Bubble Tea at Home

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Boba at home, in summary:** Make boba at home for about 40p a cup versus a fiver on the high street. The tea base, the pearls, the syrup step and the kit.

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

Boba, also called bubble tea or pearl milk tea, is a Taiwanese drink invented in the 1980s and now a global category. Made at home it costs about £0.40 a cup; bought from a high street chain it costs £5. The kit fits in a kitchen drawer. This guide covers the technique clearly.

What boba actually is

A drink built from three layers: tea (usually a strong black or green base), milk (dairy or non dairy plus sweetener), and tapioca pearls, dried starchy balls that cook into chewy "bubbles" at the bottom of the cup. Drunk through an oversized straw because the pearls need to fit through. The "bubble" in the name originally referred to the foam from shaking, not the tapioca.

The kit you need

- **Strong black or green tea.** Assam works (heavy, takes milk). Genmaicha or roasted oolong for green base. Strong brewed: 4-5 minutes, double strength.
- **Tapioca pearls.** Dried boba pearls (£3-5 per pack online or in any Asian supermarket). Cook 25 minutes in boiling water then 25 minutes resting, packets vary.
- **Sweetener.** Brown sugar syrup is traditional. Honey, agave, or condensed milk all work.
- **Milk.** Whole dairy, oat, soy, almond, preference. Coconut for a tropical version.
- **Wide straws.** Reusable bamboo or metal boba straws are standard.

The basic recipe

1. **Brew the tea double strength.** 4 grams of leaf or 2 tea bags per 250ml water, 5 minutes. Cool to room temperature or chill.
2. **Cook the pearls.** Boil 1L water, drop in pearls, simmer 20-25 minutes stirring occasionally. They float when cooked. Drain.

3. **Sweeten the pearls.** Toss them in brown sugar syrup (3 parts sugar to 1 part water, dissolved). The pearls absorb the syrup and gain flavour. Most homemade boba fails because this step is skipped.
4. **Assemble.** Pearls in the bottom of a tall glass. Tea over the top. Milk poured in (or shake everything together for a frothy version). Ice. Wide straw.

Variations worth knowing

- **Classic milk tea boba.** Strong black tea + condensed milk + brown sugar pearls. The original.
- **Matcha boba.** Matcha whisked with milk + pearls. Vivid green, slightly bitter, popular.
- **Taro boba.** Taro powder (purple yam) + milk + pearls. Sweet, nutty, identifiably Taiwanese.
- **Brown sugar fresh milk boba.** No tea, milk + brown sugar syrup + pearls. The "tigersugar" trend.
- **Fruit tea boba.** Cold brewed fruit tea + popping fruit boba (different, these are juice filled membranes, not tapioca).

Calories and sugar

A high street boba clocks in around 300-500 calories and 40-60g sugar, comparable to a milkshake. Homemade can be substantially lower if you control the syrup. Tapioca pearls themselves are mostly starch (~120 calories per typical serve), low in nutrients but not "bad", comparable to a small portion of rice.

Why we stock the boba category

Most UK supermarkets don't carry boba pearls or specifically boba friendly teas. We do, because making the drink at home is well worth the effort and because UK customers who ask for it can't find a single source elsewhere. The savings vs high street boba are substantial (one £4 packet of pearls = ~12 home servings).

FAQ

Is boba tea? The base is tea (usually) but the drink as a whole is a category of its own. Some boba is made with non tea bases (milk only, fruit juice).

How long do tapioca pearls last after cooking? 4-6 hours at room temperature. They harden in the fridge, don't refrigerate cooked pearls, just use them fresh.

Are popping boba the same as tapioca pearls? No. Popping boba are juice filled gel spheres that burst. Tapioca pearls are chewy starchy balls that need cooking.

Best tea for boba? Strong Assam or Ceylon black tea for classic milk tea boba. Matcha for green base. Genmaicha for a Japanese leaning version.

Curator's note: homemade boba is a Saturday afternoon project that pays off all week. £4 of pearls makes 12 cups; the high street equivalent is £60. Lee, teas.co.uk.

Home versus high street, the economics

	Made at home	High street chain
Cost per cup	about £0.40	£4 to £7

	Made at home	High street chain
Pearls	£3 to £5 a pack, about 12 servings	included in the cup price
Sugar control	full, you set the syrup	fixed unless you ask
Kit	fits in a drawer, reused for months	none, but no saving either

The arithmetic is the whole argument for the category: one four pound packet of pearls against roughly sixty pounds of high street equivalent for the same dozen drinks, with the bonus that you control the sugar, which is where shop boba quietly carries a milkshake sized load. The one step that decides whether home boba is good or disappointing is not the tea, it is soaking the cooked pearls in brown sugar syrup, because that is where their flavour comes from and it is the step most people skip.

FROM THE CURATOR

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