

## What is Mah Jongg?

2 Bam. 4 Crack. 9 Dot. You may be asking what are these combinations of numbers and strange words? Some of you know exactly what I'm referring to, for those of you who are new to these terms, let me introduce you to the Chinese-inspired gaming phenomenon called *mah jongg*.

Mah jongg lore states that the game crossed the Pacific Ocean from China, with an American businessman named Joseph Babcock, and made its debut in the United States in the 1920s. While he was sent abroad to work for the Standard Oil Company in China, he and his wife were introduced to and enjoyed playing the Chinese version of mah jongg. He knew this tile-based game would be well received in the American and European gaming markets, and decided the Chinese version needed a few changes to make it salable. He added Arabic numbers and Western letters to the tiles. He was spot on and created not only a lucrative new business venture for himself with the formation of the Mah-Jongg Sales Company, but at the same time, he ignited a cultural spark that turned into a new gaming sensation. Chinese cultural influences were already evident in 1920s American fashion, cuisine and home decor, and mah jongg seamlessly added to the cultural craze of the time. Mah jongg became the rage along with pixie haircuts, flapper dresses, and Jazz. It appealed to leisure-class ladies who were happy to fill their time with a game of sociability, strategy, and luck. Mah jongg created fantasy and intrigue and a connection for players to the faraway land of China, where the game originated. It was seen as an exotic and glamorous game, providing an air of sophistication and social status for its players.

American mah jongg is played with 152 tiles (resembling Domino tiles) with different suits, (much like gin-rummy). The tiles include three suits: Dots (circles), Bams (bamboos), and Craks (characters), the Winds: North, South, East and West, Flowers, Dragons, and Jokers. Each player is dealt thirteen tiles, and the dealer, fourteen tiles. Cards printed from the National Mah Jongg League display hands listed in categories which players try to replicate with the tiles on their rack as the game progresses. After the tiles are dealt and racked, players prepare for the dance of mah jongg, the Charleston. This is the sequence of passing tiles in a particular order: right, across, left, second left (with a hat), back across and final right. A courtesy option of up to three tiles is granted

with the player sitting across from you and then the dealer starts the game by placing a tile into the center of the gaming table. When a tile is discarded the player calls out the tile's suit and number or name: 3 Bam, 5 Dot, Red Dragon or West, for example. Players take clockwise turns, picking and throwing tiles as they try to match a hand on the card.

The goal of the game is to make a justifiable winning hand from a jumble of different tiles while adhering to specific rules. There is a payoff beyond the thrill of winning, there is money involved as well. Each hand has a monetary value which can range from twenty-five to sixty cents. At the beginning of the game, if the dice were rolled displaying doubles or you pick the winning tile, its double the payout! Throw the winning tile, pay double! Strategy, skill, memory, and luck all need to weave together to make a winning hand and enable a player to enthusiastically call out ***mah jongg!***

During the 1930s, the game had too many house or table rules which created inconsistency and tension at games and between players, thus creating disinterest in the once popular game. Complaints stirred through the New York City area between players and a solution to the problem needed to be found. In 1937 the National Mah Jongg League was formed by Jewish female mah jongg enthusiasts. The league standardized the game by establishing set rules that players were to adhere to and formulated specific hands on a tri-fold card, creating much needed consistency which eased tension at gaming tables. The National Mah Jongg League brought into the league's founding principles, the Jewish act of tzedaka. They sold the gaming cards and donated a portion of the proceeds to charities, a practice they have continued to do for eighty-two years. Each year the hands are changed and new gaming cards are printed. Eager players filled with anticipation await the new card each spring. I've come to the realization that American Jewish players have three New Years to celebrate, the Jewish New Year in autumn, the secular New Year on January 1st, and the mah jongg New Year in April!

By the 1950s, mah jongg had migrated from hot New York City summer apartments to the cooler, shady, tree-lined and grass-filled Catskills in upstate New York. Jewish Bungalow colony visitors packed their suitcases with summer clothes, shoes, bathing suits, hats and . . . they also brought along their mah jongg sets. The women spent leisurely days playing hours of mah jongg games either indoors during inclement weather or outdoors on the lush green lawns as their children or

grandchildren swam or played their favorite games of Monopoly, Candy Land, Scrabble or Yahtzee.

