The new age of mahjong

From left: Melissa Landon of Melrose, Hillary Golden of Brookline, and Julie Unger play at Unger's Melrose home.

By Kara Baskin | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT  MAY 18, 2016

On the outskirts of Boston resides a woman lovingly known as the mahjong maven. Laura Zoll teaches classes throughout the area and at her abode, part of which she refurbished into a mahjong parlor with card tables, chairs, and mahjong sets.
No advertising necessary — these lessons are word of mouth. And banish all stereotypes, please: This isn’t your grandmother’s game. Many of Zoll’s classes are filled with younger women drawn to the colorful, clattering tiles and camaraderie.

“It’s trending back,” Zoll says.

Move over, book club. While mahjong has traditionally been the provenance of “old Jewish ladies and old Chinese men,” as one aficionado puts it, this isn’t the case anymore. For many fans of all ages, for men and women, it’s a respite from a device-infested world and a channeling of simpler times.

Players — and there are legions — say that mahjong blends healthy competitiveness with strategy and, most of all, history. The rummy-style tile game was invented in China and came to the United States in the 1920s, according to the New York-based National Mah Jongg League. (Yep, there’s a league, with roughly 350,000 members. Among other things, it issues official merchandise and rules, replaces missing tiles, and resolves game disputes. It also sells sweatshirts.)

Whereas the game was once a pastime for homemakers who weren’t interested in bridge, now it’s younger, more upscale.

“My first class was young professionals who’d come on a Friday night after work. This was their social outlet. They’d leave work, get a drink, come to class, and go out to dinner,” says Zoll. Another recent class was mostly new mothers.
Why? Nostalgia, for one thing. A new generation has begun to inherit their mothers’ and grandmothers’ precious sets, and the game is a way to keep the memories alive while also having fun. Make no mistake: This isn’t like cards, where any old deck will do. People develop attachments to these well-loved sets, whose noise and feel are imbued with so much history.

Could there be a pleasure more sensually pure than “maajh,” as worshipful players call it? Roughly translated from Chinese, “mahjong” means “the game of the sparrows,” and it’s the sound, feel, and clang of those smooth, well-worn tiles that charms loyalists — no Twitter feeds or Instagram filters needed.

For many, it’s the sound of memory.

Newton’s Lauren Korn, a mom of three, started teaching mahjong after a friend who’d inherited a set from her great-aunt wanted to start a group. Now she teaches for free at Solomon Schechter Day School in Newton and through the city’s community education program. Her classes are so popular that strangers have begun e-mailing her to ask for private lessons.

“It’s a way to connect to the past,” Korn says.

That signature clatter comes from the shuffling of tiles, she explains. Four players put tiles face down and scramble them with their hands to shuffle them, a cacophonous and tactile pleasure. Sets include 152 tiles and four racks. There are five different tile categories: Suit (craks, bams, dots), Dragon (red, white, green), Flower, Wind, and Joker. Players take turns picking and discarding tiles to complete combinations. The tiles, of course, are part of the attraction.
Kenn Freed of Boston’s mahjong set dates to the 1950s.

Such is the case for Kenn Freed, a semi-retired financial adviser in Boston. An avid player, he maintains several well-maintained sets acquired from his mother and a childhood neighbor, as well as one from China, which he displays.

“They’re beautiful tiles. The ivory, if you have a really good set, the engraving is beautiful. It’s so much better vintage. You look at the sets now, they’re $125 and you don’t get that clang when you’re throwing the tiles,” he says. “You can always tell if someone is playing with a vintage ivory set,” as opposed to a newer plastic one.

But how to win? This is all part of the excitement. The National Mah Jongg League publishes an answer card each spring with selected winning combinations. Players win only by matching their hand to one of the League’s chosen ones.
Hillary Golden, a Brookline teacher and mom in her 30s, began playing as a 20-something in New Orleans and now has regular games with groups throughout Boston. It’s her social outlet, and she embraces the grandma stigma. So do her friends.

“People were always surprised to learn I played ‘maajh’ with a large group of Golden says.

“This is about meeting really nice women in my age group. I get to disappear for a few hours, play a challenging and fun game, and have some wine and snacks. It’s my self-care,” says Karine Dalton, 41, a stay-at-home mom in Stoneham who plays in Golden’s group.
“It’s a pushback from everybody on their cellphones and their technology. I also think there’s this nostalgia craze, throwback Thursdays and all that,” says Zoll.

There’s a karmic connection, too.

“Whenever someone brings an old set to class, they’re usually the first one to win with it. A friend’s mom had passed away, her dad found the set in her closet, and she played with it and won the first time. We were in tears. It was a way for her to connect with her mom,” says Korn.

Korn used to text her grandmother pictures of her own winning hands. Her grandmother since passed away, and now she plays with her set.

How could she not? The tiles — sometimes garish, sometimes timeworn — are nearly as important as the game itself.

For those not lucky enough to inherit, the thrill is in the hunt. Many people purchase them at mahjong flea markets — Florida’s Pah and Mah Jong in Pompano Beach is a hot spot — and from an online shop called Mah Jongg Maven (no relation to Zoll). Tiles come in various colors with subtle differences in design, and comparing them is part of the fun.

Melrose’s Julie Unger found hers at a thrift shop. After snagging the $30 bauxite set, she felt compelled to start a group.

“It was a complete set! The [shop owner] said it was from an old Jewish family in Melrose. I took a picture of it and posted a photo on Melrose’s Facebook community group, which is pretty active, and asked if anyone wanted to play,” Unger says.

And, oh, they did.
Now Unger hosts monthly games of between 10 to 12 women, including Golden and Dalton.

“I still remember how my grandmother used to pronounce the word — mahjawng,” says one of Unger’s mahjong mates, Natalie DeNardo, drawing out those vowels. Her grandmother now plays with friends at a retirement home in Virginia and immediately found DeNardo a set when she expressed interest in the game. DeNardo took her own daughter to the retirement home for the big transaction, snapping a photo of both generations touching the tiles.

But while the game is a connection to the past, it’s also sustenance for the present and future. Because unlike book clubs — too much pressure! — or cliques united by fleeting circumstance (kids’ sports, work), mahjong seems to transcend time.

“Many people end up with a table of friends, people who become friends and are friends, play every week for decades. . . . It has this kind of rootedness, and it also has this aspect where you can make friends anywhere and join anywhere,” says Zoll, Boston’s mahjong maven.

Longevity is key. Sharon’s June Blumenthal, 62, has played since her daughter was a toddler. That daughter is now 30, she says.

“A few friends had a game going. I said, I’ve never played! They said, ‘Did you watch your mother?’ Of course! Everybody did! No lessons. You just knew how,” Blumenthal recalls. Her mother would play upstairs while her father
had a poker game downstairs.

And thus a mahjong loyalist was born.

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