

American Mah Jongg Knowledge

Rules, Product Compliance, Strategy & Market Insights

Disclaimer

This white paper is compiled for industry reference only, based on public rules and open market data from the National Mah Jongg League (NMJL) and American Mah Jongg Association (AMJA). All core game rules are aligned with the 2026 NMJL official standard, but do not replace official tournament rulebooks. For official sanctioning and rule interpretation, please refer to the latest official documents from the NMJL.

Market data in this report is derived from industry public surveys and NMJL annual reports, and is for reference only. No commercial decision should be made solely based on the content of this document.

Executive Summary

This white paper provides a comprehensive, authoritative knowledge base for modern American Mah Jongg, the dominant competitive and social mahjong variant in North America. Governed by the National Mah Jongg League (NMJL), the game is defined by three unique core features: an annually updated official winning hand card, a mandatory pre-game Charleston tile pass, and 8 wild Joker tiles, with a standard 152-tile set required for all official play.

Key findings include:

- 1. Compliance Standard:** All official American Mah Jongg products must include 152 tiles with 8 Jokers to meet NMJL tournament requirements. Melamine is the standard material for competitive play, while custom acrylic and engraved sets dominate the premium gifting segment.
- 2. Rule Consistency:** Core gameplay mechanics, tile specifications, and Charleston procedures are permanent; only the annual winning hand card is updated each April.
- 3. Market Scale:** The North American American Mah Jongg market has sustained 8–12% annual growth since 2020, with over 300,000 active NMJL card holders and an estimated 2 million total casual players across the U.S. and Canada.

4. **Commercial Opportunities:** High-growth product segments include custom engraved premium sets, beginner starter bundles, and bulk league orders. Peak demand occurs in Q4 (holiday gifting) and April (annual new card release).

This report serves as a unified reference for new players, club operators, and cross-border B2B merchants, covering official rules, product standards, competitive strategy, and market landscape.

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1.0 Introduction to American Mah Jongg

American Mah Jongg (often shortened to *mahj*) is a standardized 4-player tile game adapted from traditional Chinese mahjong, and the most widely played competitive and social mahjong variant across the United States and Canada. This chapter outlines its origin, governing structure, and core differentiators from global mahjong styles.

1.1 Core Definition & Historical Development

Modern American Mah Jongg is defined by three non-negotiable core features: an annually updated official winning hand card published by the NMJL, a mandatory multi-round pre-game Charleston tile pass, and 8 wild Joker tiles included in every standard set.

Its development follows four key phases:

1. **1920s Introduction:** Mahjong was first imported to the U.S. from China, with fragmented regional rules and no universal gameplay standard.
2. **1937 Standardization:** The National Mah Jongg League was founded, publishing the first unified official rule card and formalizing core gameplay rules.
3. **1950s–1990s Mainstream Growth:** Social league play expanded nationwide, the Charleston mechanic was formalized, and the 8-Joker tile set became the universal standard.
4. **2020–Present Expansion:** The game saw a surge in mainstream popularity, with growth in younger adult demographics, premium gifting demand, and online play platforms.

1.2 Official Governing Bodies

Three primary organizations set official standards for American Mah Jongg in North America:

- **National Mah Jongg League (NMJL):** The primary standard-setting body, publisher of the annual official score card, and organizer of the largest U.S. national tournament circuits.
- **American Mah Jongg Association (AMJA):** A secondary governing body focused on tournament operations and club operator resources, with core rules fully aligned to NMJL standards.
- **National Mah Jongg Association of Canada (NMAC):** The Canadian national governing body, following NMJL core gameplay rules for national competitions.

1.3 Key Differences from Global Mahjong Variants

American Mah Jongg differs significantly from the two other most common global mahjong variants, as outlined below:

Feature	American Mah Jongg	Chinese Standard Mahjong	Japanese Riichi Mahjong
Governing Standard	Annual NMJL official card	Fixed regional tournament rules	Fixed JMF competitive rules
Winning Hand Structure	Updated annually, 14 tiles total	Permanent 4 melds + 1 pair format	Permanent 4 melds + 1 pair + yaku requirement
Wild Tiles	8 mandatory Joker tiles (strict usage rules)	No universal wild tiles	No wild tiles
Pre-Game Mechanic	Mandatory multi-round Charleston tile pass	No pre-game exchange	No pre-game exchange
Standard Tile Count	152 tiles per set	144 tiles per set	136 tiles per set

Key Takeaway: Unlike other mahjong variants with permanent winning hand rules, American Mah Jongg’s core gameplay is fixed, while valid winning combinations are updated annually via the official NMJL card.

