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High chai: the drink awakening Melbourne

Mary O'Brien

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THERE'S a glint of excitement in Tim Tehan's eye as he reminisces about his three-month trip to India. On a sunny winter's day in Fitzroy, the sweet and spicy aromas of a chai latte trigger memories of long ago and far away - steamy hot train journeys across the subcontinent with chai wallahs wandering up and down selling their teas.

Tehan remembers imbibing many a sweet cuppa as he travelled to stay with family friends in Lucknow. When the chai was finished, people would chuck their cups out the window of the moving train.

Years later when he set up his cafe, Birdman Eating, on Gertrude Street, customers started asking for chai. So he spent quite a while searching for the right product, a chai tea that would replicate the authentic spices of the Indian beverage, but that could be made efficiently in a cafe.

"The T2 tea pushed all the right buttons," he says. "The aromatic flavours really come through. They've got heaps of cinnamon. The sweetness shouldn't come from the chai mixture; it should come partly from the soy milk, which has a hint of sweetness but, mostly, it should come from the honey."

Tehan's chai latte smells good, looks pretty and is served in a red Turkish pot, topped with frothy milk and decorated with a dash of chai leaves. There's a drinking glass, a little jug of honey and a strainer. Part of the fun is pouring, straining and stirring to your personal taste - it's like a modern-day tea ceremony.

The chai latte has come of age. No longer just a drink that people have at hippie markets or after returning from Asian adventures, chai is available at most cafes in Melbourne. Some places offer chai tea, but the invention of the chai latte has moved the drink into the mainstream market.

"It's a nice alternative," Tehan says. "You've got your traditionalists who like to start the day with two long blacks (I'm probably one myself), then you've got people who only have one cup of coffee and they have a chai in the afternoon."

In India "chai" means tea. "Masala chai" - a blend of tea brewed with spices, milk and sweeteners - became popular on the subcontinent in the early 20th century. About five years ago, chai tea underwent a revival and started appearing on cafe menus in the US and Australia. The invention of the chai latte, where the steamed milk of a cafe latte is added to spiced tea made it a cafe-friendly drink.

The other big difference with this new age chai is that tea merchants say it is best matched with soy milk, which makes it a healthy alternative. In India, condensed milk, milk powders and dairy milk were used.

The chai revolution has been kind to Caitlin West. She started Calmer Sutra Tea in 2003, partly as a drink for herself. "I had my first chai when I was a teenager 17 years ago at a festival and it was love at first sip," says West, sitting in her funky teahouse in East Brighton. "My aim was to create a product that closely resembled authentic chai, which could be brewed on a stove top or in a big pot, and make it cafe or barista friendly."

What started as a hobby has become a successful business. West says her sales have increased 350 per cent in five years and she now supplies 450 cafes in Australia, most in Melbourne. What makes Calmer Sutra tea unique is that it is a fresh, hand-ground "wet" product that must be kept in the fridge. It's a blend of eight fresh whole spices (including cinnamon quills, cardamom pods and star anise flowers) with ginger root, tea and Australian honey.

"You would be hard-pressed today to find a cafe that doesn't serve chai," says West. "It's a popular choice for a lot of people who don't drink coffee, but also coffee drinkers like an alternative. It's a bit more of a health-conscious choice as it's got lots of beneficial and healing properties."



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"It's not really like tea - even though it does have tea leaves in there - but they're only a small component. It's more a milky drink. We do have people drinking it who don't really like tea."

Chai is here to stay, says Maryanne Shearer, founder and head of T2, one of Australia's largest tea retailers. "It's a great introduction to tea from coffee because it has all the power and kick of a cup of coffee. Chai or chai latte will give coffee drinkers a bit of bang for their buck."

She says there was a chai boom about four years ago and chai is now one of her three top-selling teas. T2 sells "enormous quantities" of chai, she says.

"In the winter months, chai becomes very popular. All chai is best done in the traditional way, brewed with milk and water. You can add things - cracked pepper or chilli - to the pot depending on your mood."

There's no traditional chai recipe, Shearer says. Different regions of India have different versions of chai, depending on what grows locally. T2 chai has a traditional black tea base with classic Indian spices such as cardamom, cinnamon, star anise, ginger, cloves and pepper. She also does a red chai, a chocolate chip chai, a spi chai and an organic version.

Tea merchants such as Shearer and David Zhou of Oriental Tea House have mixed feelings about chai. It's great because it has become a popular drink, but it's not a delicate tea for refined palates.

