Bubble Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Bubble tea, in summary:** Bubble tea explained: where it came from, what is in the cup, whether it counts as tea, the sugar reality, and why the home version wins.

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

Bubble tea, also called boba, was invented in Taiwan in the 1980s, exported to East Asian diaspora communities in the 1990s, and reached UK high streets around 2010. By 2026 the UK bubble tea market is worth roughly £150 million a year and growing fastest among 16-30 year olds. Whether it qualifies as “tea” is a fair debate: most versions contain real tea, some don't. Either way we stock the home making kit because the high street markup is brutal.

Where it came from

Two Taiwanese tea shops claim to have invented bubble tea independently in the early 1980s, Chun Shui Tang in Taichung and Hanlin Tea Room in Tainan. Both added tapioca pearls to iced milk tea around 1986-88. The "bubble" name originally referred to the foam from shaking, not the tapioca; over time it shifted to mean the pearls. By the 2000s the drink had spread across East Asia, Australia, and California; Britain caught up around 2010.

What's in the cup

Three layers built into a tall plastic cup:

- **Tea base.** Strong brewed black or green tea, sometimes oolong. The tea itself is unsweetened until mixed.
- **Milk and sweetener.** Dairy or non dairy milk, condensed milk for the classic version, brown sugar syrup, honey, or fruit syrup.
- **Tapioca pearls.** Cooked tapioca starch balls, chewy, dark from caramel coating, sit at the bottom of the cup.

Drunk through an oversized straw, wide enough to suck the pearls up. Served cold with ice, occasionally hot.

Is it actually tea?

The traditional version is real tea (strong Assam or oolong) plus milk and pearls. Many modern variants are "milk tea" without much actual tea, heavy on syrups and powders, with the tea reduced to a tinted backdrop. "Brown sugar fresh milk" boba is just brown sugar syrup, milk, and pearls. "Strawberry milk tea" can be strawberry powder mixed with milk. The drink as currently sold spans a huge quality range.

Authentic bubble tea, Taiwanese style with proper black tea, condensed milk, brown sugar pearls, is unquestionably a tea drink. The neon blue Instagram versions with three colours of jelly are not, really. Both sell. More on where the line sits in what counts as tea.

Calories and sugar

A standard high street boba is 300-500 calories and 40-60g sugar. Comparable to a milkshake. The tapioca pearls themselves are mostly starch (~120 cal per typical serve). The sugar content is the thing, most of it from the brown sugar syrup or condensed milk, not from the tea or the pearls.

Homemade boba can be substantially lower in sugar if you control the syrup. A homemade "less sweet" version is more typical of how it's drunk in Taiwan, where the high street default sweetness in the UK would be considered cloying.

The home making case

UK high street boba: £4-6 per cup. Homemade: ~£0.40 per cup. The maths works hard for anyone drinking more than once a fortnight. The kit is small, boba pearls, strong tea, milk, sweetener, wide straws. A single £4 packet of pearls makes ~12 servings.

Full home making guide here.

Why we stock the boba category

Most UK supermarkets don't carry boba pearls or specifically boba friendly teas. We do: the drink repays making at home, and UK customers can't easily find a single source. Strong Assam for the classic version, oolong for a more refined cup, matcha for the green version, dried tapioca pearls in the standard sizes.

FAQ

Is bubble tea actually tea? The traditional version is. Many modern variants are barely tea, heavy on syrups and powders. Read the menu.

How many calories in bubble tea? Typically 300-500 per cup at high street; can be lower at home if you control the syrup.

Are tapioca pearls vegan? The pearls themselves yes (just starch). The drink may contain dairy milk; ask for oat or soy.

Does bubble tea contain caffeine? The tea base does, around 40-50mg for a proper black or green tea base, and less for a fruit or powder based drink.

Where to buy boba pearls UK? Most Asian supermarkets stock dried boba pearls. We stock them too, paired with the right teas for at home boba making.

Curator's note: bubble tea is well worth trying. The high street markup is the problem; the drink itself is good. Make it at home and you'll drink it more often, sweeter or less sweet, your call. Lee, teas.co.uk.

Variants and where the sugar sits

The category has grown well beyond the original milk tea. Across all of them the tea base is usually real, the defining experience is texture and sweetness, and the sugar load varies enormously by style and by the customisation you choose.

Variant	What it is	Sweetness
Classic milk tea	strong black or oolong, milk, brown sugar pearls	moderate, adjustable
Brown sugar / tiger	caramel syrup, pearls, milk, often little tea	highest
Fruit tea + popping boba	green or jasmine base, fruit, juice burst pearls	lighter
Cheese foam / cheese tea	salted sweet cream cap on tea	indulgent
Taro / matcha	starchy taro or matcha milk base	moderate high

To make the real version at home, start with a strong base from the black tea range or the full tea shop, then read the boba and bubble tea overview for the cultural and components depth.

On the shopping side, see the English tea range and loose leaf range.

Reference noted

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

FROM THE CURATOR

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Bubble tea companion reading

- Boba and bubble tea overview
- Bubble tea at home
- Bubble tea flavours and toppings
- Is bubble tea bad for you

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- Black tea
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