

eat & drink

MINI-REVIEW

**Chiya Chai Cafe**

2770 N. Milwaukee Ave. 773-360-7541

★★★★☆

Heating up

# Chai town

**LOGAN SQUARE'S CHIYA CHAI IS YOUR INTRODUCTION TO NEPALESE CUISINE**

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

**There are a lot of tube sock thefts on the Near West Side of Chicago.**

I imagine this is why you can almost always procure cheap packs of tube socks from hawkers near the Roosevelt exit off the Kennedy Expressway. I know this because I used to write a police blotter that covered the West and South Loop neighborhoods for the now-defunct Chicago Journal for five years.



LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

During my coverage, a woman gave birth to twins after she was pepper-sprayed, a man broke into a stranger's apartment just to do his laundry and a woman was swindled out of \$314 trying to purchase Persian kittens from Cameroon, Africa. And of course, not a week went by without at least one corner store tube sock or T-shirt theft.

I bring this up because the beat required me to wake up obscenely early and canvass the local police precincts. As such, I was always in need of caffeine, and at the time chai was my drug of choice. I tried it everywhere, from various mega-chains to the tiniest stores on Devon Avenue. But the only cup that ever really satisfied me was served at Panera. Not just any Panera, but the location in Southgate Market on Canal Street. I have a hunch it was a case of poor training, but every week the same woman would give me a blistering-hot, super-foamy chai bursting with cardamom and ginger. It was a result of mistakenly infusing a 10-to-1 ratio of chai concentrate to milk.

But that fortified mix propelled me through hundreds of boring assault cases. (Fun fact: The most common phrase in police reports, or at least based on my research, is "I will kick your ass.") Eventually, my favorite Panera server moved on, and since then, I've been on the hunt for another cup of ass-kicking chai. When I heard Chiya Chai Cafe, a chai emporium from brothers Swadesh and Saujanya Shrestha and their wives, Rajee Aryal and Nadine Schaefer, was landing in Logan Square with drinks made from their family's organic Nepalese tea import business, I ran over to see if I could find chai nirvana once again.

### The drinks

As much as I liked it, Panera's chai was made with a pre-packaged syrup, leaving the ginger notes flat and the final product a tad cloying. I could find perfectly perfumed chai on Devon Avenue, but it was often watered down or overly spicy.

I found my Goldilocks ideal in Chiya Chai's basic ginger-cardamom blend (\$3.75-\$5.90). Organic black tea imported by Aryal's father is steeped to order, while the ginger and cardamom spice blends are ground fresh daily. The tea, spices and organic whole milk are frothed in a unique, showy way: Servers pour the mixture from one jug to another, and with each pour, the jugs are pulled farther and farther apart, creating a milky Niagara Falls-like scene.

"This is how the chai wallahs do it," Schaefer said. "A chai wallah is the owner of a little tea stand in India or Nepal. The pouring infuses the spice and creates a froth."

The creamy top on the chai is foamy like the head on an art-directed root beer float. The brew is thick, wafts floral notes and finishes with a kick of heat from the ginger.

There are 15 flavors available at Chiya Chai, and they can all be brewed with a black tea, green tea or caffeine-free rooibos base. Schaefer and Aryal know we're living in a Starbucks world, so they also offer many non-traditional blends like coffee-hazelnut, caramel-sea salt and my personal favorite, dark chocolate-peppermint. It tastes like a York Peppermint Pattie melted into a brisk English tea. It's warming and soulful like a good cup of hot cocoa and aromatic like a garden breeze.

### The food

I expected the chai to be good at a place called Chiya Chai, but what I didn't anticipate was that the food—Nepalese classics infused with global ingredients—would also be fantastic. Masala chicken (\$9, served with white basmati rice), which is often heavy with cream and butter, was light, tangy and lip-smackingly fresh with curry heat.

The chicken balti pie (\$8.50) featured a moist crust that cleaved into hundreds of pastry shards with each bite. Its innards were full of firm carrot cubes, pea orbs and silky bits of chicken that wafted coriander and cumin. The pastry and filling could have used a touch more salt, but that's not a deal breaker.

Momo dumplings (\$8), the Nepalese version of potstickers, featured a slightly glutinous housemade wrapper that's thinner than traditional Chinese dumplings. Inside, juicy pork was studded with scallions and sweet red onion that finished with chili heat and lilted notes of champagne grapes. Chiya chili potatoes (\$6), rusty orange-colored sweet and spicy carb cubes, were glazed with honey and spiked with vinegar. The addictive flavor explains why they were the first thing to disappear from my table.

### The service

Servers distinctly pronounced the name of each dish and described flavors, ingredients and preparations as they made drop-offs. Because there isn't much room between tables here, my party of four didn't bother to mash our tables together when we sat down. But Schaefer noticed the disconnect and came over to bring them together as our food arrived to create a more communal experience.

### Bottom line

Not only are Schaefer and Aryal serving some revolutionary chai, but they're also providing a pretty good introduction to Nepalese food along the way.

"Chai is at the point where coffee was 10 years ago," Schaefer said. "What we're doing is different and high-quality. We want to start a chai revolution here in Chicago." MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.

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