"Chai tea is not a really serious tea," Zhou says. "It's kind of a casual, fun tea where the strong spices overtake the tea. The sugar, honey and milk are strong things that capture the taste buds."

He believes chai latte is a good way to introduce people to tea. "It makes it easy to enjoy drinking tea. If they start on this easy-to-drink tea, hopefully, they will start to develop some kind of palate for tea."

Chai lattes have taken off because some coffee drinkers were looking for an alternative - a sweet, warm, milky drink without the caffeine overload that they could have as a pick-me-up in the afternoon.

Zhou says real tea and coffee drinkers aren't opting for chai - it's the people in the middle who drink it and, of course, there are a lot of them. "And it's a perfect winter drink for someone who feels cold often - yang deficiency as it is a yang type of tea."

Chai tea is popular in Zhou's Oriental Tea House retail range of teas. Sales have increased by 30 per cent in the past five years and chai is in his top-five teas. His recipe includes citrus peel, cloves, rose petals, almond pieces and flavouring.

Lisa Hilbert of Tea Tonic, a trained naturopath, has closely watched chai take off over the past two years. Her Tea Tonic chai (a low-tannin black tea with liquorice root, cardamom, nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon and ginger) is now one of her top three teas and due to demand she recently launched her chai into retail outlets (which include David Jones). She says a few of the cafes that she supplies, such as Federici on Spring Street in the city, now sell almost as much chai as coffee.

Australians have really taken to chai, especially those in cooler climates such as Victoria, says Nathan Wakeford of Somage Fine Foods, which supplies tea to 800 cafes in Australia and New Zealand. His Chamellia organic chai is a blend of Ceylon and natural organic spices such as pepper, clove, cinnamon and cardamom.

Wakeford says the chai we drink here is a milkier drink than the Indian version. Our cafe culture has been dominated by coffee, but people are becoming more interested in alternative quality beverages. He believes the big trend in the future will be a move towards more natural products and fine chai teas or powders that are quick to prepare in cafes.

One of the downsides of the chai boom is the emergence of chai liquids and powders. While they may make it easier for cafes to serve up a quick chai, they taste different, they often have additives and, basically, they are not real tea. Not surprisingly, the tea people don't like these drinks.

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"These are shocking," says T2's Shearer. "Basically, it's like an instant drink. For us, chai is a process."

West says these aren't teas at all: "The instant powders and syrups taste more like a hot milkshake. These days, concentrates and powders are very popular, but they're very different to a loose-leaf variety. There's not much real in those. It's a very different end product to what we do."

Zhou is worried that chai will lose its romance and may end up as a convenience drink in 7-Elevens. Will the continuing demand for chai destroy the authentic drink or will it rise above its powdered imitators and retain its traditional appeal? If tea merchants and the increasing number of cafes serving good chai have their way, our love affair is only just beginning.

10 PLACES TO TRY

1. Birdman Eating, 238 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy (T2)
2. Amici Bakery Cafe, 242 Chapel Street, Prahran (Calmer Sutra)
3. Soul food, 273 Smith Street, Fitzroy (Oriental TeaHouse)
4. Frangos & Frangos, 82 Vincent Street, Daylesford (T2)
5. Calmer Sutra Teahouse, 622 Hawthorn Road, Brighton East
6. Tusk, 133 Chapel Street, Windsor (Oriental Tea House)
7. Mag Nation, 88 Elizabeth Street, city (T2)
8. House, 455 Chapel Street, South Yarra
9. San Sebastian, 303 Hampton Street, Hampton (Calmer Sutra)
10. Christos's Piazza, Caffe & Gelato, Shop 5/2353 Point Nepean Highway, Rye (Oriental Tea House)

MAKE CHAI AT HOME

BUY a good-quality chai tea. Warm a small plunger or teapot. Add two heaped teaspoons of chai, half fill with hot water and let it brew. Steam soy milk or heat and froth. Add milk to plunger or teapot and stir well. Allow to brew for a couple of minutes. Plunge or pour and strain. Serve honey on the side. Check your chai for exact quantities. For a more traditional drink you can dry roast and grind your own spices, which will keep in a container for several months. Add to tea and simmer in a saucepan with milk and honey.

t2tea.com/shop-for-tea/scented-flavoured/black/chai/

calmersutratea.com.au

sbs.com.au/food/recipe/570/Masala_chai

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/restaurants-and-bars/high-chai-the-drink-awakening-melbourne-20100719-10hbc.html>