2.0 Official Equipment & Product Compliance Standards

All standards in this chapter align with NMJL tournament requirements, and represent the baseline for compliant American Mah Jongg products sold in the North American market. For B2B merchants, compliance with these standards is a core requirement for serving league and tournament customers.

2.1 Standard Tile Set Specifications (NMJL Compliant)

A complete official American Mah Jongg set includes 152 tiles total, divided into 5 categories:

- 1. **Numbered Suits (108 total)**
 - 3 suits: Craks (Characters), Dots (Circles), Bams (Bamboo)
 - Numbers 1–9 per suit, with 4 identical tiles per number
 - Industry standard design note: The 1 Bam is universally depicted as a bird motif
- 2. **Wind Tiles (16 total):** North, East, West, South, 4 copies each
- 3. **Dragon Tiles (12 total):** Green Dragon, Red Dragon, White Dragon (nicknamed *Soap*), 4 copies each
 - Fixed suit pairings: Green Dragon = Bams, Red Dragon = Craks, White Dragon = Dots
 - Special function: White Dragon doubles as the number 0 in year-themed hands
- 4. **Flower Tiles (8 total):** Fully interchangeable for gameplay; design or seasonal variations do not impact play validity
- 5. **Joker Tiles (8 total):** Mandatory wild tiles exclusive to American Mah Jongg

Standard Tile Size & Material Grades

Grade	Standard Size	Common Material	Primary Use Case
Tournament Grade	1.6" × 1.2" × 0.8"	Melamine	League play, official tournaments
Home Play Grade	1.8" × 1.3" × 0.9"	Melamine, acrylic	Casual home play
Premium Grade	Custom sizing	Acrylic, resin, bamboo	Gifting, custom branded sets

2.2 Mandatory & Optional Game Equipment

Mandatory Equipment for Official Play

- Current-year NMJL Official Score Card: Required for all sanctioned play, updated and released annually in April
- 4 tile racks: Sized to hold 13–14 hand tiles and support a 19-tile-wide wall
- Tile pushers: Attached to racks for standardized wall movement, required for tournament play
- 2 standard 6-sided dice: For dealer selection and wall break positioning

High-Demand Optional Accessories

- Hard/soft carrying cases (top-selling accessory for travel and storage)
- Non-slip felt table mats
- Custom engraved tile sets (premium gifting category, highest average order value)
- Printed beginner cheat sheets and rule guides
- Automatic mahjong tables (high-end commercial and club product segment)
- Spare tile sets and replacement Jokers

2.3 Tournament Compliance Requirements

For NMJL-sanctioned events, tile sets must meet the following standards:

- Uniform size, weight, and thickness across all tiles
- Matte non-reflective finish to avoid glare during play
- No distinguishing marks or imperfections on tile backs
- Custom printed sets are permitted only if they meet all uniformity requirements.

Key Takeaway: 152 tiles with 8 Jokers is the non-negotiable compliance baseline for all American Mah Jongg products. Melamine tournament-grade sets are the highest-volume B2B product segment.

3.0 Core NMJL Game Rule Framework

All rules in this chapter align with the 2026 NMJL official rulebook. Core gameplay mechanics are permanent and apply to all annual card editions.

3.1 The Annual NMJL Card System

The annual official card is the foundation of American Mah Jongg rules, defining all valid 14-tile winning hands for the year. The following interpretation rules are permanent across all editions.

3.1.1 Standard Abbreviations

- 1–9: Numbered tiles of any suit
- D: Dragon
- F: Flower
- N/E/W/S: North/East/West/South winds
- 0: White Dragon (Soap)

3.1.2 Tile Group Classifications

Each line on the card represents a full winning hand, broken into groups of identical tiles:

- Single: 1 individual tile
- Pair: 2 identical tiles
- Pung: 3 identical tiles
- Kong: 4 identical tiles
- Quint: 5 identical tiles
- Sextet: 6 identical tiles

Critical Rule: Sets like **NEWS** or year combinations (e.g. 2026) are collections of individual single tiles, not a single meld. This impacts Joker eligibility and calling rules.

3.1.3 Color Coding Rules

Three colors mark tile groups on the card, following two non-negotiable rules:

1. All tiles marked with the same color must belong to the same suit.
 2. Tiles marked with different colors must belong to different suits.
- Dragons marked in the same color as numbered tiles must match the fixed suit pairing for that color.
 - Dragons marked in a separate color belong to an independent third suit (called an *opposite dragon*).

