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Why is everybody suddenly playing Mahjong?

We've entered a Mahjong feedback loop: influencers, merch firms, and event planners are capitalizing on a trend and also fueling it.



Not long ago, Christine McLaughlin, a Duxbury mom, learned that another mom was opening a mahjong shop. “Who opens a *mahjong* shop?” she wondered. A few weeks later, she read about a local woman who started out giving lessons and had turned into a budding mahjong tycoon. Soon, she began hearing that people on the South Shore were [spending \\$400 or \\$500 on mahjong tiles](#), and converting their kids’ playrooms into mahjong parlors.

The game got inside her, it took on an urgency, and McLaughlin, a retired attorney, found herself researching “how to play mahjong” and worrying that her friends had already formed groups.

“I can’t be left behind,” she thought.

It’s a [story being told again and again](#), as if a silent call went out, heard mainly, but not exclusively, by women. A few years ago, or maybe last week, many had never thought about mahjong. But then someone in their book club started playing, or a neighbor needed a fourth, or they heard that [Ann Michael Maye](#), the wife of the Patriots QB Drake Maye, plays, or they saw it in ["Crazy Rich Asians"](#), and suddenly they’re going on mahjong retreats, training for mahjong tournaments, playing mahjong for charity.

Their dogs? They’re wearing mahjong-themed collars.

We’ve entered a mahjong feedback loop: influencers, mahjong-merch companies, instructors, event planners, and so on, are simultaneously capitalizing on an existing trend and also fueling it, making mahjong impossible to escape, like gravity, or pickleball.

Evite, the digital events platform, says the game has officially moved past the “trend” phase. In 2026, Mahjong events are up 94 percent year-over-year, according to the company.

[Mahjong](#) was developed in 19th-century China and then began spreading across the world. It landed in the United States in the 1920s, and became so popular in the Jewish community that in 1937 a group of Jewish women [created the National Mah Jongg League](#).

It has gone so mainstream that many who play may not know its history, and there have been [accusations of cultural appropriation](#) against a Texas-based tile company founded by three white women.

With the goal of capitalizing on the game’s growing popularity, last year, chef Irene Li launched Mahjong on a Mission, an event series that pairs mahjong lessons with introductions to organizations that serve the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

The goal, said Li, the founder of [Mei Mei Dumplings](#), is to “provide cultural context and connection.”

Renne Lu, a director of the [Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association](#), captured its importance in Chinese communities. “For those who enjoy playing regularly,” she said, “it’s almost like going to church.”

It’s becoming a way of life for many who are not Chinese, too.

In Milton, come evening, real estate attorney Amy Hubert Masferrer, turns her satellite office into an after-hours mahjong lounge, part networking venue for real estate agents, part girls’ night out.

“It’s very hard when you’re middle-aged to meet other women,” said Masferrer, who’s with the Mahoney Law Group, P.C. “All the natural things you used to do don’t exist anymore — the sports games and kids stuff. I love these women I would have otherwise never met.

“I sleep better when I play,” she added. “I have a couple of friends going through hard times, and when they say they can’t take on one more thing, I tell them, ‘mahjong will let you shut off your brain — you won’t be able to think of anything else.’”

Masferrer offers complimentary classes, but a growing number of women are turning mahjong into a second career — an alternative, perhaps, to the real estate agent or life coach pivot.

Gretchen Robards sold her kids party business, and then, almost accidentally — after playing mahjong with friends and being inundated with requests for lessons — started [South Shore Mahjong](#), a company that offers classes, events, and leagues. Some days, the 10 tables in her Cohasset studio buzz and clack for nine hours a day.

The National Mah Jongg League has just started mailing its [annual card](#) — an event of enormous importance, effectively resetting the game by redefining the official winning hands — and in a few weeks, Robards will be running two 2½-hour strategy sessions. The competitive spirit is so high, she said, that people were trying to sign up before registration even opened.

In Marblehead, Debbie Ellis, a travel advisor who owns the [Good Life Travel Company](#), took the advice of a pickleball-playing friend and added mahjong to her offerings.

Quickly two things happened: The “2026 Mahjong & Christmas Markets River Cruise,” down the Rhine River, was born and sold out; and Ellis heard of and became obsessed with pickleball-themed mahjong tiles. “I need to buy these as a business expense,” she said.

Jackie Raffi and three friends — all hard-driving professionals in the Winchester area — were looking for a winter alternative to golf and a hobby that would take them into older age.

They settled on mahjong, at first just playing, then teaching others, and quickly, well, it only made sense to start the [Mahj House](#), a “bespoke” mahjong event firm.

“I want to develop a couples therapy mahjong,” said Raffi, a luxury sales executive. “I don’t know if it would help or hurt, but playing a game together is good for the soul.”

There are more than 40 variations of mahjong, but the game many people are playing around here is American mahjong — spelled Mah Jongg — and with its 152 tiles, intricate scoring system, house rules, jokers, winds, dragons, cracks, bams, dots, bonus tiles, sequencing, suits, the discard pile, the pivot ... it can be daunting.

(In our current brain-training-obsessed moment, daunting is of course good.)

The challenge was captured by a humorist on Instagram. “I just took a mahjong lesson and [I have questions](#),” Hannah Young begins. “What are we doing here ladies? Why are there so many rules? ... I thought this was going to be a cute little game night ... instead I’m over here studying a card like I’m about to sit for the bar exam.”

As for why mahjong and why now, Alix Bryant, the Chinese American entrepreneur who founded the [American Mah Jongg Association](#), has a theory: While it is true that more people are playing — an artifact of COVID and people seeking in-person connection and a hunger for non-digital entertainment — it’s also gaining newfound visibility as even longtime players play in more public settings, at events, say, rather than just in homes.

Bryant likened mahjong to “ladies golf” in two ways: [female entrepreneurs are using it to network](#); and it carries a hint of wealth, of leisure.

“There is a sense of status,” she said. “Who has afternoons free to play mahjong?”

Locally, the names of mahjong firms drive home the life-is-good vibe. [Windward Mahjong](#), [Coastal Mahjong](#), [4 Blondes Mahjong](#).

That last one was started by Audrey Maw, a Rhode Island native who moved to San Antonio, and three blonde neighbors (all natural blondes, she said). Maw’s daughters teach classes and run events in the Boston area, and people are so obsessed, she said, that they’re dreaming about mahjong, replaying games as they sleep, and thinking of moves they should have made. “That’s how you know you have fallen in love.”

A research report on the mahjong market puts it as a [multi-billion dollar industry](#) and growing. Even considering that [Hermès](#) sells a set in natural mahogany for \$14,600, and that a mahjong cruise will run you \$4,000, that figure seemed high. But it turns out that much of the projected growth is expected to be driven by increasing adoption of online gaming platforms and digital versions of the game.

That felt so sad, especially when I thought about Masferrer’s ode to the in-person game: “It’s good for people to have commitments to each other,” she said. “There is something [nice] about saying, ‘I’ll be there. I’ll see you tomorrow.’”