

Off Hours: Food writer Seeta Lee tells us where to find good chai in the Des Moines metro

Welcome to Off Hours, your [free weekly newsletter](#) from the Des Moines Register that showcases all the fun things you can do in central Iowa. If you [sign up for our newsletter](#), you get to see this early Thursday morning in your inbox.



Hi there, Des Moines! I'm Seeta Lee, a local food writer and chai lover, and I'm taking over Off Hours this week. There's a solid chance you can find me driving aimlessly while singing loudly to Billie Eilish songs and willing my ancient car, named Noob Saibot the Toaster, to last another year. Inevitably, there will be a large chai in one of my cup holders. Simultaneously driving, singing, and drinking chai brings me great joy. Sing and drive at your own risk, but chai is a joy best shared. Some folks aren't sure if it's for them. Truthfully, not all chai is good chai. So, let's take a few sips of the chai scene in Des Moines, shall we?

The Deal





Here's the deal: Please know this first: It's not chai tea. Technically, it's not even a chai tea latte, as tea without milk in India is uncommon. The drink is simply chai. In Hindi, the word "chai" means tea. That's right; you're saying "tea tea," much like when we use an ATM machine or PIN number. The redundancy makes chai lovers twitchy.

[Traditional Indian chai](#) is a thick, hot drink boiled and steeped with milk, black tea, and spices. Most of those spices include green cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, and cloves. But like curry, the spices used in chai vary by region, city, and family. Sugar is added to sweeten it; however, some opt to leave the sugar out, keep it to small amounts, or use alternatives like jaggery — an unrefined sugar. The first time I had traditional chai, I was taken aback by the density and low sugar content.

While Indian tradition and culture dictate what makes a proper chai, American culture does what it does and customizes everything. We can order chai hot, iced, blended, with cold foam, and with extra flavors. It's sold in tea bags, powdered form, and concentrates. Countless coffeeshops use the same, cheap, terrible chai powder that's far too sweet, which is a tragedy when there are so many better options.

Sometimes, the use of the iconic chai flavor gets a fun or practical makeover like in chai ice cream and chai protein shakes. However, it quickly becomes unrecognizable when wellness companies slap the word "chai" on products that aren't even adjacent. Cinnamon and tea alone do not constitute chai, my friends.

I had no idea what chai was when I first ordered it. My obsession started at Scooter's Coffee. Back when the only Scooter's Des Moines had was an actual coffee house at 63rd and Grand, it was also one of the only places that offered chai. Their chai remains one of my favorites despite my knowing it strays far from authentic; it's made with green tea and a lot of sugar. However, it's a good entry point

for those who aren't convinced it's any good. It's a comforting, smooth option and is my preferred destresser.

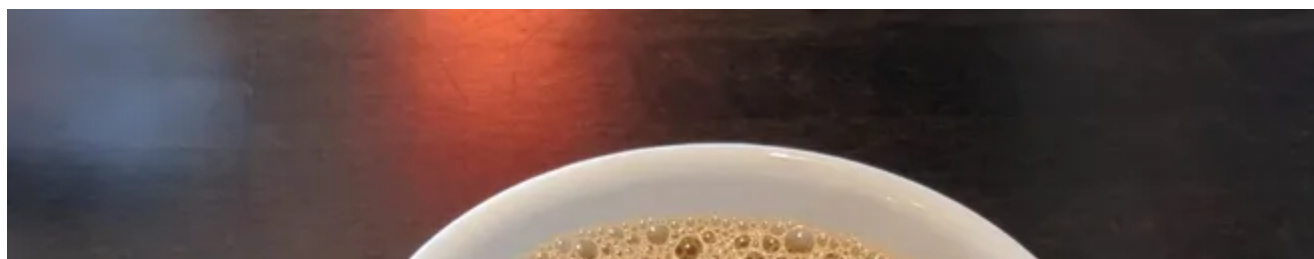
For better or worse, Des Moines' chai options are now vast. I'm always on the lookout for who offers it, and whose chai is worth adding to my regular rotation. Plus, I'm not a snob; I'm open to chai concoctions like chai bubble tea, and chai French toast is a meal I wish were more readily available.

Tell me where you're finding great chai, because I'm always on the hunt. Drop me a line at seeta@seetalee.com or follow me on Instagram at [thee_seeta_lee](#) or my website seetalee.com.

