

The History of Medicinal Chai

By Mas Vidal



When most people hear the word spices they will usually equate them with flavors and foods of Asian culture and most particularly India. The original name for India is Mahabharata and reflected vast geography much larger than the current size of India today. Of the close to six thousand herbs and spices that are known in medicinal pharmacology, at least 4,500 can be found on the Indian continent. This mainly has to do with the Himalayas as the largest mountain region in the world that produced vast river systems on its lower plains in the northern part of the country. In fact, during the Vedic era (at least 1000 B.C.) the region was referred to as the land of the seven rivers.

The term *chai* simply means tea and is known to the world as a blend or *masala* of spices to drink in the morning or during an afternoon break. The practice of drinking spices in milk or combined with water is common in India and includes spices such as ginger, cardamom, peppercorns, cinnamon and others depending on the region. Three different regions in India offer distinct variations of chai, Gujarat, Maharastra and Bengal. These different styles of chai developed over time according to the regions history. Additionally, many of the invaders to India influenced it in some way or another. It seems probable that it was the Portuguese¹ who are responsible for spreading knowledge of chai outside of the Indian continent into Europe and then eventually to the Americas. It was the British that added black tea to chai and encouraged companies and laborers to enjoy afternoon tea (high-tea) which was a longtime ritual in England before colonizing India. However this was more than continuing a ritual it was a ploy to encourage tea drinking and increase sales of both domestic use and export of tea to Europe.

¹ Portuguese India was established as the state of the Portuguese Overseas Empire from 1505 - 1961, mainly in the region of Goa, on the south western coast.



Chai as a spiced drink is best to have in early in the morning as these spices have a particular benefit to the digestive system. Balanced digestion is one of the cornerstones of Ayurvedic medicine and digestion is the mother of all systems as it is the body's primary function that sustains the health. The health of the fetus in pregnancy is largely dependent on the mothers' digestion and her choice in foods and lifestyle. Drinking chai in the morning is a great practice for managing Kapha dosha and offset the increase of body fat by creating a strong metabolism. Each ingredient in chai contains a multitude of benefits, it is essentially of a cup of tasty medicine; from digestion to the complexion, improved immunity, and circulation. When the British added black tea to chai it changed substantially, as black tea leaves contain a high amount of caffeine and when consumed daily as is the common case, it can tax the adrenal glands and can lead to chronic fatigue syndrome. Caffeine is not recommended in the least for Vata (air) types or anyone struggling from poor sleep, nervousness or poor concentration. Chai is best without the black tea, the way it was originally intended according to Ayurveda's practical wisdom.

Originally chai was prepared with cow's milk but over the last century its common practice to combine it with water and milk in a 50/50 ratio. Today, few and fewer people in western culture are drinking cows milk as a result of the inhumane treatment of cows and especially the hormones² that are injected into them create many hormonal related problems particularly in young (pre-teenage)

² (rBGH) is a synthetic (man-made) hormone that is marketed to dairy farmers to increase milk production in cows. It has been used in the United States since it was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1993.

girls. The use of this hormone is not permitted in the European Union, Canada and many other countries.

In my Ayurvedic counseling practice I spend much time encouraging my clients to reduce the amount of dairy and caffeine they consume and much of this varies depending on their constitution. The other issue with drinking chai is in regards to how it is sweetened, as many franchises aim to sell more drinks they sweeten chai with high amounts of sugar. High amounts of sugar in the modern diet has been linked to diabetes, obesity, inflammatory conditions psychological addiction.

Traditionally, in Ayurveda honey is used to take herbal medicines as it is a wonderful medicinal food in itself and considered highly purifying for the mind, improves vision and increases the synergistic quality of herbs and spices when taken together. All sugar is made by first extracting sugar juice from sugar beet or sugar cane plants, however, the problem lies in the processing that occurs after this initial extraction. Jaggery, is a form of sugar mostly produced in Maharashtra, India and its use dates back thousands of years as mentioned in Ayurvedic texts. Chai is much more effective and soothing when it is sweetened with honey or jaggery and does not take away from the savory tastes of the spices. Powerful energizing jams like the classic chyvanaprash are also sometimes sweetened with jaggery. The main issue with the chai sold in commercial places is the poor quality of spices, the processing of the spice blend and the type of milk and sugar that is used.

Ideally, the best form of chai is derived from organic fresh spices that are brewed with some type of organic nut milk of your choice however it is not comparable to the restorative properties of cows milk. Such a blend brings great enhancement to the digestive, circulatory, and immune systems and works best when integrated into a lifestyle regimen and enjoyed in the morning when kapha dosha is predominant between 6-10am. Drinking chai will promote bowel regularity and keep you connected to using spices in your diet for health and wellness and not just using spices for special occasions, using spices daily is essential to health. Mother Nature has given the world such remarkable food medicines in the form of spices, the world owes much to wisdom of Ayurveda that has made its way around the world in the form a sweet little cup of tea. Chai Ma!



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Yogi, mystic and practitioner of Ayurveda, Mas has become an influential teacher of Yoga and Ayurveda, integrating a background of athletics, therapeutics, science and ecology into a dynamic synthesis that has led to him becoming an innovative voice in the field of integral Yoga and Ayurveda. He offers unique certification and educational programs internationally and maintains an active counseling practice that embraces Vedanta, Ayurveda and Vedic astrology. He follows the lineage teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda of the Self Realization Fellowship and Swami Jyotirmayananda of the Sivananda lineage and in 2014 he appeared in the triumphant film *Awake, The Life Of Yogananda*. As director of Dancing Shiva, an educational organization based in southern California, he promotes health, wellness and societal reform by means of embracing universal spirituality and a natural approach to lifestyle. He also maintains an active ayurvedic astrology counseling practice and international teaching schedule.

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