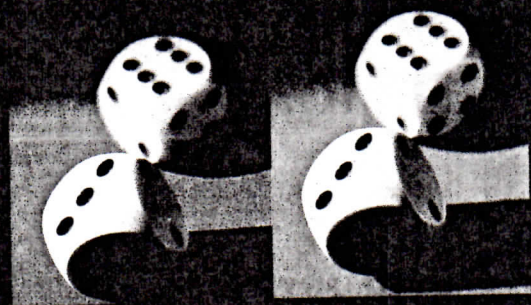


Sacramento Women



bunco fever

For generations, women have found ways to gather together—quilting bees, book clubs, games like mah-jongg or bridge—but the simple truth is: These are nothing but excuses. Because the real attraction is not the plot of the novel or the new stitch or who wins the round. It is the conversation, the visiting, the electricity in the air as some of your favorite people come in the door. “How are you?” you ask, and you really want to know. Best of all, you have hours to find out in riveting detail. ♦ So it is with bunco, a game with a rather risqué history that has seen a resurgence



in the last 10 years, particularly in suburban neighborhoods. Played with 12 people, the game calls for enough rotation that you are guaranteed quality time with every person in the room. “It basically has nothing to do with playing dice,” says one regular player. “It’s a chance to drink wine, to see everyone—a night out without the kids and the husband—a time to gossip.” ♦ “I couldn’t care less about the game,” agrees another player. “It’s the people—I’m strictly here for the people.” ♦ “I’ll tell you what bunco is: It’s a mindless game where women eat, drink and scream a lot,” says another. ♦ It’s that, and a whole lot more...

*by thea marie rood
photography by roy wilcox*



History of the Game

Although bunco is now a respectable game played—for the most part—by American women, it has a dark and rather notorious history. Its origins can be traced to an English game in the 1700s called 8-Dice Cloth, and it was introduced in San Francisco by an allegedly dishonest gambler during the Gold Rush. Bunco parlors flourished, and bunco came to mean a scam, swindle or con game. By the turn of the century, Victorian families were sedately playing bunco with their neighbors, but it entered another shady period during Prohibition when bunco gambling parlors again resurfaced. Most were daring speakeasies in Chicago, where bathtub gin and smuggled whiskey were served up with the dice, and the term “bunco squad” referred to the cops who raided these dens of iniquity.

You can be assured that today’s bunco games are not often roused by police, however, unless talking about your vacation or bragging about your granddaughter—while flushed from a good glass of chardonnay—has suddenly become illegal.

Native Daughters

This group (pictured above)—perhaps the longest running in the Sacramento area—was founded in 1979 by Barbara Chiodo, Linda Cemo, Kathy Joelson and Dar-

Lou Ernst. Most of the original 12 players worked together and the idea was sparked when one quit her job and was afraid of losing track of her office friendships. In that sense, it accomplished its primary task and kept many of the women together.

“We’ve gone through so much,” says Chiodo. “Babies, grandbabies, surgeries, marriages.”

In fact, once a member, always a member: Tanya Schwengal moved to Seattle for three years and when she returned, her first priority was getting her spot back. “I had to wait for an opening,” she says, “so I subbed for a while.” Most interesting, however, is how many members have spent their lives in Sacramento—high-fiving each other over attending rival schools in the 1960s such as McClatchy and Sac High and talking of local 20-, 30- and 40-year reunions.

The game is played once a month, on the third Wednesday, and rotates among players’ houses. This night it is being played at the home of Sam Ose, who joined the group a year ago and whose husband, Doug, is the Republican nominee for Congress. Much of the conversation excitedly focuses on his run for office and the practical effects his campaign and potential election have on the family. “We looked for years and finally found a house we’re happy with,” Sam says ruefully of their three-acre spread behind Del Paso Park, “and now we may have to move.”