My Top Three Places for Chai in Des Moines



Mayalu Coffee: Newly opened in 2023, I argue Mayalu Coffee has the best chai accessible via drive-thru in Des Moines. When I have enough time to wander to the southside (and when Fleur is in her non-construction era), you'll find me deeply sniffing my cup of chai as I drive away from Mayalu. However, Mayalu also offers Nepali chiya. This version is closer to authentic chai, and it isn't as sweet. Both their chai and chiya are worth it. If I lived closer, I'd be there every day. This is my personal plea to Mayalu's owners: Please open a location on Ingersoll. *4426 Fleur Drive, Des Moines.*





[Kathmandu](#): If authentic chai is your goal, visit one of our outstanding local Indian cuisine restaurants. Though I'm still discovering who tops the central Iowa chai charts, Kathmandu's version is authentic as I've encountered. The appearance is minimalist. The texture is delightfully thick. And the flavor is not too sweet, which emphasizes the spices. Part of me wishes they'd launch a street vendor, [chai wallah](#)-style pop-up business. 7225-7229 Apple Valley Drive. Windsor Heights.

[Scooter's](#): As I write this, I have a Scooter's cup of chai to my left. I know I'm getting dirty looks from locavores and chai snobs right now, but I can't ignore my chai origin story. When I need chai, Scooter's is easy. Maybe that's because there's a Scooter's kiosk on every block. However, it is convenient, and it scratches the itch when I need comfort but don't have a lot of energy to get out of the car. Plus, the green tea base doesn't give me the jitters like traditional chai does.

Eat This, Drink That





Loco moco, \$12: As far as I know, loco moco is sold at only two places in the metro. The Walnut's take perfects the Hawaiian dish with a perfectly seasoned beef patty, rich gravy, and a gorgeous runny egg yolk. Since it's only available on Saturdays, I get my fix as often as I can.

Get it: Find [The Walnut](#) at 1417 Walnut St. in Des Moines.





Dutch letter twister, \$11: Pella's tulips got an early start this year, so I'm quietly hoping Goldie's in Prairie City brings back their Dutch letter twister early as well. Though calling it a drink is a stretch with Goldie's substantial soft serve, I'm not sure there could be a more Iowa dessert than this one.

Get it: It's worth the short drive to stop at [Goldie's Ice Cream Shoppe](#), 304 W. Second St., Prairie City.

48 Hours Off



Thursday night: The lights go on for [Blank Park Zoo's Wild Lights Festival](#) starting at 7:30 p.m. Through May 27 on Wednesday through Sunday nights, the zoo at 7401 S.W. Ninth St., Des Moines, showcases nearly 50 handcrafted, larger-than-life, illuminated Asian lanterns shaped like animals and mythical creatures. Zoo officials suggest that visitors should arrive around sunset and plan 60 to 90 minutes for the best viewing experience. Tickets for peak times start at \$25 for nonmembers and \$21 for members. Head [online](#) to reserve a ticket.

Thursday night: Before Carole King wrote 118 pop hits, she was a young songwriter from Brooklyn. [“Beautiful: The Carole King Musical”](#) takes you back to her start and through her hits such as “You’ve Got a Friend” and “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman.” This jukebox musical plays at the [Des Moines Community Playhouse](#), 831 42nd St., Des Moines, at 7:30 p.m. and runs Wednesdays through Sundays through April 21. [Tickets](#) start at \$29.

Friday night: Sing along to “Hurts So Good,” “Pink Houses,” “Crumblin’ Down” and “Jack & Diane” when [John Mellencamp](#) comes to town on his “Live and In Person 2024” tour. Mellencamp takes the stage at the Des Moines Civic Center, 221 Walnut St., Des Moines, at 8 p.m., with [tickets](#) from \$79.50 to \$149.50. —*Susan Stapleton*

My Day Job



If you end up trying chai, loco moco, or a Dutch letter twister because you read this, I want to know! Writing about food is my main gig, and nothing makes me happier than knowing I led readers to something delicious. Speaking of which, I’m launching my Des Moines-focused Substack this May, and it’s called [“Gems, Guides, and Goodies.”](#) I’ve also recently reviewed [Tullpa](#) and [Le’s Chinese Bar-B-Cue](#). Thank you for giving this a read, and I’ll sign off with my usual salutation: [Love, Chai, and Donuts](#).

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Interested in writing an Off Hours about the things you love to do during your time off? Drop us a line at ssstapleton@gannett.com.

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