Chai vs Coffee

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Chai vs coffee, in short:** Chai vs coffee: chai is spiced black tea, gentler and lower in caffeine than coffee, unless it is a dirty chai. The sugar caveat, and how to choose.

The headline is that chai and coffee are both caffeinated warm drinks but in different leagues: real chai is spiced black tea, generally gentler and lower in caffeine than coffee, with the real twists being a “dirty chai” that adds espresso and the sugar that often comes with chai. This page compares them without flattering either.

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

What they have in common

What they share: both are warm, caffeinated, much loved drinks taken daily by millions, both are often had with milk, and both are fine everyday pleasures unsweetened. Both also get over claimed and over sweetened in cafe versions, so the sugar warning applies equally to a syrupy chai latte and a sugary flavoured coffee.

The real differences

The clear differences. Caffeine: a normal chai (black tea base) is moderate and generally below a typical brewed coffee, so chai is the gentler routine lift. Character: coffee is bitter, roasted, intense; chai is sweet spiced, milky, aromatic. The decisive clear twist is the "dirty chai", a chai latte with a shot of espresso, which stacks coffee caffeine on tea caffeine and is a high caffeine drink, not a gentle one, so the cosy image is misleading there. The other clear twist is sugar: traditional or homemade chai can be controlled, but cafe and powder chai is frequently very sweet, sometimes the bigger issue than the caffeine.

Which should you choose

Choose chai when you want a gentler, lower caffeine, comforting spiced drink and you control the sugar; choose coffee when you want a stronger, faster caffeine hit and prefer the roasted character. Choose neither as marketed if it is a sugary cafe version, make it at home where caffeine and sugar are yours to set. If you want chai specifically to cut caffeine, avoid the dirty chai and consider a rooibos chai, which is properly caffeine free.

Quick take

The clear verdict: chai is usually the gentler, lower caffeine choice and coffee the stronger one, but a dirty chai is high caffeine and a sweet cafe chai can out sugar a plain coffee. Neither is a health drink; both are good everyday pleasures. Judge by caffeine need, character preference and, above all, who controls the sugar, not by the cosy or virtuous image either one is sold with.

Chai and coffee side by side

	Chai (spiced black tea)	Coffee
Base	Black tea plus spices	Roasted coffee
Caffeine	Moderate, below typical coffee	Higher, faster
Character	Sweet spiced, milky, aromatic	Bitter, roasted, intense
The twist	"Dirty chai" adds an espresso shot	Flavoured versions add sugar
Best for	Gentler comforting lift	Stronger fast hit

References and notes

- NHS guidance on caffeine

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