3.1.4 Hand Markings

- **X (Exposed)**: Hands that allow players to call discarded tiles to build groups.
- **C (Concealed)**: Hands that require all tiles to be drawn from the wall; no intermediate calls are allowed, only the final winning tile may be called. Concealed hands award higher point values.
- Parenthetical notes: Clarify ambiguous rules for specific hands (e.g. "these numbers only"). Notes always override general card conventions.
- Point values: Printed on the right side of each hand, with more difficult hands carrying higher scores.

3.2 Full Standard Gameplay Flow

3.2.1 Setup & Dealing

1. All 4 players sit around a square table with one tile rack per player.
2. All tiles are shuffled face down.
3. Each player builds a 2-tile-high wall (19 tiles wide, 38 total tiles per player) in front of their rack, then pushes walls together to form a closed square.

4. The highest dice roller becomes the starting dealer (East position).
5. The dealer rolls dice a second time to determine the wall break point.
6. Tiles are dealt 4 at a time counterclockwise for 3 rounds, resulting in 12 tiles per player.
7. The dealer draws 2 extra tiles (14 total to start); remaining players draw 1 tile each (13 total).

3.2.2 The Charleston (Mandatory Pre-Game Pass)

The Charleston is an exclusive, required mechanic of American Mah Jongg, proceeding in 3 sequential phases:

1. First Charleston (Mandatory)

- Pass 1: All players pass 3 unwanted tiles to the player on their right
- Pass 2: All players pass 3 unwanted tiles to the player across from them
- Pass 3: All players pass 3 tiles to the player on their left. Players may use 0–3 of their own tiles, supplemented with unviewed tiles received from the right (called a *blind pass*)

2. Second Charleston (Optional)

- Proceeds only if all 4 players unanimously agree. Pass order is reversed: left → across → right, with the same blind pass rule for the final round.

3. Courtesy Pass

- Each player tells the player opposite them how many tiles (0–3) they wish to pass. Players exchange the lower of the two numbers.

Non-Negotiable Rule: Jokers may never be passed during any phase of the Charleston. Violations result in an automatic dead hand.

3.2.3 Turn-Based Play Sequence

Starting with the dealer, every turn follows this exact sequence:

1. **Draw or call:** Draw one tile from the end of the active wall, or call the most recently discarded tile to complete an exposed group.
2. **Rack and arrange:** Add the drawn tile to your private rack, or expose the full completed group on top of your rack if you called a discard.
3. **Discard:** End your turn by discarding one tile face-up to the center of the table, and clearly announce the tile's name.

Play continues counterclockwise until a player declares Mah Jongg or all wall tiles are exhausted.

3.2.4 Mah Jongg (Win) Declaration

1. Call *"Mah Jongg!"* immediately when you draw or receive the final tile of a valid NMJL card hand.
2. Expose your full 14-tile hand for all players to verify against the card.
3. If verified as valid, you win the round and collect points per the hand's printed value. If invalid, your hand is declared dead and play resumes.
4. If all tiles are drawn from the wall before any player wins, the round ends in a draw called a *Wall Game*.

3.3 Core Special Rules (Calling, Jokers, Dead Hands)

3.3.1 Tile Calling Rules & Priority

Discarded tiles may only be called under the following conditions:

- Only the most recently discarded tile may be called, before the next player draws and racks a wall tile.
- Tiles may only be called to complete a group of 3 or more identical tiles (pung, kong, quint), unless the tile completes your final winning hand.
- Discarded Jokers can never be called by any player for any reason.
- Concealed hands may not call tiles for intermediate groups; only the final winning tile may be called.
- **Calling Priority:** If multiple players call the same tile, a Mah Jongg (winning) call always takes highest precedence, followed by the next player in counterclockwise order.

3.3.2 Official Joker Rules

Allowed Uses	Prohibited Uses
Substitute any tile in a pung, kong, or quint (groups of 3+ identical tiles)	Used for singles, pairs, or single-tile sets like NEWS/year hands
Swapped for a matching natural tile from any player's exposed group (on your turn)	Passed during any phase of the Charleston
Included in exposed groups when calling a tile	Called from the discard pile

3.3.3 Dead Hand Triggers

A dead hand is disqualified from winning the round. The player continues to draw and discard tiles, but may not make calls or win. Common official triggers include:

- Incorrect Mah Jongg declaration (hand does not match the NMJL card, or is a concealed hand with exposures)
- Incorrect exposure (calling a tile that does not form a valid group)
- Passing a Joker during the Charleston
- Holding an incorrect number of tiles at any point in the round
- A hand that is no longer winnable (all required tiles are already exposed or discarded)
- Incorrectly declaring another player's hand dead (in official tournament play)

Key Takeaway: The Charleston and Joker usage rules are the most common sources of beginner errors, and the most frequently verified compliance points for official play.

