

It's certainly an impressive trick! Small terracotta pots preheated in big tandoor like stoves; milk boiled at a high heat until it becomes all creamy and thick, and tea liquor brewed with sticks of cinnamon.

Then begins the interesting bit — with a steel tong, you pick up the hot terracotta pot and place it inside a big brass cup, decant the boiling milk in to the clay pot, and finally pour the simmering tea liquor on top of it.

An instant sizzling takes place and a whiff of burnt terracotta mixes finely with the frothy tea, and you have your warm earthen cup of tandoori masala chai! Take the cinnamon out, and you have just a cup of tandoori chai. Add cashew, almonds, pistachio, caramel, and strawberry syrup, and you have a different variant of tandoori chai; mix everything together, and you have a special concoction of tandoori chai, as served at Kolkata Tandoori Matir Hari Chai, Aga Sadek Road in Old Dhaka.

It is doing the rounds now as dessert tea.

"We are selling 300 to 400 cups daily to customers, and around 500 cups in weddings and other functions," said Emdad Hossain owner of Kolkata Tandoori Matir Hari Chai.

This tea shop in old Dhaka has its own rustic charm; soot laden kettles of tea and milk are being steamed at high heat; a regular buzz of customers has kept the servers on their toes. Everyone is peeping at the big stove where the terracotta cups are kept warm, and ordering for this new fancy tea.

I met Emdad in this store, and he briefed me that his uncle came across the tea at his friend's store in Kolkata. Around eight months ago, that friend came to Dhaka to train them and now, Emdad and his uncle both have tandoori tea stalls in different locations in Old Dhaka.

Mr. Tea, at Sector 7, Uttara, is a small, cosy, upscale tea stall that attracts locals and outsiders equally for their new innovation the tandoori chai.

"I had to frequent Chennai for personal reasons and came across this special tea. After a lot of coaxing I learnt the making of the beverage from Chennai tea makers. I perfected the art after many trials and now, my year-old shop draws a fine crowd, for which I am happy," said Delwar Hossain of Mr. Tea.

His is a thick malai (fat cream) mixed milk that is added to the tea liquor over a burnt terracotta cup. The scorched clay smell lingers on to the tea and is a crowd favourite, especially in chilly afternoons.

Next stop was Gulshan Cha Chaii, a cosy tea store specialising in another type of tandoori tea. Theirs had a faint hint of cinnamon, the tea was light and frothy, and had struck a chord to my black tea only palate. For people who drink black tea only, enjoying any latte is difficult, but the tandoori chai served at Cha Chaii was the perfect cup for me.

"People queue for our tea and the demand increases as night draws in. Weekends also see huge crowd when we sell close to 700 cups of all kinds of tea," said the teamaker at Cha Chaii.

Next tea tasting stop was a surprise; my dining room — aren't you perplexed? Well, my cousin ordered the special brew of tandoori cha from Gram Cha, an online portal for tea, where you place an order and they deliver your order of tea at your doorstep in a flask. Their delightful blend was what Mishael liked because he can carbon copy it when he is brewing his own milk tea. And the surprise factor added fodder to my tea adventure that day.

All in all, we loved our tea hoping and had seven to eight different variations of tandoori chai, which landed on our shores from Kolkata and Chennai. And we can safely say that we have somewhat gained expertise on the subject and can recommend two cups of tandoori chai at one go, in any chilly, wintry evening.

Happy brewing and experimenting.

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— RBR

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed
Special thanks to Mr. Tea, Uttara

