Senegalese Attaya: The West African Three Glass Ritual

From the teas.co.uk wiki

Senegalese attaya, in summary: Senegalese attaya is West Africa's three glass tea ceremony: gunpowder green, a bitter, sweet, then sugary progression, an aerating pour, and hours of company.

In Senegal and across West Africa, attaya is a slow social ceremony, not a quick drink. Compare it with other world tea customs in how customs differ.

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

The essentials: Senegalese attaya

Aspect	The note
What it is	Senegalese (and wider West African) three glass tea ceremony
Tea base	Chinese gunpowder green tea; historically imported
Three glasses	Bitter (life), sweet (love), sugary (death/family)
Pour from height	Aerating pour for the foamy crown
Sugar levels	Heavy; the signature of the ceremony
Social function	Hours-long; the Senegalese gathering rhythm
Mint variant	Mint-leaves-added; relates to Moroccan green-tea tradition
UK access	Gunpowder green widely available; easy to recreate at home

The three-glass progression

Each of the three glasses carries a different meaning and a different cup. The first, "bitter as life", is the strongest brew with minimal sugar, intentionally bracing and astringent, sipped while the host opens the conversation. The second, "sweet as love", is brewed again from the same leaf with sugar added, a sweet and strong cup for the warmth of relationships, by which point the guests have settled in. The third, "sugary as death" or "sugary as family" depending on the regional reading, is re-brewed once more with heavy sugar into the sweetest cup, as the conversation reaches its most relaxed. The whole sequence runs two to four hours: a structured social and philosophical ceremony rather than a mere tea break.

The pour from height (kessa)

The signature gesture is the pour from height: the server holds the small pot 30 to 50cm above a heat-proof glass and pours a thin stream so the tea aerates as it falls, building a thick foamy crown called the kessa. It does three jobs at once, cooling the tea to drinking temperature, developing the foam that improves the texture, and demonstrating the server's skill, since experienced hands can pour dozens of glasses without spilling. A good kessa is a centimetre or two thick, creamy and stable for several minutes; a poor one is thin and dies quickly, and the knack takes months of practice, see the Moroccan pour.

Cousin to Moroccan mint tea

Attaya and Moroccan mint tea are closely related cousins rather than the same drink. Both use Chinese gunpowder green imported along trans-Saharan trade routes, both lean heavily on sugar, both use small heat-proof glasses, and both use the aerating pour with a foam crown. The differences: Moroccan mint tea always includes fresh mint, while attaya may or may not depending on the household; Moroccan tea is served at any time across brief social moments, while attaya is specifically the three glass ceremony that lasts for hours; and Moroccan mint is the more internationally known, while attaya remains more anchored in West African and diaspora households, see the Mauritanian ritual.

Attaya at home

You can do it at home with modest kit: a small metal teapot, a few small heat proof glasses, Chinese gunpowder green, sugar, and optional mint. Boil the water in the pot, add a couple of tablespoons of gunpowder green with a little sugar and simmer about five minutes, then pour the first round from height, bitter; refill the pot with fresh water and more sugar, simmer and pour the second, sweeter; refill again with the most sugar for the third, sweetest. The full sequence is an hour or more, served to a few guests across an unhurried afternoon, the West African rhythm rather than a quick cup, see how customs differ.

What to buy

Source the base from the gunpowder green range and the kit from the teaware range, or browse the full tea shop; free UK delivery over £35.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (beverage)

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