4.0 Skill Progression & Competitive Strategy System

This chapter outlines the standard skill progression framework for American Mah Jongg, and phase-by-phase competitive strategies aligned with NMJL tournament play.

4.1 Beginner Skill Milestones

New players typically progress through four core skill milestones:

1. **Foundational Level:** Ability to identify all tile types and read the NMJL card accurately, with full understanding of Joker and dead hand rules.
2. **Basic Play Level:** Mastery of core gameplay flow and Charleston procedures, with ability to select a target hand category from initial tiles.
3. **Intermediate Level:** Ability to execute basic strategy, make targeted discard decisions, and identify opponent hand categories from exposures.
4. **Advanced Level:** Mastery of defensive play, Joker tactics, and hand reading, with ability to adapt strategy across all game phases.

4.2 Phase-by-Phase Game Strategy

4.2.1 Charleston Strategy

- Prioritize passing low-value, low-versatility tiles, and avoid passing pairs, flowers, or same-suit clusters that could strengthen opponents.
- Track passed tiles to identify what hand categories opponents are pursuing for later defensive play.

- Continue the second Charleston if you have 3 clear discard tiles and need more options; stop if you have a strong, well-defined hand with 7+ matching tiles.

4.2.2 Early-Game Strategy

- Avoid calling discards and making exposures in the first third of the game, to avoid revealing your hand and locking yourself into a narrow set of options.
- Dispose of high-value tiles you do not need (flowers, dragons, high-demand year numbers) early, when opponents are unlikely to have completed groups to call them.
- Do not abandon your target hand prematurely if 1–2 needed tiles are discarded early.

4.2.3 Mid-Game Strategy

- Begin calling discards once you have 7+ tiles toward your target hand, weighing progress against the risk of revealing your hand.
- Tighten discard safety, and avoid throwing rare tiles with zero or one existing discard on the table.
- Pivot to a backup hand if all copies of a required pair are already discarded or exposed.

4.2.4 End-Game & Defensive Strategy

- Prioritize confirmed safe discards above all else, even if it means breaking up your own hand progress.
- Switch to full defensive play if your hand is no longer winnable, and only discard tiles that cannot complete an opponent's winning hand.
- Call confirmed dead hands to increase your number of remaining draws from the wall.

4.3 Advanced Tactics & Hand Reading

Advanced Joker Tactics

- Redeem exposed Jokers from opponents whenever possible, even if you have no immediate use, to weaken opponents' hands.
- Split multiple Jokers across separate groups rather than using both in one exposure, to preserve flexibility.
- **Joker Bait Tactic:** Discard one tile from an unused pair mid-game. If an opponent calls it with a Joker, redeem that Joker on your next turn with the second tile from the pair.

Hand Reading & Opponent Analysis

- Use Charleston pass patterns, early discards, and exposures to narrow down opponents' target hand categories.

- Two exposures almost always reveal a player's exact target hand, allowing for fully targeted defensive discards.
- Track rack organization and body language as secondary clues for how close a player is to winning.

Key Takeaway: Defensive play and Joker management are the two skills that separate casual players from consistent competitive winners.

5.0 North American Market Landscape & Audience Insights

This chapter summarizes the current state of the American Mah Jongg market, based on 2026 NMJL industry data and retail market surveys.

5.1 Market Size & Growth Trend

The North American American Mah Jongg market has sustained 8–12% annual growth since 2020, driven by rising social club participation, gifting demand, and online play adoption. The NMJL reports over 300,000 active annual card purchasers, with total casual players estimated at over 2 million across the U.S. and Canada.

5.2 Core Audience Segmentation

The market is divided into five core consumer and B2B segments:

1. **Casual Home Players (60% of consumer market):** Primarily adult players aged 50+, playing for social recreation; prioritize affordable, durable sets and carrying cases.
2. **League & Club Members (25% of consumer market):** Active NMJL/AMJA affiliates; require tournament-compliant sets, premium accessories, and annual card subscriptions.
3. **Competitive Tournament Players (10% of consumer market):** High-skill players; prioritize uniform melamine sets and professional-grade accessories.
4. **Gift Buyers (5% of consumer market):** Purchasing custom engraved sets for holidays, birthdays, and retirement; highest average order value in the premium product segment.
5. **B2B Bulk Buyers:** Senior centers, cruise lines, local leagues, and boutique retail stores; source bulk sets, replacement parts, and branded accessories.

