Chai From Scratch Recipe

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Chai from scratch recipe, in summary:** Authentic chai is a decoction, not an infusion: a strong CTC Assam and balanced whole spices simmered in milk and water. The spec and the method.

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

The 15-minute, made from scratch chai recipe is the one that actually changes how you think about the drink. Whole spices, fresh ginger, milk simmered into the cup, not steeped. The result is dramatically better than any tea bag and worlds away from a Starbucks chai latte. £0.50 of pantry ingredients, 15 minutes, two cups of the real thing.

Why "from scratch" matters

Pre ground spices in a tea bag have lost most of their volatile aromatic compounds. Whole cardamom pods, fresh ginger, and a stick of cinnamon (cracked just before brewing) deliver 3-4x the aromatic intensity. The pan brewing method also extracts compounds that don't release in a 4-minute steep. Together these produce a cup with depth, layering, and a finish that bagged chai really can't match.

The recipe (makes 2 generous cups)

Ingredients

- **Whole spices:**
  - 5 green cardamom pods (lightly crushed with the flat of a knife)
  - 1 small piece cinnamon stick (about 2cm, Ceylon cinnamon if you can get it)
  - 5 whole cloves
  - 5mm piece fresh ginger root (peeled, sliced thin)
  - 4-5 black peppercorns (cracked)
  - Optional: 1 star anise point, ¼ tsp fennel seeds
- **Tea:** 2 heaped teaspoons CTC Assam loose tea (or 2 strong tea bags torn open)
- **Liquids:** 250ml water, 350ml whole milk (or oat milk)
- **Sweetener:** 2 tsp sugar, jaggery, or honey (to taste)

Method

1. **Bruise the spices.** Crack the cardamom pods so the seeds inside are exposed. Snap the cinnamon stick in half. Crack the peppercorns with the flat of a knife. The bruising matters, whole intact spices barely release their oils.
2. **Spice infusion (4 minutes).** Add water, all spices, and sliced ginger to a small saucepan. Bring to a gentle simmer. Hold for 4 minutes. The water turns golden amber and the kitchen fills with the chai aroma. This is the step most rushed cooks skip, it's the foundation of the cup.
3. **Tea steep (4 minutes).** Add the tea. Reduce heat slightly. Simmer for 4 minutes. The cup deepens to a rich brown.
4. **Milk and sweetener (3 minutes).** Pour in the milk and sugar. Heat to just below boiling, when it starts to climb the pan, lift it off the heat for a moment, then return to the heat. Repeat 2-3 times. This "frothing up" technique is traditional and aerates the milk slightly.
5. **Strain and serve.** Pour through a fine sieve into mugs (a fine mesh tea strainer works very well). The cup should be deep golden brown with a faint head of foam.

Total active time: ~3 minutes. Total brewing time: ~15 minutes. Cost per cup: ~25p.

Why these spice ratios

- **Cardamom dominates.** 5 pods is on the higher end, Indian chai wallahs use generously. Cardamom provides the floral camphoraceous character that defines chai. Reduce to 3-4 if you find it too intense.
- **Ginger is the warmth.** Fresh sliced ginger releases gingerols slowly. Powdered ginger doesn't replicate the cup. Don't substitute.
- **Cloves are background.** Use sparingly, too many cloves make the cup taste like a chemist's shop and numb the tongue.
- **Black pepper is the surprise.** Most home cooks skip it; chai wallahs don't. The pepper rounds out the spice profile without making the cup hot.
- **Cinnamon: Ceylon vs Cassia.** Ceylon ("true" cinnamon) is sweeter and more delicate. Cassia (Chinese cinnamon, the common supermarket variety) is bolder and slightly more bitter. Both work; Ceylon gives a more refined cup.

Variations

Kerala style

Add a pinch of nutmeg and ¼ tsp fennel seeds. Heavier on cardamom, lighter on ginger. South Indian profile.

North Indian street style

Boil more aggressively, more sugar, less spice. The flavour of strong tea with hints of spice rather than spice led. Use 50-50 milk water and 3 tsp sugar.

Adrak (ginger led) chai

Triple the ginger, halve the other spices. Winter favourite for sore throats and cold mornings.

Caffeine free version

Replace black tea with 2 rooibos tea bags. The cup will be lighter bodied with a sweet woody base. More caffeine free chai options.

Decaf version

Use decaf CTC or decaf tea bags. 2-5mg residual caffeine per cup.

Iced from scratch chai

Brew double strength (halve the milk, hold the sweetener). Cool. Pour over ice in a tall glass, top with cold milk. The spices stay vivid even cold.

Equipment

You don't need anything special:

- Small saucepan (1 litre is ideal)
- Wooden spoon
- Fine mesh strainer or tea strainer
- Optional: a small mortar and pestle for bruising spices (or just use the flat of a knife)

Storage

Whole spices stored airtight in a cool dark place last 6-12 months at peak aroma, longer but fading thereafter. Replace cardamom and cloves every 6 months for best results, they fade faster than cinnamon and pepper.

Spice mix shortcut

To save time on weekday mornings, blend a dry spice mix in a small jar:

- 3 tbsp ground cardamom
- 2 tbsp ground cinnamon
- 1 tbsp ground ginger
- 1 tbsp ground cloves
- 1 tsp ground black pepper

Use ¼ tsp per cup. Less optimal than fresh whole spices, faster than measuring out pods. Replace every 3 months.

Buying the ingredients in the UK

- Whole spices: any UK supermarket spice aisle, but Indian groceries are far better value (£1.50 for cardamom that costs £6 at Sainsbury's).

- CTC Assam: Twinings Pure Assam or specialist Indian tea suppliers (Brooke Bond Red Label is the Indian street chai standard).
- Whole milk: any.
- Jaggery: Indian groceries; gives a more authentic flavour than white sugar.

FAQ

Can I use ground spices instead of whole? Yes, but the cup will be flatter. Use ¼ tsp of each ground spice per cup.

What's CTC tea? Crush Tear Curl, small pellets of black tea that brew strongly and quickly. The Indian chai standard.

Can I make chai with green tea? Not traditional, but it works. Use 1 tsp green tea, simmer for 2 minutes (not 4) to avoid bitterness.

How long does the brew keep? 24-48 hours in the fridge. Reheat gently (don't boil, milk separates). Add fresh milk if needed.

Can I scale this up? Yes, proportions hold. For 4 cups, double everything except the simmering time (still 4 + 4 + 3 minutes).

Curator's note: this is the recipe I default to on weekend mornings. Once you've made chai from whole spices, the bagged version permanently disappoints. The 15 minutes is the whole point, chai isn't a fast drink. Slow it down. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

This is the from scratch method; the milk led café style is the chai latte recipe, and the full background is the chai pillar. A strong CTC base and whole spices are in the full tea shop or a Pukka chai.

Reference noted

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

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