Chai Concentrate

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Chai concentrate, in summary:** A chai concentrate is a strong brewed base you dilute with milk; convenient, and only as sweet as you make it.

Chai concentrate is a strong, pre brewed spiced tea base that you keep in the fridge and dilute with hot milk or water a cup at a time. It sits sensibly between two extremes: simmering a fresh pot from scratch every morning, which is lovely but slow, and a sugary instant powder, unlike a proper chai latte, which is fast but tastes of it. Made well, a concentrate gives you most of the quality of the from scratch version at most of the speed of the instant one, which is why it is the format worth understanding.

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What it actually is

A concentrate is just a normal masala chai decoction, made as on the how to make chai page, taken further: more tea, more spice, less water, no milk, simmered longer and then strained and cooled. Because the milk is added fresh at serving time rather than stored, the base avoids the dull, cooked milk taste that ruins a fully made chai left in the fridge. You are storing the hard part, the spiced tea, and doing only the easy part, heating milk, on the day.

Sweetened or unsweetened

Leave the concentrate unsweetened. It is tempting to sugar the batch for convenience, but an unsweetened base is far more useful: you can sweeten each cup to taste, use it in cooking, make a savoury leaning version, or hand it to someone who takes no sugar. Sweetened concentrate locks you into one decision for the whole batch and tends to taste cloying after a day or two in the fridge. Sweeten the cup, never the jar.

How to make a proper batch

For roughly a week for one person: lightly crush 12 green cardamom pods, a 6cm piece of fresh ginger, 2 cinnamon sticks, 6 cloves and a teaspoon of black peppercorns. Simmer the spices in 750ml of water for about 10 minutes so they fully open. Add 6 heaped teaspoons of a strong black tea and simmer a further 4 to 5 minutes; you want it noticeably too strong to drink as is, because it will be cut roughly half and half with milk. Strain it through a fine sieve, cool it quickly, and keep it in a clean sealed bottle in the fridge; use it soon. To serve, heat equal parts concentrate and milk, sweeten the mug to taste, and drink.

A dilution guide

The concentrate to milk ratio is the dial that decides what you get. None of these is more correct than another; they are different drinks from one bottle.

Concentrate : milk	Result	Good for
1 : 1	Rich, milky, dessert like	The classic comforting mug
2 : 1	Strong, tea forward, brisk	Morning, or with food
1 : 2	Mild, latte like, soft	An easy all day cup
1 : 1 with water	Lighter, no milk	A black spiced tea

Scaling, freezing and shelf life

The recipe scales linearly, so double or triple it in a bigger pan with no change to method. Strain the batch well and keep it in the fridge under a lid; use it up quickly, because no keeping time can be promised for a home made concentrate. For longer storage it freezes well: pour it into an ice cube tray, freeze, and drop two or three cubes into a mug of hot milk on the day. Freezing means a single big weekend batch can cover several weeks of cups.

Troubleshooting a flat concentrate

If the diluted cup tastes weak, the batch was almost certainly under strength to begin with; concentrate needs to taste aggressively too strong neat, because the milk will tame it hard. If it tastes only of clove or only of cinnamon, the spice balance was off before reduction and only got more concentrated, so adjust the next batch down on the dominant spice. If it turns dull within two days, it was probably not strained finely enough and fine sediment is stewing in the bottle; strain through a finer sieve or a cloth next time.

Homemade versus the bottles on the shelf

Shop bought concentrates vary widely. The better ones are properly brewed and only lightly sweetened; many are heavily sugared and taste much closer to the syrup cafe route than to a simmered pot. The advantage of making your own is total control of strength, spice and sugar at a fraction of the cost. The advantage of a good bottled one is obvious convenience. If you buy, read the label for where sugar sits in the ingredients list; if it is near the top, you are buying mostly syrup.

A recipe for the weekend: chai French toast

Concentrate is a brilliant cooking ingredient because it is intense and milk free. Whisk 1 egg with 60ml of unsweetened chai concentrate and a teaspoon of sugar, soak thick slices of bread in it for a minute a side, and fry in butter until set and golden. The custard carries the cardamom, ginger and clove right through the bread in a way a sprinkle of cinnamon never manages. Served with banana and a little honey it is a weekend breakfast that really does earn the spice rack, and a far more interesting thing to do with a good tea than pour it down the sink.

Using it beyond the mug

An unsweetened concentrate is one of the most useful things in a fridge precisely because it is intense and milk free. It makes the custard for the chai French toast above, but it also goes much further. Reduce it with a little sugar and it becomes a chai syrup for drizzling over pancakes, porridge or ice cream. Whisk it into a baked or stovetop custard for a spiced pouring cream. Use a splash in the liquid of a banana bread or a spiced loaf in place of milk for a warm background note. Soften it with hot water rather than milk and you have an instant black spiced tea for someone avoiding dairy. One bottle quietly does the work of a spice rack and a saucepan of effort.

A savoury direction

Less obvious, but worth trying: a small amount of strong, unsweetened concentrate adds depth to a few savoury dishes, particularly a lentil dal or a spiced squash soup, where the cardamom, clove and pepper read as seasoning rather than as tea. Use it sparingly, a tablespoon or two, as you would a spice paste rather than a stock. It is a good way to use up the last of a batch.

Bottling, labelling and giving it away

A few practical habits make concentrate low effort. Cool the strained batch quickly rather than leaving it to sit warm, since fast cooling keeps it fresher for longer. Bottle it in a clean glass bottle or jar with a tight lid, and actually write the date on it, because an unsweetened concentrate looks much the same from one day to the next, so the date is the only way to know how old it is. A well made batch in a nice bottle, with a tag giving the simple “equal parts hot milk, sweeten to taste” instruction, is also a really good homemade gift, far more thoughtful than a shop jar of powder and made from nothing more than good tea and a handful of spice.

Common questions

Can I make it caffeine free? Yes, use a decaf or rooibos base; the spice carries the drink, so it survives the swap well.

Why did mine go cloudy and sour? Either it was not cooled quickly before bottling or it was kept too long. Cool fast, seal clean, label the date and use it soon.

Hot milk or cold? Either. Hot for a normal mug; cold over ice for an instant iced chai, covered on our iced chai page.

The whole system depends on the strength of the leaf you brew the batch from. A sturdy, malty black from our Assam teas, or a strong breakfast blend, is the right base for a concentrate, because it stays clearly present even after it has been cut with milk in the mug or whisked into a custard in the pan.

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; free shipping to UK addresses starts above £35, and single bags are included.

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