

# Chai, served with a side of yaadein

This new book on India's favourite beverage includes recipes for tea and a story about different seasons, times of day, and moods

**NASRIN MODAK SIDDIQI**

AMID Lucknow's gulabi thand (mild winter), we had one of the most unexpected treats one night. A stall opposite the Rumi Darwaza sells this beautiful Kashmiri pink tea, on tap from a large embellished brass and copper samovar, pouring it onto a ceramic bowl and saucer, with a layer of malai and a khari, delicately balancing on the top. "Dip it or break it into the tea and let the flakes gently blend into the cloyingly sweet chai, flavoured with just a hint of nutmeg, cinnamon, cardamom, saffron and kewra," said our host. The butter and salt from the khari broke the sweet streak, and it was one of the best things we had on that trip.

In a nation that bleeds chai, everyone has a story. Recently, we read *The Book of Chai: History, stories and More than 60 Recipes* by Mira Manek (Headline Home, ₹809), which delves deep into the ritual. Through the book, Manek urges us to 'keep making time for those small things that, together, bring big joy, moments that feel like a sigh, that ground you, like making your chai with spices, grating ginger or crushing cardamom pods, savouring each sip as you read or journal or simply sit.'

This book celebrates chai and explores the fascinating history of the beverage and its role in Indian life and culture without getting too factual. There are personal memories interspersed with recipes—from chai latte to rose chai and recipes using chai spices, including sweet miso chai porridge, saffron chia muesli, and vanilla chai chia pots, to accompanying dishes. She even explains the health benefits and different techniques for making the beverage.



In India, masala chai—a robust, sweet and milky tea brewed with spices, with its unique and exhilarating aroma—is woven into the very fabric of life. India consumes more tea than any other country globally. In 2022 alone, the amount of tea consumed by the country was approximately 1.2 billion kilograms. Funnily, the history of tea here is relatively recent; drinking different concoctions of spices in hot water, or kadha, is far older and expounded in the ancient Ayurveda texts.

The author's love affair with chai started in childhood with a cup of ukaro (chai masala mix with milk and sugar, but no tea) with buttered toast or fresh puri and progressed on as a teenager travelling all over India savouring cups or kulhads of it from chaiwalas pouring it from high above into glass cups, creating froth and steam, street-side performances that stayed with her, as did the syrupy sweetness of the brews she drank and also the healthy Ayurvedic concoctions.

Manek runs an online brand in the UK called Chai by Mira, and has created many blends of different flavours. The idea for *The Book of Chai* came in 2022, about a year after the brand was established, and writing it has been an enriching, eye-opening and therapeutic experience... rather like chai itself.

She visited the archives at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew in the UK several times to read through their incredible array of books. "Even though I've always loved drinking chai, I discovered so much more about its fascinating global history and spices," she says in the introduction.

The memories in the book are about her family—her grandmother, whom they call bhabhi, and her chai memories interlaced into stories of growing up in a village in Gujarat, her year of yatra (pilgrimage) when she returned to India as a mother of three and of the summers she spent with her mother at her parents' home in Loughborough, England.

We get the chaats, toasties, and masala chai cupcakes, but the digressing to lassis and faloodas made them seem like fillers at first. On a phone call from London, Manek explains, "In the west, chai is related to a spiced drink and milk-based drinks like lassi are mentioned to give context on how lassi is an older drink than chai in India, but the latter rose to greater fame in a shorter period. Lassi is our own; chai was introduced to us by the Brits."

We recommend that on a late afternoon, make yourself a cup of adrak chai and carrot cake (both recipes in the book) to go with it. Take a deep breath, inhale the aroma of the spices, the leaves and savour the goodness of the golden hour as you leaf through the author's stories that paint a vision of the old and new India, and its diaspora. From the ethereal ghats of Varanasi that are brought to life to the naga sadhus with matted hair smoking ganja at Mahashivratri; to waking up after an overnight train journey from Bihar sipping chai with strangers.

Then plan your next trip where you can sip chai, and create your own stories and memories.

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- > 1 tsp chaat masala
- > Fistful of coriander, finely chopped
- > 1 green chilli, finely chopped
- > Fistful of sev
- > 1 tbsp lime juice

## METHOD

If using raw corn on the cob, cook the cob on a naked flame or under the grill, rotating it regularly to brown all sides. Shuck it, slicing the kernels from each side. Melt butter in a pan with the cumin seeds for a minute before adding the corn kernels. Cook until soft. Let it cool down, and pop in the fridge/freezer until cold. Mix all the other ingredients together in a bowl, apart from the sev. Taste and adjustment seasoning. Sprinkle the lemon juice, and garnish with sev and coriander leaves just before serving to keep sev crispy. This chaat is a medley of flavours textures and vibrant colours, hence the word 'chaat', which literally translates as 'to lick' or 'to taste'.

