

â??Mr. Mahjongâ?• teaches San Francisco to love a 19th-century Chinese game

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When Andrew Keeler was five, he would fall asleep in his living room to the sound of clacking tiles. His mother and her three women friends would call out in turn, â??One bam, three crack, eight dot.â?•

â??I didnâ??t know what the words meant, but 40 years later, I found out,â?• Keeler said. They were plays in the game of mahjong.

Heâ??s put that knowledge to such good use that friends have dubbed him â??Mister Mahjong.â?• An avid player, he runs the Bay Area Mahjong Meetup Group, with 1,400 members. The group lists current game sites, welcomes new players, and encourages people who want to initiate public games.

He thought the game was only for â??older Jewish ladiesâ?• like his mother until his wife started playing and encouraged him to learn. â??I started playing American style, and once I learned, I started teaching friends, so Iâ??d have more people to play with,â?• he said. Now 63, he started playing in 2014.

â??I love the art of the tiles, various versions of the game, luck of the play, and making new friends at the mahjong table,â?• he said.



Andrew Keeler and Lexi DeHart starting a mahjong game. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

Mahjong, which originated in China, is a four-player game of tiles with distinct sets of numbers and/or designs. The game involves drawing and discarding tiles to build winning combinations, somewhat analogous to poker. There are American and Chinese variants with different sets of rules.

Keeler owns 50 mahjong sets but insists heâ??s a â??casual collector.â?• He scored a coup when a woman in Oakland gave him several dusty boxes of sets tucked away in her garage. One was a Chinese bone and bamboo set in a decorated chest, which Keeler thought was worth around $2,000.

Keeler is a skilled player, coming in 10th out of 200 in a Destination Mah Jongg world tournament in San Diego in 2022. â??But if I donâ??t win, Iâ??m OK because mahjong is half luck,â?• he said.

Tall and thin, Keeler is easy to spot at events wearing his fedora and a sports jacket decorated with images of mahjong tiles. Itâ??s all part of a life lived with a certain flair.

A writer, a gambler, a web designer

He grew up in San Diego, graduated from college, took time off to travel and work overseas, including in a cookie shop in Amsterdam. He then tried his hand at a basketful of occupations. Heâ??s been a newspaper reporter and a freelance writer. He was also a sports bookie, which he calls â??a four-year lucrative business and a victimless crime,â?• before turning to web design and writing ad banners.

He and his wife eloped to Mexico in 1995. They now live in Noe Valley, three blocks from a neighborhood restaurant that is one of the places that hosts the groupâ??s mahjong games. They have two sons, Carlos, 26, and Felix, 23, who are â??warming upâ?• to the game.

Keeler also plays tennis and is skilled at lawn bowling. He is the head coach at the San Francisco Lawn Bowling Club, the oldest municipal club of its kind.



Andrew Keeler lawn bowling in Golden Gate Park. (Photo courtesy of Andrew Keeler)

The first mahjong games Keeler participated in were held at San Franciscoâ??s Jewish Community Center, which he said â??was fine, but I wanted to expand it to a bar or restaurant, making it more fun.â?• Players have a sense of humor, he said. â??There are people who teach the game with names like â??Little Miss Mahj,â?? â??The Marvelous Mrs. Mahj,â?? and â??The Mahj Squad.â??â?•

The game then moved to the bar area on the mezzanine at the Sundance Kabuki Cinema (now AMC).

â??There were plenty of tables, so we didnâ??t interfere with moviegoers, and interested people came over to take a look,â?• he said. â??Thatâ??s where I learned to play Chinese when people from the Mahjong Meetup Group showed up.â?• (The meetup group had been dormant until Keeler stepped up and revived it.)

When the Sundance Cinema was sold, the games ended, and Keeler and company moved to the Patriot House restaurant in Embarcadero 2. It hosted games from 2017 to 2020. â??It wasnâ??t my intention to grow mahjong in San Francisco, but it just happened naturally,â?• he said.



