Chai Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Chai, in summary:** The full chai reference: a strong spiced black tea, what is in the spice mix, the caffeine, and how to make authentic masala chai properly.

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

Chai is the Hindi word for tea. Calling something "chai tea" in English is like calling something "naan bread", you're saying tea twice. What British shoppers actually mean when they buy chai is **masala chai** the Indian spiced milk tea that has been the everyday morning drink across the subcontinent for at least a century.

Masala chai is built on three things: a strong black tea base, a spice mix (the masala), and full fat milk. It's the only major tea in the world that requires both milk and spice as part of the brewing rather than as optional add ons, and once you've had a properly simmered cup at an Indian railway station or your nearest decent chaiwala, the powdered "chai latte" sachets in the supermarket aisle make sense as a mass market shortcut rather than a like for like substitute.

The word

"Chai" derives from the Mandarin *cha* (?), which travelled along the Silk Road and overland trade routes to become "chai" in Hindi, Persian, Russian, and Swahili. The English "tea" came via maritime trade from the southern Chinese Min dialect *te*. So Atlantic trade languages got "tea" and overland trade languages got "cha/chai", the same word, two routes.

What Indian English calls "chai" is the spiced milk tea preparation. What British English absorbed as "chai tea" is shorthand for that same drink. Linguistic purists object; cafés don't care.

What's in the spice mix

There is no single "correct" masala recipe. Every household, every region, every street vendor blends slightly differently. But the core spice canon is consistent across India:

- **Cardamom**, the defining "chai" aroma, slightly menthol eucalyptus, present in nearly every blend
- **Cinnamon**, warming sweetness, no sugar required for the perception of sweetness
- **Ginger**, warming heat at the back of the throat, fresh in traditional recipes, dried powder in commercial ones
- **Cloves**, a slightly apothecary depth, the “chai pudding” note

- **Black pepper**, hard to taste directly but adds the savoury layer that makes chai feel substantial rather than just sweet spiced

Regional variants extend the canon. South Indian chai often adds star anise; Punjabi chai leans heavily on fresh ginger; Kashmiri "noon chai" uses green tea, salt, and almonds rather than the standard recipe. The masala you'll find on the British shelf is typically the broadly Punjabi style with cardamom led sweetness.

The proper way to brew it (the simmer method)

British style "tea bag in mug, splash of milk on top" works for everyday black tea. It does not work for chai. The spices and the tannins both need a gentle simmer in milk and water to extract properly. Five minutes of effort, but it's the difference between a real chai and an instant approximation.

1. **Bring 200ml of water and 100ml of milk** to a near simmer in a small saucepan. Whole milk is traditional; oat milk works particularly well.
2. **Add one tea bag** of strong black tea (or 1 to 2g of loose CTC Assam) and the masala spices if not already in the bag. For pre blended chai, the spices are already there.
3. **Simmer, do not boil:** for 3 to 5 minutes. Gentle bubbles around the edge of the pan; you should see the milk darken from white to caramel.
4. **Add 1 to 2 teaspoons of sugar:** jaggery (unrefined cane sugar) or honey. Stir to dissolve. Sugar is not optional in traditional chai; the chemistry needs it to balance the tannin.
5. **Strain into a mug** and drink hot. The whole process takes 5 to 7 minutes.

The simmer extracts more from the spices and produces a properly chai shop cup. The Western "splash of milk on tea" gives you spiced black tea with milk, which is fine but not the same drink.

Chai vs chai latte, the modern split

The word "chai latte" started in the late 1990s in Western coffee shops as a way to sell sweet, milky chai flavoured drinks alongside cappuccinos. Today the British shelf splits into three different products that are all sometimes labelled "chai":

	Traditional masala chai	Chai tea bags	Chai latte sachets
Format	Loose spices and tea, brewed from scratch	Black tea plus dried spice in a tea bag	Pre mixed powder of milk + sugar + tea + spice
How to make	Simmer in milk and water, 5 minutes	Boiling water, 4 to 5 minutes, milk after	Add hot water, stir, drink
Cup character	Full, complex, fresh spice depth	Recognisably chai, less depth than fresh simmered	Sweet, milky, dessert leaning
Caffeine	Black tea base: 40 to 70mg	Black tea base: 40 to 70mg	Often light: 30 to 50mg
Sugar content	You add it (typically 1 to 2 tsp)	You add it	Pre added, often substantial (5 to 10g per cup)

All three are valid drinks, but they're three different things. The latte sachets aren't trying to be chai house chai; they're trying to be a coffee shop chai latte, which is a different drink with its own conventions.

Caffeine in chai

Standard masala chai uses a strong CTC Assam base, so caffeine sits in the 40 to 70mg per cup range, similar to a regular black tea. Lighter blends (Twinings standard chai, Yogi cardamom chai with smaller leaf content) sit lower at 30 to 50mg.

