Chai vs Chai Latte

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Chai vs latte, in summary:** Chai vs chai latte: traditional Indian masala vs Western coffee shop sweet milky version. UK independent tea guide. Free UK delivery £35+, free sample.

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

Chai is the spiced black tea drink with thousands of years of Indian heritage; chai latte is the Western coffee shop adaptation that adds steamed milk, sweetener, and often a syrup based concentrate. Both are warm, spiced, comforting drinks built on similar ingredients, but the preparation, sugar content, calories, and flavour intensity differ dramatically between a properly brewed chai and a Starbucks style chai latte. The most common British coffee shop chai latte is closer to a spiced milkshake than to traditional Indian chai.

This guide covers the actual differences, what's in each version, and how to make a proper chai at home that's a fraction of the cost and calories of the coffee shop equivalent.

The headline differences

	Traditional chai (masala chai)	Coffee shop chai latte
Origin	India, thousands of years	Western coffee shops, 1990s onwards
Base tea	Strong Assam black tea, brewed loose	Concentrated chai syrup or pre mixed powder
Spices	Fresh whole spices, simmered	Spice flavoured concentrate, often with vanilla
Milk	Whole milk, simmered with the tea and spices	Steamed milk added separately
Sweetener	Sugar, jaggery, or honey	Sugar (often a lot), syrups
Calories per serving	80 to 150	200 to 350
Sugar per serving	5 to 15g (controlled by maker)	30 to 50g (typical)
Caffeine	40 to 70mg (full black tea brew)	30 to 60mg (depending on concentrate)
Cost per serving	£0.20 to £0.50 at home	£3.50 to £5.50 at a chain

What "chai" actually means

"Chai" simply means "tea" in Hindi, Urdu, and several related languages. The drink we call chai in English is more accurately called *masala chai* in India ("spiced tea") or just chai in everyday speech. Calling it "chai tea " in English is technically saying "tea tea", but the convention is so established it's now standard usage.

Traditional masala chai is a specific preparation: strong black tea (almost always Assam) simmered with whole spices, milk, and sweetener over heat. The exact spice mix varies by region, household, and personal preference, but the canonical blend includes:

- Cardamom pods (the defining note of most chai)
- Fresh ginger root
- Cinnamon stick
- Cloves
- Black peppercorns
- Sometimes star anise, fennel seeds, or nutmeg

Different regions emphasise different spices: Mumbai style chai often features more ginger; Punjabi chai often features more cardamom; some southern Indian variants include lemongrass or saffron. There's no single "correct" recipe; there's a family of related preparations.

For more on the chai family see the chai tea overview.

The chai latte invention

The chai latte as known in British coffee shops is a Western adaptation, popularised in the late 1990s and 2000s by US coffee chains looking for a non coffee warm drink that fitted the espresso machine workflow. The format choice (concentrate or powder, plus steamed milk, plus optional sweetener) was driven by operational convenience: a barista can make a chai latte in 30 seconds without any tea brewing, just by combining concentrate with steamed milk.

The trade off is that almost every coffee shop chai latte uses a sweetened concentrate or powder rather than freshly brewed spiced tea. This is why a "small" chai latte from a major chain often contains 30 to 50g of sugar, more than a Coca Cola can. Some independent coffee shops and Asian market cafes do use proper brewed chai with sugar added to taste; the major chains almost always use the high sugar concentrate format.

The sugar problem

The single most important difference between traditional chai and a coffee shop chai latte: sugar content. A standard 16oz Starbucks Chai Latte (made with their classic chai concentrate) contains approximately 42g of sugar; a Costa Massimo Chai Latte similarly. That's around 10 teaspoons of sugar per serving, more than the WHO recommended maximum daily added sugar intake for an adult.

A properly made traditional chai contains only the sugar the maker chooses to add, typically 1 to 2 teaspoons (5 to 10g) for sweetness without dominance. The same drink, made with the same ingredients and the same calories of tea and spice base, can have 4 to 8 times less sugar depending on preparation.

For drinkers who really enjoy chai but are wary of the sugar load, the answer is straightforward: make it at home, or order from coffee shops that brew proper chai (ask before ordering; if they say “we use a syrup concentrate” the answer is the high sugar version).

