Cup of Char: Meaning and Origin

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Cup of char, in short:** A cup of char is a cup of tea. Char is British slang from cha, the Chinese word for tea, which reached Britain through soldiers who had served in India.

"A cup of char" simply means a cup of tea, normally a plain, strong one with milk. The word char is the Chinese word for tea, cha, picked up by the British Army in India and carried home in the early twentieth century.

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

What char means

Char is an informal British noun for tea. Dictionary.com lists it as British informal and Green's Dictionary of Slang files it under cha, with chah, chuh and char as spellings of the same word. You will mostly hear it in set phrases such as "a nice cup of char", and it sits in the same family as cuppa and brew in our guide to UK tea slang.

It has an old-fashioned ring now. John Wyndham gave it to a character in The Day of the Triffids in 1951, who offers to fetch "a cup o' char".

Where the word came from

The root is Chinese. Green's Dictionary of Slang gives the origin as Mandarin ch'a, tea, and Oxford University Press's language blog says the Mandarin word chá is the origin of char, while the word tea came from the same source through the Min dialect form te.

The route into British speech ran through India. Dictionary.com traces the slang to Hindi c?, itself the Chinese word, and dates it to 1915 to 1920. Green's quotes an Army paper, The Regiment, noting in 1900 that many Army terms came from India and that tea was "chuh". The earliest spelling with an r that Green's records is from Patrick MacGill's war book The Great Push in 1916: "There'll be some char (tea) in a minute."

So both common explanations are right. Royal Museums Greenwich notes that char is usually taken for an Indian word but is in fact close to the Chinese one. The Hindi word and the Chinese word are the same word at different points on the road.

Why it has an r in it

Nobody pronounces the r. Wiktionary describes char as a non-rhotic spelling of cha: in most English accents "ar" is simply how you write a long "ah" sound, so cha became char on paper.

The trail of the word

When	Spelling	Where it turns up
1590s	cha	First form of the word in English, by way of Portuguese traders
17th century	tea	Arrives through the Dutch, from the Min form te
1854	cha	Delhi Sketch Book, quoted in Green's Dictionary of Slang
1900	chuh	The Regiment, on Army words brought from India
1916	char	Patrick MacGill, The Great Push
1951	cup o' char	John Wyndham, The Day of the Triffids

Char, chai and tea: one word, three routes

Almost every language's word for tea goes back to the same Chinese character. Tea came by sea from the Min form te. Cha, and so char, came from the form used around Canton. Chai travelled overland, picked up a Persian ending and entered English through Hindustani in the twentieth century, which is why it now names the spiced, milky drink in our chai tea bag guide.

What goes in a cup of char

The phrase belongs to the mess tin and the works canteen, so it means black tea brewed strong and taken with milk, the same drink as builders' tea. A blend made for that job is Tetley Extra Strong Breakfast Tea. For something smoother, Yorkshire Tea Gold Blend does it with more Assam in the mix. The rest are on our everyday tea bags shelf.

The slang came home with soldiers, and tea stayed tied to war on the home front too: see tea rationing in the UK. For a newer tea phrase with a very different history, there is "spill the tea".