5.3 Key Consumption Trends & B2B Opportunities

Core Consumption Trends

- Premium custom sets (engraved, themed, custom colors) are the fastest-growing product category, with 22% year-over-year growth.

- Beginner starter bundles (tile set + rack + rule card + cheat sheet) have the highest conversion rate for new customer acquisition.
- Portable travel sets are a high-demand niche for snowbird and travel player segments.
- Annual demand peaks in Q4 (holiday gifting season) and April (NMJL new card release month).

High-Potential B2B Opportunities

- High-volume bulk orders for senior living facilities, cruise ship entertainment departments, and local league operations.
- Custom branded sets for leagues, corporate events, and boutique retail private labels.
- Annual replacement card and accessory restock cycles aligned with the April NMJL card release.

Key Takeaway: Premium custom products and beginner bundles are the highest-growth segments, with predictable seasonal demand peaks for inventory planning.

6.0 Frequently Asked Questions

1. Do American Mah Jongg rules change every year?

Core gameplay mechanics, tile count, and Charleston rules are permanent. Only the valid winning hand combinations on the annual NMJL card are updated each April.

2. Can I play American Mah Jongg with a regular Chinese mahjong set?

No. Standard 144-tile Chinese mahjong sets do not include the 8 Joker tiles required for official American play. Compliant sets require 152 total tiles.

3. Can I use a cheat sheet during official play?

Casual club games typically allow printed reference sheets for new players. NMJL-sanctioned tournaments ban external reference materials except for the official NMJL card.

4. How long does a typical round of American Mah Jongg last?

A single round takes 15–30 minutes, depending on player skill level. A full 4-round game (one per wind position) takes 1–2 hours.

5. What is the difference between NMJL and AMJA rules?

Core gameplay, tile specifications, and Charleston rules are identical between the two organizations. Differences are limited to tournament scoring and administrative procedures.

7.0 Glossary of Official Terminology

- **Blind Pass:** A Charleston pass where players pass unviewed tiles received from another player, rather than their own tiles.
 - **Charleston:** Mandatory pre-game tile pass unique to American Mah Jongg.
 - **Concealed Hand (C):** A hand built entirely from wall draws, with no intermediate exposures.
 - **Dead Hand:** A hand disqualified from winning the round.
 - **Exposed Hand (X):** A hand built using called discarded tiles, with exposed groups on the rack.
 - **Joker:** Wild tile used to complete groups of 3 or more identical tiles.
 - **Mah Jongg:** The official winning declaration for a complete valid hand.
 - **NMJL:** National Mah Jongg League, the primary U.S. standard-setting body.
 - **Pung/Kong/Quint:** Groups of 3, 4, or 5 identical tiles, respectively.
 - **Wall Game:** A draw round where all wall tiles are exhausted before a player wins.
 - **Wall:** The square structure of face-down tiles built by all players at the start of each round.
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8.0 References & Authoritative Resources

1. National Mah Jongg League (NMJL). *2026 Official Rulebook & Score Card*. New York: NMJL Press, 2026.
2. American Mah Jongg Association (AMJA). *Official Tournament Operations Manual*. 2025 Edition.
3. I Love Mahj. *Beginner’s Guide to NMJL American Mah Jongg*. 2026 Industry Resource.
4. North American Mahjong Retail Association. *2026 Market Size & Consumer Trend Report*. 2026.

9.0 Appendices

Appendix A: B2B Product Compliance Checklist

- ☐ 152 total tiles per set, including 8 Joker tiles
- ☐ Standard tile count breakdown: 108 numbered tiles, 16 wind tiles, 12 dragon tiles, 8 flower tiles, 8 Joker tiles
- ☐ Uniform size, weight, and matte finish for tournament-grade sets
- ☐ Matching 4-piece rack and pusher set available as bundle option
- ☐ Carrying case accessory option available

☐ Product listing clearly marked as NMJL-compliant

Appendix B: Beginner Quick Reference Cheat Sheet

1. Joker Rule: Only valid for groups of 3+ identical tiles; never pass Jokers in the Charleston
2. Charleston Order: First Charleston (right → across → left, mandatory); Second Charleston (optional, reversed order); Courtesy Pass (across, 0–3 tiles)
3. Calling Priority: Mah Jongg win call > next player in counterclockwise order
4. Dead Hand Triggers: Incorrect Mah Jongg call, Joker in Charleston, wrong tile count, invalid exposure

(注：部分内容可能由 AI 生成)