Tea masala vs garam masala: don't swap the jars

From the teas.co.uk wiki

Both are Indian spice blends, both contain cardamom, cinnamon, cloves and black pepper, and they are not interchangeable. The difference is what else is in them, and in what proportion.

	Tea masala (chai masala)	Garam masala
Built for	Sweet milky tea	Savoury dishes
Leading spices	Ginger, cardamom, cinnamon	Cumin, coriander, black pepper
Also common	Cloves, black pepper, nutmeg, fennel	Cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, bay, mace
Usually contains cumin?	No	Yes, often the main note
Added	During brewing, in the pan	At the end of cooking a dish

Commercial products show the split clearly: tea masalas are ginger-and-cardamom led, while garam masalas are built around cumin and coriander.

Use garam masala in your chai and it will taste savoury: cumin is unmistakable and does not belong in a milky sweet drink.

If garam masala is all you have

Do not tip it in. Instead, build a quick chai spice from what is likely in the cupboard:

- ¼ teaspoon ground ginger
- 2 crushed cardamom pods (or ¼ teaspoon ground)
- a small piece of cinnamon stick
- 1 clove
- 2 black peppercorns

Simmer those in the water for five minutes before you add tea and milk.

A house chai masala worth making

Grind together and keep in a small airtight jar:

- 3 tablespoons ground ginger
- 2 tablespoons ground cardamom
- 1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground cloves

- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg (optional)

Use **¼ to ½ teaspoon per mug**, added with the tea. Ginger leads, cardamom perfumes, pepper gives the warmth at the back. Adjust it to your taste: every household's version is different, which is the point.

Whole spices, simmered, give a cleaner flavour than ground; ground is quicker and gives a cloudier, spicier cup. Keep either in a sealed jar away from the hob and use within about six months.

Or buy it ready blended

A ready masala chai bag does the same job with no jars at all: Tea India Masala Chai is black tea with ginger, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, black pepper and anise. For a ginger-led cup, Tea India Ginger Chai.

More detail in chai spices and the method in how to make masala chai.

Common questions

Is chai masala the same as pumpkin spice?
No. Pumpkin spice is cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and cloves, with no cardamom or pepper: see pumpkin spice tea.

Can I use tea masala in cooking?
In sweet dishes, yes: rice pudding, poached fruit, biscuits. It is too ginger-forward for most curries.

How much do I use?
Start with ¼ teaspoon of ground blend per mug, or a few whole spices per pan.

Do the spices need to be fresh?
Ground spices fade within months. If your chai tastes dusty rather than warm, the jar is old.

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