How to make proper chai at home

Authentic Indian style masala chai for one mug:

1. **Bring 100ml of water to the boil** in a small saucepan
2. **Add 4 cardamom pods (lightly crushed), 2 cloves, 1cm of fresh ginger sliced thinly, a small piece of cinnamon stick, and 2 black peppercorns**
3. **Simmer for 3 minutes** to extract the spice flavours
4. **Add 1 teaspoon of loose leaf Assam tea or 1 strong black tea bag**
5. **Simmer for another 2 minutes**
6. **Add 150ml of whole milk**
7. **Bring back to a simmer (don't boil over) and cook for 2 to 3 minutes** to combine the flavours
8. **Add 1 to 2 teaspoons of sugar to taste**
9. **Strain into a mug through a fine sieve** to catch the spices

The whole process takes about 10 minutes from cold and produces a much better cup than any concentrate based chai latte. For an even quicker version, use Yogi Chai or Pukka Original Chai tea bags which contain pre ground spices and just need brewing in milk and water.

The shortcuts that work

For drinkers who want chai style tea without the full simmer and strain process, several reasonable shortcuts exist:

- **Chai tea bags brewed in milk:** brew a strong chai tea bag in 100ml of water for 4 minutes, then add 150ml of warmed milk and a teaspoon of sugar. Half the work of traditional chai, three quarters of the flavour.
- **Loose leaf chai blends:** brands like Teapigs Chai offer pre blended whole spice loose leaf chai that you can simmer in milk and water without separately measuring spices.
- **Chai lattes at home from concentrate:** buy a Pukka or Drink Me Chai concentrate, mix with hot milk and sweeten to taste. Higher quality than coffee shop chai latte, lower sugar than typical coffee shop versions.
- **Yogi Chai or Tetley Masala Chai** supermarket chai tea bags that are decent everyday options when brewed in a 50/50 milk water mix.

Iced chai latte

An increasingly popular summer drink. To make properly at home:

1. Brew chai concentrate (3 chai tea bags in 200ml of water for 5 minutes, removed)

2. Cool to room temperature
3. Pour over ice in a tall glass
4. Top with cold milk (oat milk works particularly well for iced chai)
5. Sweeten with a teaspoon of vanilla syrup or honey

The result is a fraction of the cost of a coffee shop iced chai latte (which typically uses the same high sugar concentrate) and lets you control the sweetness yourself.

The caffeine comparison

Both traditional chai and coffee shop chai latte contain similar caffeine amounts (40 to 70mg per cup) since the base tea component is comparable. Coffee shop chai latte caffeine varies by chain: Starbucks runs slightly higher, Costa slightly lower, independent coffee shops vary widely. None matches a coffee on caffeine; chai is a moderate caffeine drink not a high caffeine one.

For caffeine sensitive drinkers who love the chai flavour, decaf chai versions exist (Pukka, Drink Me Chai) and rooibos based chai is naturally caffeine free. See the rooibos overview for the rooibos chai option and the caffeine guide for the wider context.

Which one for which drinker?

- **Wants the authentic chai flavour:** traditional chai brewed at home with whole spices
- **Wants the chai latte experience without the sugar:** brew chai concentrate at home and add steamed milk with controlled sweetening
- **Occasional treat from coffee shop:** accept the sugar load as the cost of the convenience
- **Daily chai habit on a budget:** home brewing saves £15 to £25 a week vs a daily coffee shop chai latte
- **Caffeine free chai** look for rooibos based chai blends or decaf chai versions
- **Quick everyday cup:** supermarket chai tea bags brewed in milk and water with honey

What we stock

Browse the chai tea range. The most bought chai products on teas.co.uk:

- 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

Brand level archives: Pukka, Drink Me Chai, Yogi, Teapigs, Twinings reference.

The verdict

Traditional chai and coffee shop chai latte are related but not equivalent drinks. The traditional version is an authentic, low sugar, high flavour spiced tea with thousands of years of heritage. The coffee shop version is a Western adaptation that traded preparation time for convenience and (usually) added a lot of sugar in the process.

If you've only ever had coffee shop chai latte and like the flavour, try making proper chai at home. The cost saving is dramatic, the sugar saving is dramatic, and the actual flavour is better than any concentrate based version. The 10 minutes of preparation is the price of admission to a much better drink, and the spice ratios can be tuned to your taste in a way no chain coffee version can match.

For the wider context see the chai tea overview, the black tea overview, the rooibos overview for caffeine free chai, the caffeine guide, and the best tea for PCOS guide for the cinnamon and blood sugar context.

Source cited

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

Common picks around this topic: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. For more, the full tea shop ships free across the UK over £35.

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