Drinks / Thailand

Thai Milk Tea (Cha Yen)

A glass filled with ice and packed with the theatrical drama of condensed milk swirling in amber clouds through intensely brewed spiced orange tea — tannin, cardamom, vanilla, and fat sweetness colliding into one of the world's great iced drinks. The color, an improbable burnt-orange, comes from the tea blend itself and not food coloring, if you source the right leaves.

Time 15 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 3 parts Thai tea leaves (Cha Tra Mue brand preferred — orange-spiced blend)
- ☐ 8 parts Boiling water (100 C)
- ☐ 2 parts Sweetened condensed milk
- ☐ 1 parts Evaporated milk or full-fat coconut milk
- ☐ 4 parts Crushed ice, generously packed

Let's make it.

01 Measure the Thai tea leaves into a fine-mesh strainer or muslin bag set over a heatproof pitcher or tall glass. Pour the boiling water directly over the tea leaves. Let steep for exactly 5 minutes — no less (the tea will be weak and pale) and no more (it becomes tannic and bitter, though Thai vendors often brew very strong by design). After 5 minutes, remove the strainer and press the leaves firmly with the back of a spoon to extract the last, most concentrated brew. The liquid should be a dramatic, almost improbable burnt orange — darker than any typical orange tea, with a rich spiced aroma of cardamom, star anise, and warm vanilla.

02 Allow the brewed tea to cool to room temperature (about 10 minutes) or place the pitcher in a bowl of iced water for 3–5 minutes of rapid chilling. Do not pour hot tea directly over ice — it dilutes the brew and produces a watery drink. The tea must be at room temperature or cooler before it meets the ice. If preparing ahead, the brewed tea keeps refrigerated for up to 3 days and actually improves as the flavors integrate and mellow.

03 Spoon 2 tablespoons of sweetened condensed milk into the bottom of a tall glass — this is not optional, it is the structural sweetness of the drink. Pack the glass completely with crushed ice. Pour the cooled tea slowly over the ice, filling the glass to about 2 cm from the top. Finally, pour the evaporated milk or coconut milk over the top from a height so it cascades down the side of the glass in white streams, clouding the orange tea in a slow, beautiful diffusion. Do not stir — present it swirling and let the drinker mix it, or stir at the table. Traditionally served with a straw.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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