Tibetan Butter Tea (Po Cha) Explained

From the teas.co.uk wiki

Tibetan butter tea (po cha), in summary: Tibetan butter tea (po cha) explained: salted black tea churned with yak butter, why it works at altitude, home preparation, cultural context.

Tibetan butter tea, po cha, is the tea tradition that surprises Western drinkers most, because it is savoury, salty and rich rather than sweet or delicate. It is tea as sustenance, evolved for a high, cold environment, and it belongs in our world ceremonies cluster as a reminder that tea is food as well as drink.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in May 2026.

What it is

Po cha is made from brick tea, compressed aged dark tea, boiled long into a strong dark liquor, then churned vigorously with yak butter and salt until emulsified into a thick, savoury, almost soup-like drink. It is closer to a broth than to a cup of tea as most readers know it, and it is consumed in large quantities throughout the day.

Why it exists

The form is a direct answer to environment. At high Himalayan altitude in intense cold, the body needs fat, salt and fluid, and butter tea delivers all three in a warm, sustaining package while the tea provides a gentle lift and aids digestion of a fat-heavy diet. It is a brilliant piece of practical food culture, not an eccentricity; understanding the why is the point of including it.

The brick tea base

Traditional po cha uses compressed dark or post-fermented tea, related to the pu-erh family, chosen because it travels, keeps, and stands up to long boiling and churning where a delicate leaf would be obliterated. It is the same logic that makes robust dark tea the base of other hard-working traditions, see pu-erh and black tea.

The churning

The defining step is emulsification: the boiled tea, butter and salt are churned, traditionally in a wooden cylinder (the chandong), until they combine into a uniform, slightly frothy, opaque drink. Without the churning

it is just salty buttery tea; with it, it becomes the smooth, rich, distinctive thing it is. A modern home approximation blends very strong black tea with two or three tablespoons of salted butter and a pinch of salt until foamy. It is the Tibetan parallel to the Moroccan pour or the Japanese whisk, a mechanical step that defines the result.

Hospitality and quantity

A guest's cup is kept topped up; draining it signals you want no more, and it is polite to sip and let it be refilled. Tibetans may drink many bowls a day. As with every tradition in this cluster, the social rule is generosity, expressed here through near-constant replenishment rather than ceremony.

Should you try it

It is hard to source true brick tea and yak butter, but a reasonable approximation, very strong dark tea blended with a little salted butter and a pinch of salt, is worth trying once to understand a completely different idea of what tea can be. Most Western drinkers find it challenging on first taste, salty and broth-like rather than what they expect tea to be; some bond with it (especially those who like savoury broths or ramen), others never adjust. It resets the assumption that tea is necessarily light and sweet, which is exactly the broadening the ceremonies cluster is for.

In short: Tibetan butter tea (po cha)

Field	Detail
Tibetan name	Po cha (also bod ja, cha suma); literally "Tibetan tea"
What it is	Strong black tea churned with yak butter and salt; a high-calorie hydration drink at altitude
Tea base	Brick tea: compressed bricks of Chinese black tea, Pu-erh-related, fermented for transport over mountain passes
Other ingredients	Yak butter (substantial amount), salt, sometimes milk
Cup character	Hot, salty, fatty, umami-rich and savoury; closer to broth than tea by Western standards
Caffeine	40-60mg per cup, standard fermented black tea range
Why it works	At Tibetan altitudes (3000-5000m+) calories from butter, salt for electrolyte balance, and warm hydration solve real physiological needs
Daily consumption	Working households can drink 30-60 cups daily

The wider tea-on-the-plateau context

The Tibetan Plateau is one of the few regions where tea consumption per capita rivals or exceeds the British: some households drink 30-60 cups of po cha a day, far above the UK average of around 1.5 cups per person. The high consumption reflects practical need: at altitude food is scarce, fuel is limited, and warm calorie-dense drinks are valuable. Tea arrived via the historical "Tea Horse Road" from Sichuan and Yunnan, a network of mountain paths that carried compressed tea bricks into Tibet for over a thousand

years in exchange for Tibetan horses prized by Chinese armies. The route shaped the brick-tea format (compressed for transport), the fermented character (the long pack-animal journey aged the tea), and the cultural centrality of tea in Tibetan daily life. Modern China has largely paved the old route and truck transport has replaced pack animals, but brick tea remains the cultural standard.

The bottom line on Tibetan butter tea

Po cha is an intelligently designed high-altitude survival drink that solves real physiological needs in Tibet and looks unfamiliar to UK drinkers. It is worth trying once for the cultural exposure and the genuinely interesting taste; worth adopting only if you bond with the savoury-tea-as-broth idea, which few UK households will. The cup belongs in Lhasa and the Himalayan plateau rather than a mild sea-level kitchen, but knowing the drink exists, and why, deepens any tea drinker's sense of how broadly tea travels.

Reference noted

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)

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Tea reading

For broader ceremony context see the tea ceremonies around the world overview. For the related fermented base see pu-erh tea and black tea fundamentals, and the Chinese tea tradition. For another Asian tradition see the Japanese tea hub. For brewing technique see how to make tea properly.

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