

For those longing to shake off the the last of winter's doldrums and spice up your life this spring, read about the outrageously popular Chai tea, and discover that this delicious drink is also quite healthy!



Mad About Chai!

Chai is cropping up everywhere. In cafés, in grocery stores, in health food stores. You'll find mixes, concentrated blends or spiced herbal tea bags and it's even in bath salts as a fragrance. But what exactly is chai, and what is the history of this outrageously popular tea-drink?

"Chai" is actually an abbreviation of masala chai, meaning a mixture of spices in a milky, sweetened tea. The roots of chai, trace back 5,000 years to India, Nepal, Pakistan and Tibet. Some say a royal king invented the drink in the ancient courts of India and Siam, then protected the recipe as one of his treasures. But chai's deepest root can be traced unmistakably to the ancient Indian medical system of Ayurveda. In Ayurveda, spices, herbs and oils, along with intricate diagnostic techniques are used as treatments for all manner of ailments. Chai was, in Ayurveda, a soothing, delicious *healthy drink*.

Classic masala chai contains a black tea base to which ground spices are added. Then, scalded or steamed milk is poured in. Vegetarian blends use soy milk as a dairy substitute. Classic chai is sweetened with honey although contemporary blends may white, brown or raw sugar.

At the India Café on Monroe Avenue in Rochester, Rajvir Kaur, 18, reported that several large pots must be made daily in order to keep up with customer demand, and the India House Restaurant in Victor, NY reported selling more teas than beer or wine. Chuck and Mary Durand, owners of Earthtones Coffee House in Webster, NY., have included chai on their drink menu since opening four years ago and currently have many regular customers who come daily for their cup of chai. Although co-owner of a café that has become popular for its' coffee drinks, Mary describes herself as an avid tea drinker and says chai is ideal for our Northeastern climate. "There are so many cold and damp months in Rochester; chai is the perfect drink for that."

Common Chai Ingredients

BLACK TEA has long been revered as a *digestion aid*, and has less caffeine than coffee. It's also a *gentle blood thinner* and helps to *lower cholesterol*.

CINNAMON is a *stimulant to other herbs* enabling them to work faster, and *naturally lowers high blood pressure*, *fighting staphylococcus, E.coli and thrush*. It also helps *relieve nausea, indigestion, gas and heartburn*. Further, Cinnamon *controls diarrhea and eases menstrual cramps*.

GINGER helps to *strengthen and heal the digestive and respiratory system*, as well as *fight off colds and flu*. Ginger aids congestion, soothes sore throats, and relieves body aches. Recent studies show ginger to be effective in *preventing motion sickness*; it helps *heal ulcers, supports cardiovascular health, reduces pain and inflammation*.

NUTMEG helps *moisten the airways* and reduce the drying of mucous membranes and the throat.

BLACK PEPPER stimulates the taste buds which increases hydrochloric acid secretion, thereby *improving digestion*. It also demonstrates impressive *antioxidant and antibacterial effects*, while the outer layer of the peppercorn stimulates the breakdown of fat cells.

GREEN TEA can be used in place of black tea to make chai and as it is naturally high in polyphenols, it provides *aggressive antioxidant action*. Green tea is high in vitamin C, helps *lower cholesterol and naturally inhibits fat absorption*. *In tests, skin cancer was reduced by simply rubbing green tea onto the skin*. In India, chai is available wherever people gather – on trains, in bus stations and in the marketplace, where it is sold by vendors called wallahs who call out "chai!" and serve it in low-fi red clay cups called chullahrs, made on open fires.

Editor's Pick for Chai Products

CHAI TEA BODY LOTION From the Shadow & Light Tea Collection A blend of Assam tea, green tea, vitamins A, E and D along with essential oils for a chai-inspired fragrance. www.shadowandlightinc.com

THE ORGANIC BATH COMPANY HONEY CHAI BODY SCRUB & SEA MINERAL BATH SOAK A blend infused with organic white tea, vitamin E and real caramel to produce a sweet and spicy aroma. www.organicbathco.com

ORGANIC BLACK CHAI by Yogi Tea. Naturally decaffeinated, requires only water and your choice of dairy or soy milk. Spiced with organic herbs and spices, sweetened with stevia leaf (natural sweetener). www.yogitea.com

TAZO VANILLA CHAI Black Teas from Kenya and India paired with Madagascar vanilla, lightly sweetened with organic cane sugar. www.Tazo.com