Thai Tea vs Hong Kong Milk Tea: Making Both at Home

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Thai tea vs Hong Kong milk tea, in short:** Both start with very strong Ceylon style black tea. Thai tea is sweetened with condensed milk and poured over ice. Hong Kong milk tea is strained through a cloth bag and smoothed with evaporated milk.

Thai tea and Hong Kong milk tea are cousins: strong black tea and tinned milk, with no fresh milk in sight. They differ in sweetness, in temperature and in one signature step each, and you can make a fair version of both at home with supermarket tea bags.

We do not stock Thai tea mix, Hong Kong tea blends or tinned milk at teas.co.uk. We do stock the plain Ceylon and Assam teas both drinks are built on.

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

The two drinks side by side

	Thai tea (cha yen)	Hong Kong milk tea
Tea	Strongly brewed Ceylon black tea, or a local Assam type	Ceylon black tea
Milk	Condensed milk in the tea, evaporated or whole milk poured on top	Evaporated milk, about 30% of the cup, or condensed milk
Sweetness	Sweet by design: sugar and condensed milk	In the original style you add your own sugar
Temperature	Poured over ice	Brewed hot and kept hot
Signature step	Milk poured over the iced tea	Tea pulled through a cotton bag

Each drink has its own page here: how to make Thai tea and Hong Kong milk tea.

Why shop Thai tea is orange

The bright orange of a Thai iced tea usually comes from colouring in the tea mix, not from the tea. One food writer's account names a yellow food dye as the usual source, with annatto used in some blends. Without it the drink is a darker, more muted amber.

So a Thai tea made with plain tea bags will be brown amber. It is the same drink without the dye. Spices are a similar story: in Thailand the tea is not typically brewed with spices, though some English language recipes add star anise or cardamom. Thailand also drinks it without milk, as cha manao, iced with lime and sugar. There is more in Thai iced tea explained.

Why Hong Kong milk tea is called silk stocking tea

Hong Kong cafes brew the tea in a thin cotton bag. Stained brown, the bag looks like a silk stocking, and the nickname stuck. The drink took shape in the middle of the twentieth century, when local diners adapted British tea with milk by swapping fresh milk for cheaper, more concentrated evaporated milk.

The cafe method is long: a 12 minute steep, with the tea poured back and forth through the bag four times. In 2017 the technique was declared part of Hong Kong's intangible cultural heritage. Our page on Hong Kong milk tea culture tells that story.

Home versions with tea bags

These are home approximations in our own quantities, not the cafe originals.

Thai style iced tea

1. Steep two black tea bags in 150ml of freshly boiled water for 5 minutes, then remove them.
2. While it is hot, stir in a teaspoon or two of sugar and a tablespoon of condensed milk.
3. Fill a tall glass with ice and pour the tea over it.
4. Finish with a splash of evaporated milk on top.

Hong Kong style milk tea

1. Steep two black tea bags in 200ml of freshly boiled water for 6 to 8 minutes.
2. Remove the bags and pour the tea between two jugs a few times, the home stand in for pulling.
3. Pour into a warmed cup and add evaporated milk until it makes up roughly a third of the cup.
4. Sweeten to taste.

The closest teas we sell

Dilmah Premium Ceylon Black is the closest match for both drinks, because Ceylon black tea is what both are traditionally made from. Our guides to Ceylon tea and Dilmah explain the tea, and the Sri Lankan tea shelf has the rest.

Twinings Assam is the choice when you want more weight. Thai tea is also made with an Assam type leaf, and Assam is usually described as brisk and malty.

Tetley Extra Strong Breakfast Tea is the everyday box if you make these often. See our strong breakfast tea picks for others.

None of these is a Thai tea mix or a Hong Kong cafe blend. Those are made up to their own recipes, and the Thai mixes carry the colouring. What we sell is the plain tea underneath.

Strong black teas for milk tea

A Ceylon, an Assam and an extra strong blend, the plain teas these two drinks are built on.



Dilmah Premium Ceylon Black, 25 Tea Bags 50g

~~£7.00~~ Original price was: £7.00.£5.60Current price is: £5.60.

View pack and details ?



Twinings Assam, 80 Tea Bags 200g

~~£9.50~~ Original price was: £9.50.£7.60Current price is: £7.60.

View pack and details ?



Tetley Extra Strong Breakfast Tea, 75 Tea Bags 237g

~~£4.75~~ Original price was: £4.75.£3.80Current price is: £3.80.

View pack and details ?

See all Sri Lankan teas ?

Autumn Sale prices shown. The sale ends on 24 December.

These are products sold by teas.co.uk. Every order includes a free tea sample, and UK delivery is free over £35. Check each product page for the latest price, availability and pack information.

Which tea for which drink, at a glance

Drink	Tea we would use	Milk to buy elsewhere	Served
Thai tea	Dilmah Premium Ceylon Black or Twinings Assam	Condensed and evaporated	Over ice
Hong Kong milk tea	Dilmah Premium Ceylon Black	Evaporated	Hot

Common questions

Can I make Thai tea with normal tea bags?

Yes. Use a plain, strong black tea and brew it at double strength. The drink will be amber, not orange, because the orange comes from colouring in commercial mixes.

Is Thai tea spiced?

Not typically in Thailand. Some English language recipes add star anise or cardamom.

What is the difference between condensed and evaporated milk?

Condensed milk is sweetened and thick. Evaporated milk is unsweetened and pours like cream, which is why Hong Kong milk tea uses it for body and Thai tea uses condensed milk for sweetness.

For the no milk version

Thailand also drinks its tea iced with lime and sugar and no milk, and lemon black teas are the nearest thing we stock.



Hyson Lemon Infused Black Tea, 32 Tea Bags 32g

~~£4.75~~ Original price was: £4.75.£3.80Current price is: £3.80.
View pack and details ?



Rochambeau Lemon Infused Black Tea, 25 Tea Bags 50g

~~£7.75~~ Original price was: £7.75.£6.20Current price is: £6.20.

View pack and details ?



Lift Instant Lemon Black Tea, 165g

~~£3.00~~ Original price was: £3.00.£2.40Current price is: £2.40.

View pack and details ?

See all black teas ?

Autumn Sale prices shown. The sale ends on 24 December.

These are products sold by teas.co.uk. Every order includes a free tea sample, and UK delivery is free over £35. Check each product page for the latest price, availability and pack information.

Reference noted

Facts on this page were checked against the Wikipedia entry for Thai tea, the Wikipedia entry for Hong Kong style milk tea, the Takeout article on how Thai iced tea gets its colour and the Wikipedia entry for Assam tea.

More from the tea wiki

- How to Make Milk Tea
- Iced Chai: Concentrate, Dilution and Milk Guide

- Iced Black Tea: Methods and Best Teas
- Hong Kong Milk Tea: Strong, Silky, Sweet
- How to Make Thai Tea (the Bright Orange One)
- Ceylon Tea
- Hong Kong Milk Tea Culture: The Silk Stocking Craft
- The Ultimate Guide to Making Tea
- How to Make Bubble Tea at Home
- The whole Tea Wiki, A to Z

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