## Cold corn chat

### INGREDIENTS

- > 1 tin/340 gm corn (285 gm drained weight) or 2 cobs
- > 1 tsp butter
- > 1 tsp cumin seeds
- > 1 onion, finely chopped
- > 1 green pepper, finely chopped
- > 1 tomato, finely chopped
- > Salt to taste
- > 1 tsp black pepper

## CUPFULS OF MEMORIES

### Tea of the mountains

Ginger lemon honey tea is usually the choice of trekkers in the Himalayas to soothe the throat, help with altitude sickness, and prevent dehydration.

This one time, in Buddhist monasteries cradled in mountain tops, I had the privilege of having butter tea with salt with some monks. It's a heavy and hot tea with a strong aroma of butter permeating the olfactory



senses and adding to the delight of reaching the top with those incomparable views.

Wrapping my fingers around the metal tea cup to feel the comforting heat. I have special memories of this butter salt tea.

### Sorcery or what?

Imagine a glass of chai with a spoon in the centre, balancing without support. "The trick of khade chammach ki chai, which I had at a Parsi joint some years ago, is that there's so much sugar at the bottom that the teaspoon stands vertically," shares artist Diksha Shenoy. Need we say how cloyingly saccharine this chai must be?



### Layers of love

On the way from Bengaluru to Mangaluru, we take our compulsory halt at KT for Kalladka. This double-layered treat by a highway tea stall has been luring travellers long before chai lattes became a thing. The balance in the ratio of milk and sugar makes it interesting.



**MORE PROTEST STORIES ON PAGE 00**



Author Mira Manek's new book is on all things chai, laced with nostalgia spanning three generations





## Chai oat biscuits

### INGREDIENTS

- > 2 tbsp pecans and or walnuts, toasted
- > 2 tbsp oats
- > 2 tbsp plain flour
- > 2 tbsp coconut sugar
- > Pinch of bicarbonate of soda
- > Pinch of cinnamon
- > Pinch of cardamom
- > 2 tbsp maple syrup
- > 1 tbsp coconut oil, melted
- > 1 tbsp milk
- > 1 tbsp ginger juice (optional)

### METHOD

Preheat the oven to 180 degree Celcius. Blitz the nuts and oats in a blender or food processor, and mix with the rest of the ingredients. Taste for sweetness and make adjustments as needed. Roll into spheres the size of golf balls, and flatten lightly using a fork. Place in the oven and bake for 15 to 20 minutes. Let cool on a rack, and enjoy!



## Black tea in God's own country

For Professor Omkar Bhatkar, you'll find better black tea in Kerala than in Mumbai. "They over boil it here," he complains. "My favourite memory is that of a walk with a photographer friend to this highway side tea stall—buzzing vehicles, men in mundu on cycles, frankincense in the air from temple behind—a typical Kerala morning. The tea is brewed in hot water, then sugar is added to the glass and stirred in the quintessential kapi-style—holding one glass about a metre high and pouring into another glass in the other hand on a repeat mode three-four times, poured and repoured and served hot. The morning sun rays passing through the glass, with the radio playing Malayalam news and bells from a distant temple, made the tea memorable.



# Gather to break into a bangda

**TASTE TEST** Espousing a home-styled, nutrition-focused and freshness-first attitude, this new seafood restaurant in Andheri intends to give the ubiquitous pomfret and surmai a break

### SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

TUCKED among storefronts on a busy pavement on New Development Road in Andheri East is The Mackerel Story, a month-old seafood restaurant espousing a freshness-first mantra. As we push past the glass doors under its blue nautical logo of two anchors and a model of the fish that lent the eatery its name, the ample green of the interiors—the chairs, the booths on one side, the foliage-inspired wall art on the left—are a relief to the eyes after the glaring sun outside.

Dressed in smart casuals with cropped hair, owner Bhakti Muslunkar is waiting for us accompanied by chef Prasad Parab, who has helped design the concept and curate the menu of the restaurant. Muslunkar owns a farm in Guhagar, about six hours by road from Mumbai, where she grows turmeric, kokum, cashews, mangoes, pineapples, cabbage, capsicum, rice, nachni, khapli wheat and jowar. "We source 70 to 75 per cent of our ingredients for the restaurant from the farm which are produced without the use of chemicals," she tells us.

