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MANGO, FALOODA, AND ROOH AFZA...WITH BOBA?

Hold your chai and lassi. South Asian bubble tea entrepreneurs are infusing the Taiwanese classic with tastes of home.



Arva Anees, owner of Boba Wali, a pop-up serving Desi-inspired bubble tea, at an event in Sugar Land on July 6, 2025 (Elizabeth Conley/Houston Chronicle via Getty Images)

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In the 1980s, hot tea wasn't enough to entice people to the Taiwanese teahouse Chun Shui Tang. Liu Han-Chieh, the founder, thought the problem might be the temperature of their drinks. "With hot tea, you can only sell to old people," he once observed. Iced tea seemed to do the trick. But Liu wasn't satisfied. He asked his staff to add more texture, and one of them added tapioca pearls.

They had no idea they'd stumbled onto a global phenomenon. That experimental drink became known as bubble tea — or boba — and today, it's one of the most recognizable beverages in the world. In the past few years, South Asians have also started to put their own spin on it — adding flavors ranging from thandai to falooda and Rooh Afza — and customers can't get enough.

In New Jersey, Misree Chai's boba tea features pista, falooda, and mango kulfis. In Texas, pop-up shop Boba Wali has mango lassi boba. In New York, PYO Chai will be expanding to its third storefront on Long Island. And in Los Angeles, Band Baaja Boba (yes, similar to Ranveer Singh's debut movie) uses shikanji soda, a popular Indian lemonade with cumin and black pepper. And in Georgia, Pot Bharoon touts rasmalai and falooda.

Boba tea refers to teas that contain tapioca pearls, or chewy translucent balls made from tapioca starch, which is derived from cassava root. Cassava is a tropical plant native to the West Indies and Central and South America — not an ingredient many would expect to find in Taiwan. Traders from the Dutch East India Company brought potatoes and cassava with them to the island nation, formerly known as Formosa, around 1624. Though they left by the late 1660s, the foods they brought stayed behind.

"Starch-based foods were sort of like the primary carb in Taiwan, starting from the 16th century onwards, just because starch-based roots, like sweet potatoes,

just grow really well,” Clarissa Wei, author of *Made in Taiwan: Recipes and Stories from the Island Nation*, told *The Juggernaut*. Taiwan’s subtropical climate offered similar temperatures to the native environments of their imported tubers. “It’s not indigenous at all to East Asia, but using the starch of these tubers was the easy way to thicken things and make things last.”

A lot of soups, Wei added, have starch to thicken them. That starch soon made its way to the drink scene. “People would just make balls of starch and serve it in water — like icy water or lemony water — as a way to cool themselves down,” Wei explained. “That was sort of the belief that these starch chewy balls would cool people down.”

These starch-based toppings — which included tapioca pearls — drew inspiration from [sago](#), a starch from sago palms that the Chinese mainland has been using in its cooking for about 5,000 years. Sago pearls [tend](#) to be chewier with a nuttier texture than tapioca ones. Tapioca pearls also ended up in desserts, including over [shaved ice](#), a dish that the Japanese brought during their occupation of Taiwan between 1895 and 1945. Known as kakigori in Japan, the Taiwanese variation of the icy dessert is now a summer staple.

By the 1980s, Taiwan had invented a beverage that would dominate the world — and bring with it a dramatic legal battle.

In 1986, two Taiwanese teahouses [started](#) experimenting with their drinks. Liu Han-Chieh, the owner of Taichung’s Chun Shui Tang, [had started](#) selling iced tea, when he asked his staff to add more texture. In Tainan, the dessert [stalls](#) at a local market inspired Tu Tsong-He, the founder of Hanlin Tea Room. Tsong-He was [looking](#) for ideas to set his tea shop apart. After seeing a grandmother pair tapioca balls with sugar at one of the stalls, he wondered how it would taste with tea.

Though Wei [noted](#) that these boba tea origin stories are hard to verify, the result was that both teahouses began adding tapioca balls to tea. Commonly paired with milk-based teas in flavors such as black tea, taro, honeydew, and more, tapioca pearls give people something to chew on while working their way through the drink.

Both teahouses, which claimed creating bubble tea or pearl milk tea, made their way to court in 2009; by 2019, it had ruled neither was right. After all, neither teahouse [had filed](#) a patent or trademark protection. And boba had already spread far beyond Taiwan.