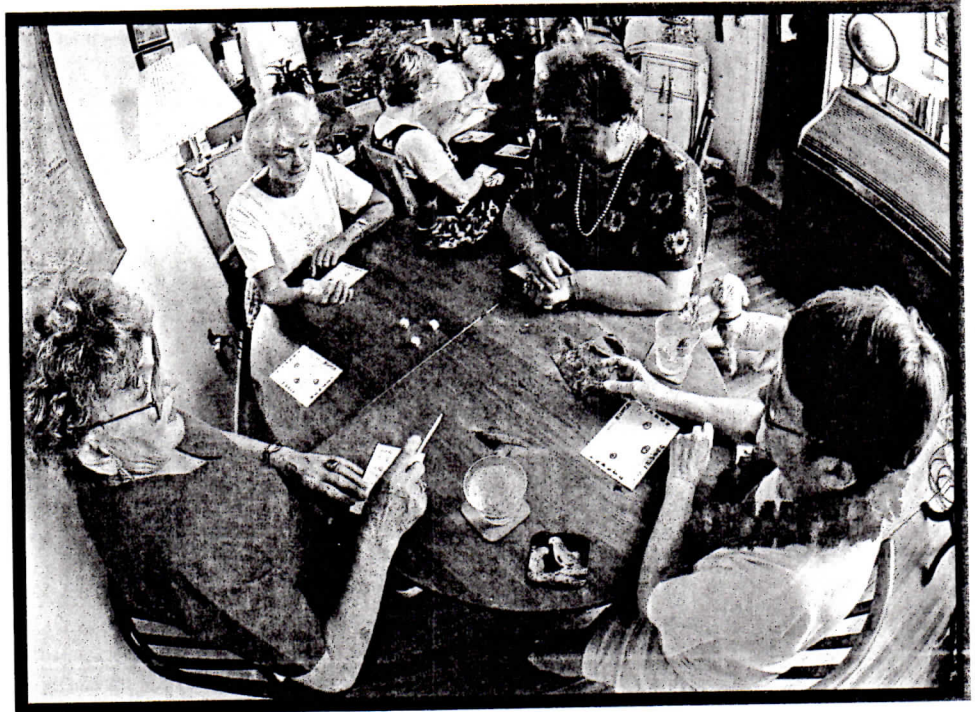
The head table, located in the Oses' dining room, controls the game and is stocked with a bell that signals when to start and stop play. "We play three tables of four [players]," explains Chiodo, "and the game goes until the [head] table reaches 21." Each game consists of six rounds: in the first, you roll for ones, in the second for twos, in the third for threes, and so on. When a round finishes, the partnership with the highest score moves on and the losers stay put but get new partners. This rotation makes it possible to see and talk to everyone several times over, so that conversations often begin again mid-stream: "So *why* are they still living with you . . ." "When are you going back to Kona . . ."

"Do you think it would help to switch teachers . . ."

These women know each other well, and the talk is intimate and comfortable. Talk is also obviously the priority, with many laughing eruptions over mistakes in score-keeping or forgetting to play. "This game is a no-brainer," confides Ernst. "It takes no skill, which is good, because usually we're too busy talking."

The refreshments are also important to this group. Bowls of popcorn and chocolates line the tables, and several bottles of wine are consumed as the evening wears on. "Send Doug out for more wine or tell him we won't vote for him," shouts one player, and everyone—including both Oses—laughs out loud.

In fact, everything gets louder—and funnier—as the group moves into its fourth and final game near 10:30. For example, the group uses a stuffed toy—arguably a bear or a dog—to signify when someone has a "bunco": three of the kind being rolled for in that round. At some point, the toy is lost—picked up by a visiting child or mislaid by someone refilling a wine glass—and Sam Ose replaces it with one of her daughter's Barbie dolls. "Bunco Barbie," she announces, which instantly starts the group on the idea of marketing a doll with a scorecard and bowl of snacks. "Maybe she could have dice earrings," cracks one player. The evening finishes with prizes awarded for the most buncos, the most wins and losses, the last bunco,



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and a drawing—which members say shows how desperate they are about winning a present. Prizes, which have been purchased with \$60

of monthly donations, this time consist of a vase, scented candles, a candle holder and potpourri. At well past 11 p.m., the group is sipping flavored coffee and eating homemade apple cobbler, and the conversation is still going strong.

The School Teachers

Many—but not all—of these bunco players are elementary school teachers or recently retired, such as tonight's hostess, Marjorie McCauley, who lives in an antique-filled bungalow in Old Land Park and helped found the group (pictured above) three years ago. "She had several of us in for supper in her backyard," says Evie Franz, also an original member, "and she suggested we each invite a friend. When we said we'd never played before, she laughed and said, 'You can learn in about 30 seconds.'" Although most didn't know each other well before starting the bunco group, surprising commonalities have been discovered. "Two ladies found out they'd both worked in the Arden Town shopping center 30 years ago," says first grade teacher Elinor Anklin. "And one player found out she'd gone to high school with another."