For caffeine free chai, see the rooibos chai variants in the rooibos range. Rooibos chai uses the same masala spice canon on a rooibos base instead of black tea, giving the warming spice cup without any caffeine. Pukka Vanilla Chai is the best known UK example. The full caffeine context across all tea families is in the ultimate caffeine guide.

Dirty chai, masala chai with espresso

Western invention but it works. A "dirty chai" is a chai latte with a shot of espresso added. The combination of chai's warming spice and espresso's bitter intensity gives you a sweet spiced cup with a coffee backbone, popular with people who want both a chai latte and a morning caffeine kick. Drink Me Chai sells a Dirty Chai sachet for the home version.

Chai latte recipes (Western style)

If you don't want to go the simmer on the stove route, the easiest route to a credible chai latte at home:

1. Brew one strong chai tea bag in 100ml of just off boiling water for 4 minutes.
2. Heat 200ml of whole milk or oat milk separately, almost to a simmer.
3. Whisk the milk with a hand frother to develop a foamy top.
4. Pour the brewed chai into a mug, top with the frothed milk.
5. Add 1 teaspoon of sugar, honey, or maple syrup if you want it sweet.

The whole thing takes 6 minutes, gives you a near coffeehouse cup, and costs maybe 30p of ingredients. If you do this regularly, a £15 hand milk frother is the only kit upgrade worth making.

Regional variations across India

- **Kashmiri chai (noon chai).** Pink salty tea, green tea + baking soda + salt + milk + nuts. Distinct tradition, not spiced like masala.
- **Bombay cutting chai.** Half cup ("cutting"), strong, sweet. Mumbai street standard.
- **Adrak chai.** Ginger led version, often less cardamom heavy. Popular in colder regions.
- **Elaichi chai.** Cardamom led version, more aromatic, less spicy.
- **Sulaimani chai.** Black tea only (no milk) sweet tea with lemon and cardamom. South Indian Muslim tradition.
- **Tandoori chai.** Newer trend, terracotta cup is heated in a tandoor oven, milk tea poured over the hot cup creates a smoky caramelised cup. Photogenic and increasingly common at Indian weddings.

Chai outside India

- **Pakistani chai (doodh patti).** Similar to Indian but tends toward heavier milk content. "Doodh patti" literally means "milk leaves", the tea is brewed entirely in milk with no water.
- **Iranian chai.** Black tea, usually unmilked, served with sugar cubes held between the teeth. Cardamom flavoured but not the masala style spice mix.
- **Turkish çay.** Black tea, very strong, served in tulip shaped glasses. No milk, no spices. Different category but the same word.
- **Russian chai.** Black tea brewed strong in a samovar concentrate, then diluted with hot water. Lemon and sugar; sometimes jam.
- **Western "chai latte".** Café version popularised by Starbucks and others, chai concentrate or syrup blended with steamed milk. Sweeter, milkier, less spice forward than authentic masala chai.

What we stock

Browse the chai range through the black tea range (most chai is on a black tea base) and the rooibos range for caffeine free chai variants. The most bought lines:

- Drink Me Chai Latte Selection Box, 6 Sachets 93g
- Dragonfly Organic Cape Chai Rooibos, 40 Tea Bags 80g
- PG Tips Chai Special Blend, 70 Tea Bags 175g
- Drink Me Chai Chocolate Chai Latte, 225g
- Drink Me Chai Dirty Chai Latte, 200g
- Tea India Ginger Chai, 40 Tea Bags 100g

The brands that matter in the chai space:

- Tea India, CTC Assam base, traditional masala spice canon, brewed in milk style. The closest UK supermarket chai to the railway station original.
- Drink Me Chai, the UK chai latte powder specialist; Spiced, Vanilla, Chocolate, Apple Pie, Sticky Toffee, Dirty Chai variants
- Pukka, rooibos based vanilla chai, the caffeine free option
- Twinings, mainstream Earl Grey tradition take, available everywhere
- Yogi Tea, the original Western chai brand, founded by yoga teacher Yogi Bhajan in 1969 specifically as a class end chai blend

Chai vs other tea families

Chai is not a different plant; it's a way of preparing black tea with spices and milk. Compared to plain black tea, the cup has the same caffeine, the same tannin backbone, plus an additional spice layer that needs the milk to balance. Compared to plain green tea or rooibos, the cup is dramatically different in character because of the spices and the milk and sugar tradition.

If you're new to chai and want the entry level version: a Drink Me Chai sachet with hot water on a desk at work. If you want the proper version: a Tea India Masala Chai bag, simmered in milk and water with a teaspoon of sugar. Both are valid; one is a 30 second drink, the other is a 6 minute routine.

For the wider tea family map see the black tea overview (the chai base), the rooibos overview (caffeine free chai base), and the herbal and fruit infusions guide. For the brewing fundamentals across all families, the loose leaf brewing guide.

Source

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · A chai tin you reach for daily beats a drawer of half tried ones. Rotate two or three chais you actually drink.

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