Teas for a proper cup of char

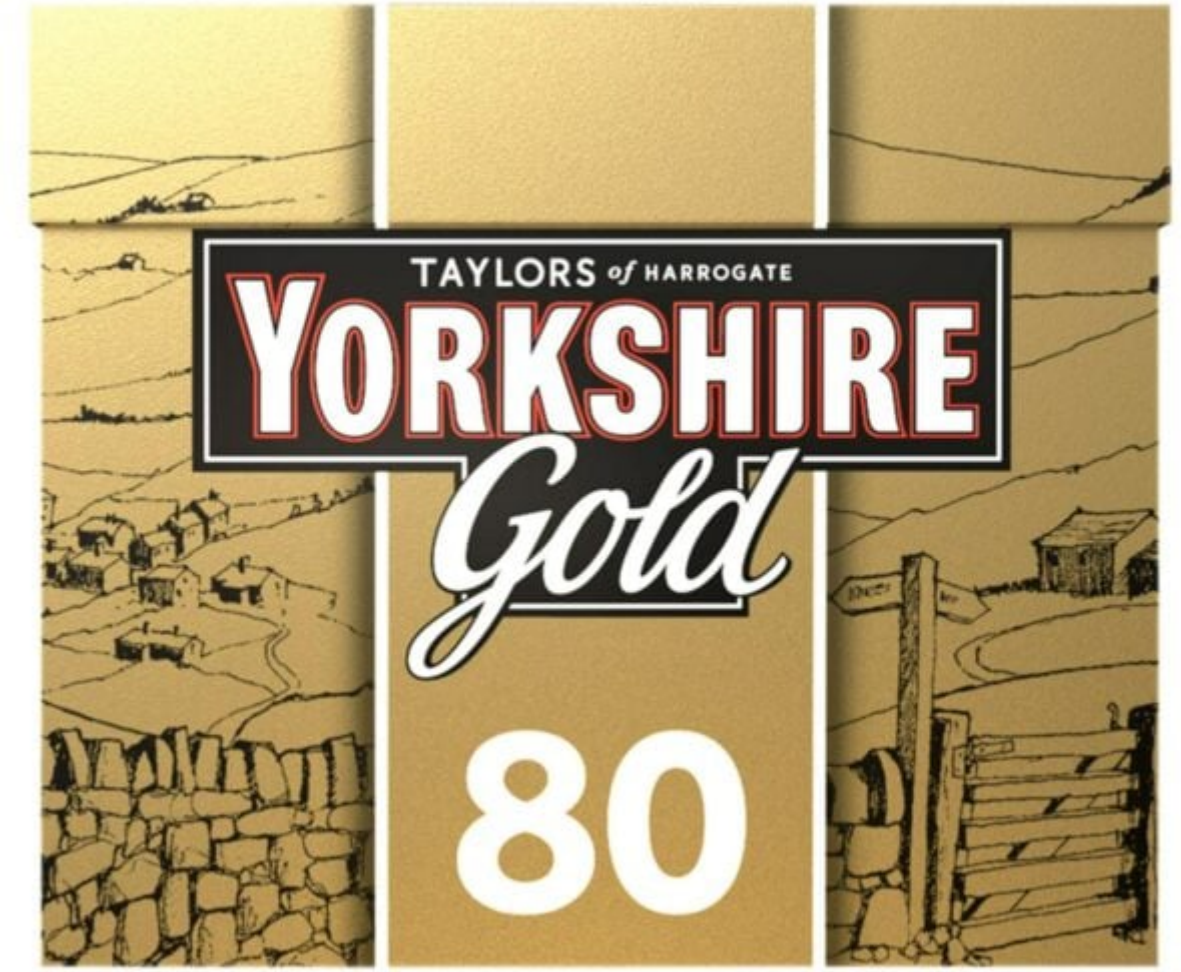
Strong everyday black teas that take milk well.



Tetley Extra Strong Breakfast Tea, 75 Tea Bags 237g

~~£4.75~~ Original price was: £4.75.£3.80Current price is: £3.80.