One reason for its popularity may be its emphasis on socializing, which clearly outweighs the formalities of the game.

Because these women are just beginning their friendships, the focus is on the game, which is competitive but good-natured. "You dirty bird," says McCauley at one point, when being skunked by someone on a roll, and everyone laughs. The conversation centers on casual topics, such as summer tours of Europe, an upcoming Alaskan cruise, grown children's weddings and grandchildren. By unspoken agreement, work talk is limited, but there is other evidence of school teaching: score is kept on the back of Monet postcards, for example, and the bell at the head table is an old-fashioned brass antique. "It's from the one-room schoolhouse I attended in Wichita, Kansas," confides McCauley proudly. Substitute players are carefully reminded to put their names on their scorecards and laggards are urged not to dawdle over rolling the dice.

This group's refreshment habits are fairly sedate: Although a bottle of wine is available, most members sip lemonade or iced tea, served in frosted glasses with a sprig of mint. And tonight is one of the group's two yearly potlucks: The kitchen yields a lovely display of half a dozen salads, a fruit bowl and chicken. Homemade brownies and lemon bars are sneaked between rounds.

As for prizes, "this group is in it for the cash," says one member, and indeed, the \$5 donations go into a pot that is split at the end of the evening: \$30 goes to the player winning the most rounds, \$15 to the player with the second most, \$10 to the player with the last bunco and \$5 to the player with the most losses. At Christmas, the group has an ornament exchange in lieu of prizes and donates the pot to a local charity. By 9 p.m. most game nights, group members depart for home, although sometimes in the summer, they've been known to walk to Vic's Ice Cream for sundaes.

The Mommies

Formed as part of Sierra Moms in Folsom—which is made up primarily of stay-at-home mothers with pre-school children (pictured on page 57)—this bunco group is in general younger and gleeful to be out for the evening, for whatever reason. "We bond and vent," says Fran Schreck, a founding member of both the moms' group and the bunco nights. "The game is mindless—it's totally secondary to the excuse of getting out of the house."

"And it's an excuse my husband buys," adds Valerie Weinberg.

It's also a big group, with 16 permanent players and an eager group of subs. One reason for its popularity may be

its emphasis on socializing, which clearly outweighs the formalities of the game. For example, tonight the game is hosted by Cindy Zoeller, who spent the afternoon making artichoke dip, meatballs, vegetable and cheese platters and, for dessert, tiramisu and apple cake.

"I'm the best eater in the group," says Rachele Barri, a reed-thin blonde who runs a home day-care center.

"She needs the extra energy," says Schreck.

Alcohol is sometimes served—depending on the hostess—although the group tends to be giggly and rambunctious even without wine.

Equally important to the members is the gift exchange; play is cheerfully suspended tonight after only two games because one member's husband—home watching the kids—has been paged back to his high-tech job and everyone would rather open presents in the remaining half hour. And it is an uproarious event. Each gift can change hands three times, so it becomes a wild snatching and hoarding of the best items. "She's a closet cheater," Marni Simon teases another member. "She tries to make exchanges outside." The wrapped gifts cost \$5 and center around a theme, such as Something to Learn from (road atlases and cookbooks), Something Light and Bright (candles, for example) and Treat Yourself (gift certificates for Starbucks or Baskin-Robbins).

After the gift exchange, the donation pot is split: \$25 for the most wins, \$20 for the most buncos and \$15 for the last person with "traveling" (triple twos in any round). "It's really the best of both worlds," Simon says of the gifts and prize money. "If worst comes to worst, you go home with your own gift."

By about 10 p.m., players leave in car pools of two or three, heading home to relieve tired husbands, tuck errant children into bed, pat a restless infant back to sleep. ■

BUNCO GRAB BAG

So what if you want to start a bunco group? Not surprisingly, the Internet offers plenty of sites that can help, including www.buncobook.com where you can order *The Sisterhood of Bunco: A Comprehensive Guide to the Game* and www.buncogame.com, which gives you rules, definitions and ideas for themes. Perhaps the best resource is www.worldbunco.com, the address for the World Bunco Association (also known as C&L Enterprises), which produces a boxed game with everything you need—dice, scorecards, pencils, a rulebook and bell—called *It's Bunco Time* for \$19.95 and a kids' version called *Bunco Blast*, especially popular with the 10-year-old-girl set, which is reportedly hot on bunco birthday parties. WBA also offers bunco chat and can help find players in your area. If you're not on line, call (800) 786-9456.