What's in Chai? Tea, Spice and the Real Masala

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **What is in chai, in short:** Real chai is black tea, whole spices, milk, water and sweetener decocted together: what the spices are, and why there is no single correct recipe.

"What is in chai" has a clear answer that the cafe and powder versions obscure: real chai is masala chai, a decoction of black tea and whole spices simmered with milk, water and sweetener. It is not a syrup, not a flavour and not a single fixed recipe, and knowing what actually goes in it is the key to the whole drink.

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

What it actually is

The core of real masala chai is five things: strong black tea (Assam style CTC is traditional because it stands up to milk and spice), water, milk, a sweetener, and a blend of whole spices. The common spice core is cardamom, ginger, cinnamon and clove, very often black pepper, with regional and family additions like fennel, star anise or nutmeg. Crucially there is no single correct masala: proportions and choices vary by family, region and season, and that variation is the tradition, not a deviation. A cafe or powder "chai latte", by contrast, is often a sweet syrup or spiced powder reconstituted with milk, a different thing.

What it tastes like

Made properly, chai tastes of brewed black tea and real spice together, warming, aromatic, gently sweet, with the pepper and ginger giving a faint bite and the cardamom and cinnamon the perfume. It should taste of tea, not of vanilla syrup; if it tastes only of sweetness, it is a syrup or powder version, not a decoction.

The health picture

The plain picture: chai is caffeinated because it is black tea, so it gives a real if gentle lift and is no sleepy decaf, while a "dirty chai" stacks espresso on top, making it a high caffeine drink. The spices add flavour and a comforting feeling rather than a proven medical effect, and the biggest health variable is sugar: traditional chai is sweetened in the pot to your taste, but cafe and powder versions are frequently very sweet. A balanced view credits the warmth and the making of it while keeping the sugar and caffeine in plain view.

How to use it well

To use this well, make it as a decoction: bruise whole spices, simmer them in water with the tea, add milk, simmer briefly more, sweeten in the pot and strain. That method is exactly why homemade chai tastes of tea and spice rather than syrup. Adjust the spice mix, strength, milk and sweetness to your taste over a few attempts, that personalisation is the authentic tradition, and the sugar and caffeine stay firmly yours to control.

What is actually in masala chai

Component	Typical	Role
Black tea	strong Assam style CTC	the caffeinated base that stands up to milk and spice
Spices	cardamom, ginger, cinnamon, clove, often pepper	the aromatic core; fennel, star anise, nutmeg are regional adds
Milk	whole, or plant milk	body and softening
Water	simmered with the tea and spice	the decoction medium
Sweetener	sugar, jaggery, honey, to taste in the pot	the main health variable, controllable when home-made

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea

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