



Tiles That Unite: The Popularity of Mahjong

By Sharona Saltzman

What do a retired Marine, a teenage coder, and a Brooklyn grandmother have in common?

The answer clicks into place with a satisfying shuffle: mahjong. This centuries-old tradition has a way of turning any gathering into something truly unforgettable.

Born in China during the Qing Dynasty, this game has evolved from its regional roots into a global phenomenon. Whether it's being played in a hip New York café, by a sunlit pool in Los Angeles, or on a shaded porch in Miami, it has transcended

mere recreation to become a vibrant lifestyle.

So, what exactly is mahjong? While definitions vary, its essence is widely understood: a game designed for four players, using intricately designed tiles, where skill, strategy, and chance intertwine to build a winning hand — and above all, to bring people together. There are over 40 known variations around the world. Among the most popular are Chinese, American, and the fast-paced Riichi style from Japan. Though rules and tiles may differ, the core values — camaraderie, tradition, and intellectual challenge — remain the same.

Beyond its mechanics, mahjong holds a unique social magic. Whether sipping tea between turns or sharing laughter over a playful misstep, the game is a bridge — cutting across ages, cultures, and languages. It's brain-boosting, mood-lifting, and may even trigger a release of endorphins. While winning is always sweet, many players will tell you the real joy lies in the friendships formed across the

table. The challenge is fun, but the social connection is the real prize.

Its enduring appeal has made its way into design, fashion, pop culture, and yes — even TikTok. With colorful tile sets, custom accessories, and themed events, the mahjong revival is well underway. It's a game that stretches the mind and feeds the soul — and it's just



as enjoyable at age eight as it is at 98. You might be surprised by how many celebrities and

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creatives play, from actors like Julia Roberts and Sarah Jessica Parker to writers, artists, and even athletes. Mahjong's charm knows no bounds — it's just as likely to appear at a cozy wine bar as it is after church on Sunday.

No matter where or how you play, mahjong offers something universal: a way to unplug, challenge oneself, and share meaningful time with others. If you haven't learned yet, there has never been a better time to start. And if you're already a player — congratulations, you're part of a timeless tradition that continues to unite and inspire.

Sharona Saltzman, is a writer, creator and founder of Mahjong West Media. Follow her @mahjongwestmedia.

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