By the 1990s, the Taiwanese diaspora had taken the drink global. “It started with the diaspora, the people moving out of Taiwan and starting boba businesses around the world. That really started happening in the ‘90s and early 2000s,” Wei noted. In the U.S., small stores began [selling](#) boba tea to predominantly Asian communities in [California](#). Luke Tsai, the food editor for California-based KQED, [said](#) boba may have first appeared in the Bay Area as early as the mid-1990s. The first standalone boba shop, Tsai [said](#), was likely Fantasia Coffee & Tea in Cupertino.

Sanjay Chandra, who grew up in California, remembers falling in love with boba in the summer of 1998. “I grew up in the Bay Area, where boba was really common,” he said. He would cut class to go to local boba shops with his friends. Boba, he said, didn’t really make its way to the rest of the U.S. — including the East Coast, which is now home to hundreds of boba stores — until later. Patrick Yeh, founder of the Bubble Tea caterer Bar Pa Tea, [said](#) that boba truly took off nationally with the rise of social media in the mid-2000s.

That growth has only persisted. Between 2019 and 2022, cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and others saw a [60% jump](#) in their number of boba tea stores. You can [find](#) brands like Tiger Sugar, Gong Cha, Kung Fu Tea, Xing Fu Tang, and Hey Tea. China’s Hey Tea opened up two locations in Manhattan in only the last year, and Xing Fu Tang, the famed Taiwanese bubble tea store, opened a location in Manhattan in 2021.

Countless boba cafes have [also opened](#) across India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal in the past couple of years, which many have either encountered abroad or online. The Indian subcontinent is known for its [cooling drinks](#), from frothy [mango lassi](#) to nostalgic [Rooh Afza](#) to creamy [gondhoraj ghol](#). South Asians even have their own version of tapioca pearls: sabudana, which uses starch from cassava. People crush the root until it releases “milk,” which they turn into mini pearls to steam, roast, or dry. In the subcontinent, however, sabudana is mostly associated with savory dishes, such as khichdi, kheer, and tikki. And so, boba tea is a novelty.

In India alone, the market for boba tea — valued at \$450 million in 2024 — [is expected](#) to more than double by 2033. Several have put their own “desi twists” on the drink. In Tamil Nadu, a Taiwanese national [opened](#) Taiwan Maami in 2024 in Chennai’s Palladium mall, [featuring](#) a range of offerings, from Taiwanese milk tea to jaggery and basundi oolong milk lattes. Boba Bhai, a chain [spanning](#) over 25 storefronts, [sells](#) chaas boba tea alongside miso filter coffee and mango-gochujang shakes.

The difference between these boba shops in South Asia and the desi-inspired ones in the U.S. may lie in their missions. The former want to bring the Taiwanese tea to residents, in both classic and adapted forms. Desi-inspired boba shops in the U.S., however, have fully embraced fusing South Asian and Taiwanese flavors.

Shaheer and Saqib Khan, two brothers in New York, got the idea to combine South Asian flavors with boba tea during the pandemic. “We started making stuff at home, and we would share with our family members or our friends,” Shaheer Khan told *The Juggernaut*. “And then we started experimenting with some of the traditional flavors that we would have at home. Being a Pakistani-Nepali household, we would have so many different things to play around with.” [Rooh Afza](#), of course, was in easy reach — as was kheer, whenever their mom made it. They’d also find ways to incorporate the sweet milk from rasmalai and kulfi into their drinks.

It wasn’t long before they realized they had a “great amalgamation” at hand, Shaheer Khan said. Fate seemed to smile upon them when they found a vacant storefront across the street from Saqib Khan’s high school. “Back then, in 2020 [and] 2021, there was no such thing as South Asian-inspired bubble tea,” Shaheer Khan said. “That was a foreign concept, not just in New York or Long Island, but globally.”

PYO Chai opened for business in March 2021. On their first day, a line stretched down the block. “We had people with hijabs and beards and turbans, people of color patronizing a business in a way that was so supportive,” Shaheer Khan recalled.

Shreya Menon, a Long Island-based food blogger, recalled standing in line during PYO Chai’s opening days. She and her brother got the mango kulfi and desi [masala chai](#) bobas. “They were delicious,” she said. “I loved the mango kulfi the most.” Menon also liked the desi [masala chai](#), but she admitted that she usually likes chai hot.

