

FEMINA

Chai Is The Thread That Weaves Stories Together For Mira Manek

Written by [Primrose Monteiro DSouza](#)

Posted on Jul 26, 2024, 07:50 IST

The Book Of Chai by Mira Manek is truly an ode to the ritual of tea, but also goes way beyond in the stories she tells



***The Book Of Chai* by Mira Manek is truly an ode to the ritual of tea, but also goes way beyond**

Chai has always been a part of Mira Manek's life. The London-based author and entrepreneur's journey is a series of reminiscences. Memories of drinking *ukaro chai* as a child in London, travelling with cups of tea, it seems, from one chaiwala to the next through India, being buoyed by chai through lonely days in university, making it her "happy place" when travelling and living abroad in Dubai and Uganda. After her marriage ended and she came back to London, Mira fell into a food and wellness career almost by chance. By popular demand, she began making a chai spice mix – and her business Chai By Mira came about. In short order, she launched her café Chai By Mira in a central London yoga studio – serving everything from Rose Chai and Chai Latte as well as wholesome Ayurvedic food (one of Mira's previous books is *Prajna: Ayurvedic Rituals For Happiness*).

It is truly as if Mira took the personal – the comfort she received from her own ritual of brewing tea with spices – and made it social – in the form of the café – and then went entrepreneurial. Her Chai By Mira brand goes to cafés, hotels and restaurants in the UK, and is available worldwide. She finally translated it into her third book, *The Book Of Chai: History, Stories And Recipes* (Hachette India).

The café has since shut down, the chai brand is doing very well, thank you, and Mira has put her vivid memories associated with tea from her childhood and youth into this book. "*The Book Of Chai* is a vehicle to tell my personal stories, to delve into my treasure trove of memories, to encapsulate the details from my grandmother's childhood – to share and preserve them – with chai as the thread that weaves these stories together."



Mira with her grandmother Bhanuben

The book explores the history of tea in India, how masala chai was born, the fascinating fact that, although tea is the country's national drink, it wasn't drunk in India until the 1900s, and a slew of teas from across India. There are also recipes – different types of regional teas, snacks to be relished with tea (think *pakoras* and the more unusual *handvo* cupcakes) and

dishes to be made with tea and the associated spices. But what distinguishes *The Book Of Chai* most is the Mira in it, in the form of her India travel stories centred around chai. Stories in which she delves into her grandmother's childhood memories of growing up in a village in Gujarat, of milking cows, and other interesting stories woven around the blends. "It was the stories I started writing first; the rest, the history and recipes and the structure, all came after."

Deciding which recipes would go into the book was not easy. "I wanted to feature as many, if not all, the regional teas or chais I could find, and there really are so many – from the salt chai or *namak-wali* chai up North, closer to the Himalayas, as well as a yak butter tea, to a stronger more gingery and sweeter blend in Rajasthan and Gujarat, the cutting chai of Mumbai, and the Kashmiri *kahwa*. Snacks to have with chai were just as important, of course. In this book, it's a mix of typical dishes such as chilli cheese toast to my own creations such as corn fritters. Lastly, I wanted there to be a celebration of spices in food, so there is everything from Carrot Cake Masala Chai Cupcakes to Chai Spiced Overnight Oats and Saffron Biscuits."

Is talking about tea to Indians like selling ice to Eskimos? "Chai is an emotion; it means different things to different people. It is something to slow you down, to take a moment and breathe, to feel the spices warm the body, to feel the tea awaken the senses and the sugar send a rush of energy to the brain. And I think most Indians will identify. For many to whom I've spoken, chai is 'home', it takes them back to family, to rituals, to memories. I've tried to encapsulate chai through my stories in different parts of India, on train journeys, in the monsoons, the cities and the villages – I hope readers will connect with the memories and emotions encapsulated in these stories." She hopes to inspire readers "to travel and create your own stories and memories."

The India Connection

Although Mira is based in London, India has always been a second home. "I've travelled all over India, but have spent more time in Mumbai as well as Gujarat. I still come a few times a year and often spend a month at a time there. There's a sense of feeling at home when I land in India, like my soul or some part of me just belongs there. And each part of India is so different, so diverse, both in culture, customs and food. It is India that truly feeds my soul, gives me spiritual fulfilment, and in which I find inspiration."

The One That Got Away

In hindsight, Mira would have liked to have added a simple but “pretty awesome recipe” – a chai butter. “I’ve made it many times using my blends and it is delicious!”