The idea of the restaurant grew out of a need to offer nutritious food with the taste of homestyle cooking that was "not boring", and fresh fish that is bought each morning. A major contributor to this last part, we learn, is Shivpoojan who we meet at the restaurant and who has been buying fish for the



Bhakti Muslunkar and her son Kshitij were keen to start a restaurant that offered the taste of homestyle food and fresh catch

Muslunkars for the past eight years, scouring the markets at Bhaucha Dhakka, Sassoon Docks, Crawford Market and Naigaon as early as 4 am every day.

"Most restaurants have a ready-made curry served with fish such as rawas, prawns, pomfret and surmai. We decided to oppose that, choosing instead to serve separate curries for each type of fish to bring out their flavours," Parab tells us. A decision was also made about only serving the fresh catch of the day and not feeling compelled to serve all customers who turned up by offering them frozen fish once the fresh stocks had run out. As a result, the number of thalis that are served on a day is limited, and Parab helpfully offers that the best thing to do is to call in advance to inquire about the availability of the kind of seafood

one would like to eat.

Muslunkar's son Kshitij, a BBA student who has now joined the family jewellery business, informs that this is their second restaurant venture after Nav Kayastha Pangat in Ville Parle East which serves authentic CKP cuisine. There are also plans to open a third seafood-focused eatery in Marol later this year.

While the food tastings have been a highlight of the past month, the challenge for the owners has been to get the recruits in the kitchen to approach food differently by changing attitudes around ingredients and practices. Muslunkar has also been working with the local women at Guhagar to source fresh hand-ground masalas and cereals for the restaurant.

But why name the restaurant after the humble bangda? "Mackerel is a gareebo ka fish," Parab agrees. "You don't get it in Mumbai. Here, the poor mainly eat bombil and mandeli." It is a delicacy in Malvan where he hails from and where it is eaten at home alongside other fish such as tarli and saundale.

There is also an assumption, Muslunkar points out, that cheaper fish cannot be as good. "We realised that people in rural areas work for hours in the heat and eat mackerel which becomes a good source of protein. So we decided to introduce it here with ragi bhakris or ghavne, and neer dosa." Their aim in the coming months, she says, is to serve small fish such as parva, kane and small bangda, which are usually eaten at home

during the monsoons—and not pomfret or surmai.

In India, where mackerel is mainly exported, Parab also speaks of the need to create awareness around the dangers of overfishing. Citing the example of the Chilean government which has passed numerous regulations to protect at-risk species, including implementing restrictive fishing quotas and bans on harvesting and selling fish during breeding seasons, he speaks of the need to generate interest in other varieties. "I don't know if my children are going to be able to eat pomfret in another 10 years. When we stop offering, people will stop eating."

While we sip on a light kokum drink, the first item to be brought out is a plate of tandoori crab momos (₹599) made of whole-wheat flour, where the momos are steamed first and then placed in the tandoor. It's a bestselling dish, we are told, but we prefer the zafrani crab shells (₹759) with its delicate balancing of flavours. The item has a 35-minute prep time during which the crabs are cut, cleaned, marinated, roasted in a tandoor, and broken to retrieve the soft meat that is placed in the shells and put again in the oven. It can't be made in advance as crabmeat turns rubbery. "People will just have to wait for some things. It'll be no fun if it's not fresh," Parab tells us. We also try the Multani crab claws (₹459) which are creamy and yet unexpectedly light, but somewhat difficult to manoeuvre in a restaurant.

The Malgudi mackerel (₹299), surprisingly one of only three mackerel items on the menu, arrives next, caked lightly in a garlic, madras onion and curry leaves tawa fried masala, inspired by the flavours of Telangana, Karnataka and Kerala. Byadagi chillies add sweetness and give the dish its bright red colour. We move on to some crispy spinach prawns (₹595)—an item not on the menu but recommended by staff based on customer taste—which pleasantly balances the sweetness and softness of the prawns with the crunchy saltiness of the spinach.

The last stop is the surmai thali (₹499), an elaborate fare with both fried and curried surmai, served alongside wholesome palak bhajji, rice, rice/jowar/nachni bhakri, three types of chutney—mint, raw mango and dried coconut with peanuts—and a fragrant solkadi. There is aamras for dessert, made with mangoes from Muslunkar's farm. Since people prefer not to eat milk-based foods after seafood, there are plans to introduce appe, made of rava, coconut and sugar, gehu ki kheer, and patole with fresh coconut and jaggery in banana or turmeric leaves. Muslunkar has thus far refused to have gulab jamun or shrikhand on the menu as they are far too common and has also resisted the inclusion of cold drinks although the younger customers keep asking for them. "People need to stop consuming those things," she laughs.



The zafrani crab shells have a delicate balance of flavours and a 35-minute prep time. PICS/ATUL KAMBLE

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**WHERE**  
Shop No.1, New Development Road. Opp Takshila Society, Gate No.2, Andheri (E)