



/EDITOR'S PICK

Centuries of fun: Mahjong growing in popularity

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Karen Mansfield/Observer-Reporter



A clacking sound filled the dining room of Cheryl Hopper's East Washington home as she and three friends swirled mahjong tiles on a table.

Every other Tuesday, the women assemble there to play Mahjong, a centuries-old game that has become downright trendy.

"I love playing. It's like a shot in the arm for me, it's so much fun," said Hopper, who learned to play about a year-and-a-half ago after a longtime friend invited her to tag along to a Mon Valley restaurant where a group plays every other Friday. "I've known about mahjong for years and I've always wanted to learn how to play, but for a long while I couldn't find anybody who played. Now, there are several

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Likened to the card game rummy, mahjong (sometimes spelled mah jongg and pronounced MAH-jang), is a four-person tile game in which each person tries to be the first to make a winning combination of

sets and pairs.

In American mahjong, each player is dealt a hand of 13 tiles – engraved with Chinese characters and symbols from different suits (bam, dots and craks) as well as wind, flower and dragon tiles.

Each player takes turns drawing and discarding tiles until one player completes a hand and calls out “mahjong.”

Oh, but if it were that easy.

Mahjong is a game of strategy, skill, and a little bit of luck – you may never get that tile you need to complete the hand you’ve carefully cultivated on the rack before you, said Kathy Jones, who along with Mary Ann Sember started a mahjong club at the Jewish Community Center – South Hills in Scott Township in 2022.

Since Jones and Sember taught mahjong classes (four-week long, two-hour sessions), the club has grown from three members to 70.

They taught classes for 60 straight weeks because so many people wanted to learn how to play..

“It’s a great game. I like that it challenges your brain, and I like the camaraderie and the friendships that you build,” said Sember. “As a matter of fact, I knew none of the people here when we started the club, and after the first year, three of us went on a cruise, and we played mahjong onboard.”

Michael and Colleen Brennan of Peters Township picked up the game two years ago – Jones taught them at Monday’s Brewing Company in Peters Township – and the couple plays two times a week, at the JCC on Tuesdays and at the Galleria on Thursday nights.

For Michael Brennan, the game “was overwhelming to start.”

“It was very hard to pick up on. It’s not the way I think. I think very linearly, which is different from the card patterns we follow,” said Brennan, an engineer. “And it’s kind of like baseball – you’re not going to win every game and you’re not going to get a hit every at-bat. You’re going to lose a lot of games, so don’t get frustrated with that.”

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There are so many people you meet here. Look how many groups are here," she said, as she glanced around the JCC, where 14 tables were filled with mahjong players. "It's a cognitive game that keeps your brain stimulated, and I do like that, too."

The Jewish community, in particular, has played a large role in popularizing mahjong.

Helene Schroder, who plays with Hopper's Tuesday group, grew up playing mahjong with her family in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York.

"My mother taught me when I was 9 years old. It's a very Jewish game that my mom played, that's how I learned. It has now become more mainstream, but when I was growing up, it was something the Jewish community played," said Schroder.

Mahjong has made appearances in television shows and movies, including "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel," "Crazy Rich Asians," and "Driving Miss Daisy."

The game also has found new popularity among young people.

Each year, the National Mah Jongg League publishes a new card full of new combinations, and players must match one of those combinations. This year, the league celebrates its 87th anniversary.

Mahjong has also become a staple at Eva K. Bowlby Library in Waynesburg, Greene County, where players gather on Wednesday afternoons.

At a recent get-together, a group of regulars – Greene County residents Barb Creighton, Suzanne Cole, Sandy Whetsell, Jo Hoy and Nancy Oja – taught first-time player Jane Headlee, of Waynesburg, the basics of the game.

The group loves the concentration, the (mostly) friendly competition, and the connections the game provides.

Some of the players at the library – a dozen or more at times – have been friends for years while others have just recently met, and they come from all walks of life.

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"I ~~remember~~ after the first day I played, I thought, 'I'm never going back because I'll never get this because my brain can't handle it. But after I went home and thought about it, I said, 'Challenge yourself,'" said Hoy, laughing. "I'm so glad I went back. I really like it. It's challenging in a good way."

Hopper's Tuesday group met through an advertisement she placed in a mahjong site where you can meet fellow mahjong players.

"I serendipitously found this group, and I'm over here every other Tuesday to play. It's a smart group of women," said Carolyn Carson of Collier Township, who plays in other mahjong circles, too. "We're chatty. It is challenging and a whole lot of fun."

To meet the demand of people wanting to learn how to play, local players, including Jones and Hopper, have offered to provide instruction to teach future mahjong players the ins-and-outs of the game.

There are several mahjong books and online apps for players to sharpen their skills, but the best way to learn is to play.

Joan Charlson of Canonsburg, who won two games on Tuesday after a drought of several weeks, attempted to learn how to play for two years before she met Jones, who offered to teach her.

"I tried learning over and over. I gave up. I took lessons, I paid for lessons, I had a book, I just couldn't get it. Then I met Kathy and we started talking and she said, 'I'll teach you to play,' and the rest is history. Here I am," said Charlson, who also plays at the Galleria and with another small group and was wearing a mahjong dragon bracelet for good luck.

Charlson was a willing student, once bringing the mahjong card in a plastic bag that she propped against a water bottle and studied with Jones while they treaded in deep water in the JCC pool.

"She lets out a little shriek of joy every time she wins, and I'm so tickled," said Jones. "I dearly love her. She tried so many times, and now she's the resident expert."

At the JCC, players usually bring their own mahjong sets. The tile sets can range in price from affordable (if you're just dipping your toe into mahjong waters, you can find sets on Amazon or Mac.Bid), to quite expensive, depending on the material, craftsmanship, and brand.

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mahjong while she was growing up, owns three sets that were passed down to her: two were made in

the 1950s and one, from her godmother, dates back to 1918.

She plays mahjong on those antique boards every Monday for five hours with three childhood friends – Jones, who lived two doors down when they were kids, and sisters Elaine Goldblum and Marcia Cantor.

“We play without fail. How cool is that, that we’ve known each other all our lives and we get together to play?” said Simons, noting the group starts around noon and plays until about 5 p.m. They play at least five games an hour.

Games can take as little as 15 minutes to complete, so players can squeeze in several games during an hour.

“Some people can play a gazillion games in an hour and love it, and other people like to play three or four games in an hour, and laugh and talk,” said Sember. “There’s something for everyone in this game. I’m always happy to play.”

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