stale or bitter shot.
- **Drinking it after 2pm.** 90-130mg caffeine is real. Plan accordingly.

Ordering one in a café

Ask for "a chai latte with a shot of espresso" if "dirty chai" draws a blank. Specify single or double, since a double is a great deal of caffeine on top of the tea. If you want it less sweet, ask whether the chai is made from syrup and request less of it, in most chains the sweetness is built into the base rather than added separately. Most independent UK cafés will make one if you ask, even if it is not on the menu.

Who it suits, and who it does not

The dirty chai suits someone who likes both coffee and spice and wants the two in one cup, particularly as a mid-morning drink with enough lift to do real work. It suits people who find a plain chai latte too mild and a straight flat white too one-note. It is a poor match for anyone keeping a close eye on caffeine, anyone drinking late in the day, or anyone after the gentler side of a traditional chai, because the espresso turns the cup from mellow to bracing. There is no shame in deciding it is a lot; it is.

Pairing it with food

Because it carries both roast bitterness and warm spice, a dirty chai pairs better with food than a plain chai latte. It stands up to a buttery pastry, a slice of carrot or banana cake, or a plain biscuit far better than it does to anything delicate, which it will simply flatten. The chai spiced shortbread on our chai spices page is a very close match: the cardamom in the biscuit echoing the spice in the cup against the coffee.

Where to get the best result at home

- **Drink Me Chai sachets** plus your home espresso machine: the quickest route.
- **Tea India Chai Latte Concentrate** plus espresso: café-style result.
- **Pan-brewed chai** plus espresso: the proper version, worth the extra time. Use a malty Assam as the black tea base, it is strong enough to stand up to the shot.

A real spiced chai blend from the shop gives you a brewed, spice-led base strong enough to stand up to an espresso shot, which is exactly what a dirty chai needs and exactly what a syrup cannot provide. As with every version, it lives or dies on the chai underneath the coffee.

Dirty chai, at a glance

Aspect	Dirty chai
What it is	A chai latte with a shot of espresso added
Caffeine	Chai 30-50mg + espresso 60-80mg = roughly 90-130mg a cup
Flavour	Cardamom and warm spice meeting coffee; properly good, not a gimmick
Filthy / extra dirty	A double espresso shot; higher caffeine again
Vegan	Yes, with oat milk; oat milk handles espresso especially well
Caffeine-free route	Decaf espresso plus decaf chai, roughly 10mg total

FAQ

What is dirty chai? A chai latte with a shot of espresso. Café slang that tells you exactly what is in the cup.

How much caffeine is in a dirty chai? Roughly 90-130mg per cup, comparable to a strong filter coffee.

Single or double shot? Single for most people. Double is a great deal of caffeine on top of the tea. Build up rather than down.

Can I drink dirty chai in pregnancy? NHS pregnancy advice caps caffeine at 200mg across the day, whatever the source, and a dirty chai holds both tea and espresso, so both count towards it. Ask your midwife if unsure.

Can it be decaf? Yes, a decaf espresso shot keeps the roasted edge with much less caffeine, the sensible afternoon version.

Tea or coffee first? It barely matters to the flavour. Strength matters far more than order.

Is dirty chai actually good? Yes, spice and espresso make an interesting pairing if you like both ingredients. Try it once.

Make it from a strong base in the chai range or the full tea shop, or compare the low-caffeine route in rooibos chai.

Curator's note: dirty chai is one of those café drinks I assumed was a marketing gimmick until I tried one. Cardamom and coffee turned out to be a really good match. Just don't make it your 4pm pick-me-up unless you don't plan to sleep. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Reference noted

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)
- PubMed: Tea polyphenols and human health

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · One chai base you trust beats a shelf of sweet syrups. Keep two or three chai blends you enjoy in rotation.

Chai and caffeine reading

- Chai tea (the pillar)
- Chai latte recipe
- Masala chai from scratch
- Caffeine-free chai
- Iced chai
- Chai spices explained
- Black tea

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag
- Tea ethics and sustainability

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.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/