Lets fast forward to 2019. Its been almost one hundred years since mah jongg made its way into the lives and hearts of Americans, specifically American Jews. I know. By now you may be asking what's really behind the allure and mystery of mah jongg? Here's what I believe to be true and at the heart of this game, at least it is for me. On the surface, mah jongg is a mind sport. Its a game of strategy, memory, tactic and observation. Each new game offers players a fresh start, another opportunity to create order out of the mayhem of an array of tiles. As they turn each tile over and place it in their rack, anticipation stirs within them with the reveal of each tile.

But below the surface, magical things happen around tables and between players. Weekly mah jongg games provide sisterhood and friendship where bonds of trust and loyalty are formed. Players can share their simchas; births, marriages, birthdays, anniversaries, or their children or grandchildren becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. They discuss vacations, new jobs, recent promotions, and other personal accolades. They also share heartbreak; the loss of a loved one, a divorce or the loss of a job. Discussions about dating disasters or confessions of problems with their husbands or children can be discussed. Sometimes therapy sessions and heartfelt conversations organically occur around mah jongg tables. Some lucky women, including myself, have created intimacy through trust and honesty with one another and through dared vulnerability and exposed realness around a close-knit mah jongg table.

Add to the sweetness of gaming fun and camaraderie is the noshing and snacks galore. Some hostesses provide lunch, others set out enticing snacks; fruit, veggies and hummus, chips, candy, cakes, and other sweet treats. Coffee and tea aren't the only things to warm a mah jongg lovers heart, the affectionate bonds of friendship that form in their games warm their hearts as well.

Mah jongg is more than an entertaining and thought provoking game. It's more than a rite of passage. It creates an opportunity for belonging and connecting. It is a sacred space of sisterhood. It stimulates our brains and our hearts at the same time. It is a right-brain, left-brain symphony. Its one side focused on an analytical assignment while the other side is focused on congenial conversation. These are some of the reasons mah jongg is so popular and loved by millions of players worldwide.

What's old is new again. The game has seen a resurgence in popularity and is gaining notoriety in social media as well as being a hot topic in editorials and television segments. The Today show recently aired a segment about mah jongg, making its national television debut. Its about time mah jongg made it big! Sarah Jessica Parker and Julia Roberts both boast about playing mah jongg. Tournaments exist throughout the country and serious players spend hours vying for the big win. Temple sisterhoods, Hadassah chapters, community centers, local libraries, and churches all offer beginner classes. Mah jongg madness is spreading once again!

Women are being lured to the tiles and mystery surrounding this old Chinese game. Currently, women in their twenties and thirties are finding interest in mah jongg, some being introduced to it at their children's preschools or through their mothers or friends. Women in their thirties and forties are gathering around mah jongg tables across America, escaping for a few hours from home and work responsibilities. Women in their fifties and sixties are enjoying their weekly scheduled games filled with fun and friendship. Women in their seventies and eighties are perhaps reflecting on decades of playing mah jongg, still challenging their minds and memory. Women lucky enough to be in their nineties and to reach their one-hundredth birthday are our matriarchs, our Sarahs, of this beloved game. They were the original players, keeping their love for the game alive through weekly gatherings around their mah jongg tables, teaching their daughters and granddaughters and passing down the love and lure of a game that has forever enhanced their lives.

So, this is mah jongg. Who knew that an old Chinese tile game and a tri-fold card would change my life and add a weekly game filled with fun, friendship, and sisterhood? What's happening at my Long Island mah jongg table is happening at tables throughout New York and nation-wide and at tables across the oceans and in other continents. There is a world Mah Jongg Association located in Beijing, and there is a European Mah Jongg Association. Mah jongg sisterhoods and brotherhoods, (yes, men play mah jongg too!) are forming every day and I hope you are part of one too. Never played? Try a class and see if you like the game. I bet you will, and soon you too will be calling out: 2 Bam, 4 Crak, 9 Dot and, ***mah jongg!***

Fern Bernstein is an avid mah jongg player, children's yoga instructor, religious school teacher, writer, and author of Mah Jongg Mondays.