Chandra, the California-based boba enthusiast, had always had the idea of combining South Asian flavors in boba tea in the back of his head, but it was seeing [TikTok](#)’s aesthetic drinks that gave him the final push to start experimenting. At first, he made drinks only for friends, bringing them to Holi or Diwali parties. He was surprised when he started getting catering orders.

“I love boba and always wanted to do something with boba, but I love Indian culture and Indian food...it was a natural fit to marry the two,” Chandra told *The Juggernaut*. While he was working full-time as a product manager in tech, he and his wife got certifications and licenses together to run a boba shop out of their kitchen in the summer of 2024. Their brand, Band Baaja Boba, is open on Friday nights and the weekend — the only time the two of them were free.

"The response was astronomical," he said. "People were coming out of the woodwork. We got so many catering gigs." It helped Chandra realize they had something marvelous on hand. He quit his job and began operating his business full-time.

Chandra is from Bihar, a region whose flavors he noted weren't often present in mainstream Indian restaurants. Growing up, he had a Bengali-inspired food palette, he told *The Juggernaut*. Band Baaja Boba sells more savory flavors — a departure from more common sweet profiles. You can order a shikanji soda or a [haldi](#) doodh, brown sugar masala chai, thandai (spiced saffron and nuts), and more. He's even thinking of introducing a chaat boba.

Arva Anees, creator of the Boba Wali pop-up in Houston, moved to Texas in November 2023. Though she had heard that Texas had a huge boba scene, she couldn't find any South Asian-inspired boba shops. She'd just been laid off from her job, so it was the perfect time to experiment. "I thought, 'Huh, maybe I can be the one to fill this gap,'" she told *The Juggernaut*. Boba Wali was born shortly after.

The pop-up serves only two drinks: [mango lassi](#) and [Rooh Afza](#) lemonade with boba. But Anees hopes to open a storefront soon. "I'm very surprised at how pretty much every person has had an exciting, positive response," Anees said.

"People are very excited for something new, for a fusion," Anees added, especially in a world where people are [consuming fewer alcoholic drinks](#). "When I was starting the business something that was always at the top of my mind was how as a Muslim, we don't drink alcohol," she said. "So a lot of times at weddings and parties, you're usually limited to soda, water, maybe a [mango lassi](#), if that." Desi-inspired boba tea, then, is a fun alternative to the usual classics. Anees said she's already gotten requests to cater at both birthday parties and wedding-related events.

Combining South Asian flavors with Taiwanese boba isn't without its challenges. Kulfi drinks, [mango lassi](#), and [chai](#) tend to be thicker than the teas traditionally used for boba, such as jasmine or green teas, Shareer Khan told *The Juggernaut*. Delicate experimentation to determine the right consistency was essential to perfect their recipes. "With South Asian palates, I came to know that they like things that are a little bit more creamy and rich," he said. "They're used to that richness in food."

PYO Chai sources ingredients directly from the source, namely Taiwan and South Asian countries. "We're not trying to make bubble tea better," Shaheer Khan told *The Juggernaut*. "We acknowledge that, at the fundamental level, what we're doing is not our own."

So far, the formula seems to be working. PYO Chai opened a second location in 2022 and is opening a third in August. Band Baaja Boba got accepted into Smorgasborg L.A., a weekly open-air food market.

But running a small business isn't easy. Another South Asian-inspired boba store, Pila de Boba, opened in New York City in 2022, but it has since shuttered. Its falooda boba [featured](#) basil seeds, kulfi ice cream, and vermicelli noodles; it was delicious and one of its most popular orders.

So will South Asian-inspired bubble tea stick around? Krishnendu Ray, a food studies professor at NYU, told *The Juggernaut* that only time will tell. "An increasing transaction of taste between various kinds of ethnic groups that have come together in various urban cultures, in American cities, in global cities, in South Asian cities," he pointed out. "At a moment, something might look gimmicky, but we don't know whether it's gimmicky," he said. There's been [South Asian pizza](#), [Indian pasta](#), and more. Fusion can — and has — worked.

Shaheer Khan, for now, is undeterred. "I have this philosophy that the community will support you as long as you support them back," he said.

And as Ray reflected, “There’s always this element of continuity in food, and there’s always an element of improvisation — even when we’re trying to make the same thing.”

Surina Venkat is a NYC-based reporter.

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