Thai Iced Tea (Cha Yen): Sweet, Creamy, Orange

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Thai iced tea, in summary:** Cha yen is strong, very sweet, creamy black tea over ice, usually dyed orange. Strip away the dye and it is essentially a milkshake-sweet iced black tea, distinct from spice-led iced chai, and easy to make lighter at home.

Thai iced tea, cha yen, is that vivid orange, intensely sweet, creamy iced drink served in Thai restaurants the world over. It is delicious, distinctive and widely misunderstood, often confused with iced chai. Here is what it actually is, how it is really made, and how to make a good one at home.

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

What it actually is

At its core Thai iced tea is a strongly brewed, heavily sweetened black tea, served over ice and finished with milk, traditionally a combination of sweetened condensed milk stirred in for sweetness and body, and evaporated milk or cream floated over the top for the two-tone look and a richer finish. The base is a robust black tea, classically a Thai-grown leaf often blended with spices such as star anise, tamarind or vanilla, and historically tinted with food colouring to produce the signature bright orange. Once you can see those components, you can rebuild the drink from real tea and spices at home and simply leave out the dye. Strip away the colour and it is, fundamentally, very strong sweet milky black tea, built for ice.

Why it is orange

The famous colour is mostly cosmetic. Traditional Thai tea mixes are commonly dyed to give that instantly recognisable sunset orange, which has nothing to do with the flavour and everything to do with presentation and consistency. A naturally brewed strong black tea finished with milk is a tan or caramel colour; the orange is added. This is worth knowing simply so you understand that a less luridly coloured homemade version is not a failed one, it is just an undyed one.

How it differs from iced chai

The two are cousins, not the same drink, and the distinction is the same one drawn on the iced chai and masala chai pages. Iced chai is spice-led: tea simmered with cardamom, ginger and clove, milk, and modest sweetness. Thai iced tea is sweetness-and-creaminess-led: very strong black tea, a lot of sugar, condensed and evaporated milk, with spice as a background note if present at all. Both are strong tea over ice with milk; one is built around aromatic spice, the other around rich sweetness.

	Thai iced tea	Iced chai
Lead character	Sweet, creamy	Spiced, aromatic
Milk	Condensed plus evaporated	Dairy or oat, modest
Sweetness	High	You control it
Colour	Often dyed orange	Natural tan

The sugar reality

A traditional Thai iced tea is a dessert in a glass, and there is no point pretending otherwise. Between added sugar and sweetened condensed milk it is one of the sweeter drinks you can order, closer to a milkshake than to a plain iced tea. That is not a reason to avoid it; it is a reason to treat it as the sweet treat it is rather than an everyday thirst-quencher, the same framing the tea and your health page applies to sugary tea drinks. The good news is that, made at home, the sweetness is entirely in your hands. This is general information, not medical advice.

A short history, and the variations

Cha yen is a relatively modern street and restaurant drink that grew out of Thailand's embrace of strong black tea and sweetened condensed milk, with a clear Chinese-Thai influence and a strong dose of mid-twentieth-century convenience: pre-blended, pre-coloured "Thai tea mix" made it fast and consistent for vendors, and it became an icon of Thai food culture abroad largely through restaurants, where its vivid colour and sweetness made it instantly memorable. Understanding it as a vendor-and-restaurant drink, engineered for speed, sweetness and visual punch, explains almost every choice in how it is made. Several relatives appear on the same menus: cha dam yen is the same sweet strong tea served iced but without milk, black and sharp rather than creamy; Thai green milk tea swaps the black base for a green one for a grassier sweetness; and the drink crosses readily into bubble-tea territory with tapioca pearls. Knowing the family means you can order deliberately rather than be surprised.

How to make it at home, lighter if you like

Brew a small amount of black tea very strong, far stronger than you would drink hot, because it has to survive ice and milk; a robust Assam or a strong broken-leaf black works well, with a little star anise or a crushed cardamom pod for the traditional hint of spice. Always sweeten the tea while it is hot, so the sugar dissolves, then chill it hard before building the glass: ice, the cold sweet strong tea, a stir of condensed milk to taste, and a float of evaporated milk or a little cream over the top for the classic two-tone look. For a lighter everyday version that you could drink often rather than as a treat, sweeten with a measured sugar syrup so you control the exact amount and finish with a modest splash of evaporated or barista oat milk instead of a heavy stir of condensed milk; you lose the milkshake density and the lurid colour but keep the distinctive strong, creamy, lightly spiced character. It also cold brews well for a smoother base, and batches happily as a jug of sweetened strong tea kept in the fridge with the milk added per glass. Brew it properly strong with loose-leaf black from the full tea shop, where UK delivery is free over £35.

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teas · Skip the orange dye and brew the base twice as strong as you'd drink it hot. That, not the colour, is what makes a good one.

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