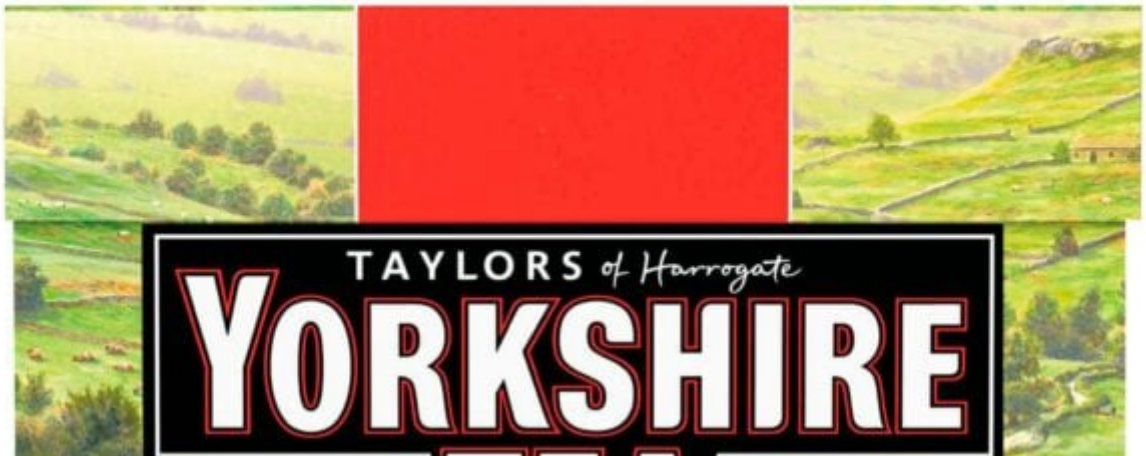
View pack and details ?



Yorkshire Tea Gold Blend, 80 Tea Bags 250g

~~£6.25~~ Original price was: £6.25.£5.00Current price is: £5.00.

View pack and details ?



Yorkshire Tea Original Everyday Blend, 80 Tea Bags 250g

~~£4.50~~ Original price was: £4.50.£3.60Current price is: £3.60.

View pack and details ?



PG Tips Original English Breakfast, 80 Tea Bags 232g

~~£3.75~~ Original price was: £3.75.£3.00Current price is: £3.00.

View pack and details ?

See all everyday tea bags ?

Autumn Sale prices shown. The sale ends on 24 December.

These are products sold by teas.co.uk. Every order includes a free tea sample, and UK delivery is free over £35. Check each product page for the latest price, availability and pack information.

At a glance

Question	Answer
Meaning	Tea, usually strong with milk
Register	British, informal, now old-fashioned
Root	Chinese cha, tea
Route	Through Hindi and the British Army in India

First "char" spelling on record	1916
Related words	cha, chai, tea

Common questions

Is it "cup of char" or "cup of cha"?

Both are the same word and sound the same in most English accents. Cha is the older spelling and char is the one that stuck in the phrase.

Is char the same word as chai?

They share a root in the Chinese word for tea but took different roads into English. Char is early twentieth century Army slang for ordinary tea, and chai arrived later through Hindustani.

Do people still say it?

Yes, though mostly with a smile. Oxford University Press's language blog notes it is still heard in phrases like "a nice cup of char".

Something to dunk

Border biscuits to go with a strong mug of tea.



Border Butterscotch Crunch Organic Biscuits, 135g

~~£3.00~~ Original price was: £3.00.£2.40Current price is: £2.40.

View pack and details ?



Border Dark Chocolate Ginger Organic Biscuits, 150g

~~£3.50~~ Original price was: £3.50.£2.80Current price is: £2.80.

View pack and details ?



Border Fiery Ginger Crunch, 135g

~~£3.00~~ Original price was: £3.00.£2.40Current price is: £2.40.

View pack and details ?

See all biscuits ?

Autumn Sale prices shown. The sale ends on 24 December.

These are products sold by teas.co.uk. Every order includes a free tea sample, and UK delivery is free over £35. Check each product page for the latest price, availability and pack information.

Reference noted

Sources checked for this page: Green's Dictionary of Slang, cha, Dictionary.com, char, Oxford University Press blog on tea idioms, Royal Museums Greenwich, A cup of char, Wiktionary, char and Wikipedia, Etymology of tea.

More from the tea wiki

- Chai Tea
- What Does Chai Mean
- Builders' Tea
- UK Tea Slang, Explained
- Builders' Tea: The Working Class Story
- "Spill the Tea": Origin Explained
- The whole Tea Wiki, A to Z

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.

100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.

teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/