Beginning a game of mahjong. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

After the pandemic, Mamahuhu, a Noe Valley restaurant, reached out to Keeler, and ongoing mahjong games in San Francisco were off and running. Now there are also games at St. Josephâ??s Art Society

on Howard Street, the Ferry Building, and Union Square.

Keeler was born in Walnut Creek, but his father, who worked in payroll services for Bank of America, was transferred to San Diego, where Keeler and his two older siblings grew up. His mother also joined Bank of America as a teller.

Discovering a talent for design

He worked on his high school paper and became the managing editor at the UCSD Guardian, the student paper at the University of California, San Diego. Working on the papers, Keeler discovered he had a flair for design, a talent that later led him to become a web designer.

Keeler took five and a half years to finish college, graduating in 1986. â??My thoughts were: I could write a paper for a teacherâ??s assistant to review, or I could write a feature story for the newspaper that 2,000 people would read,â?• he said. â??For me, academics took a back seat.â?•

After graduation, Keeler wrote freelance for The Union Tribune in San Diego, doing pop and rock concert reviews, â??going to so many loud concerts, I damaged my hearing.â?• He paused his career, taking time to live in Europe, first in Amsterdam and then in Istanbul where he taught English.

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In the early 1990s, Keeler began betting on sports games and eased into taking bets as he realized how lucrative the business was. â??I did that for four years but gave it up to engage in a more acceptable profession â?? web design â?? so Sharon (Gillenwater, his future wife) would look at me as a good prospect for marriage,â?• he said. His father was worried he would go to jail.



Andrew Keeler and Sharon Gillenwater. (Photo courtesy of Andrew Keeler)

Keeler met Gillenwater in 1993 at one of the many free-food public relations events that attract hungry freelance writers. After marrying, they moved to San Francisco to further Gillenwaterâ??s foray into the tech world, starting a database information company.

During this time, web design was coming into focus after the Internet, then called the World Wide Web, was made more user friendly with the introduction of graphical web browsers. Keeler had the foresight, along with the aesthetic eye, technical skills, and marketing know-how, to make website design and later banner ad creation good-paying career choices.

Keeler worked freelance, getting his start with creative ad agencies and building his resume. As he got more work, he hired other contractors, establishing his agency, â??Keeler Kommunikations.â?• â??I helped my wife in her business in her last few years until she sold it in 2022,â?• he said, â??and then I stopped doing my own work to focus on mahjong, lawn bowling, and tennis.â?•

Besides running the Mahjong Meetup group, Keeler has established public drop-in games in four locations around the city. â??I like producing events and teaching new players,â?• he said, â??but I have other interests and commitments both in and out of town, so other experienced players help me out.â?•

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Andrew Keeler at home with one of his 50 mahjong sets. (Photo by Jan Robbins)

Keeler enjoys getting out of town to play in tournaments. There are two main tournament producers â?? Destination Mah Jongg and Mah Jongg Fever. â??I like seeing friends who play in tournaments, and I like the trips to different cities and the hotel stays,â?• he said.

Keelerâ??s efforts at popularizing mahjong are paying off as the gameâ??s appeal crosses generations. At a recent mahjong meetup behind the Ferry Building, players at one table ranged from 25 to 82, while another table featured players of retirement age.

New devotees include Gen Z and Millennials craving contact after the isolation of the pandemic. â??They want to do things together, like Trivia night and pickleball, not just going to a bar and

drinking,â?• he said.

Some, like Keeler, are leaning into their cultural heritage, feeling nostalgic for games their parents and grandparents played, he said. â??Movies like â??Crazy Rich Asiansâ?? and television shows where mahjong pops up have heightened the interest.â?•



Mahjong at Ferry Plaza. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

New venues are coming online. Union Square is a new location. Another will soon open at a restaurant in the Marina District.

(You can add your name to Keelerâ??s mailing list at: https://mailchi.mp/331d18f8e0dd/mah-jongg-mailing-list

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