

BOCCE!

Having a ball

Traditional Italian pastime a hit on the courts with the casual and extremely competitive alike.



Tom Diabonne tosses a bocce ball during a friendly game at Bocci's Cellar in Santa Cruz.

Gill Lovejoy/Sentinel

By **CHERYL STERNMAN RULE**
SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

An ancient game that takes only minutes to learn, bocce is a sport unlike any other. Players range from strapping teenage boys to sprightly 80-year-old grandmothers. The relaxing and jovial game can turn on a dime, becoming fiercely competitive with a single throw of the pallino. And while newcomers may enjoy bocce for its camaraderie, seasoned players know that skill, strategy, and, above all, restraint reign supreme in this traditional Italian pastime.

For an upbeat, casual introduction to the game, head over to Bocci's Cellar, the Santa Cruz restaurant/bar/live music club/bocce facility that's been around for more than 85 years.

Boris Seibert of Capitola, who works at nearby Plantronics, has been bringing colleagues and clients to Bocci's Cellar for years.

"You get to act like a kid for a while," he says of the game. "Bocce is great for bonding with friends and co-workers, but it's also very competitive."

Owner Roger Barnes agrees.

"This is the simplest game there is,"

says Barnes, who owned the business 20 years ago, sold it, then bought it again in the late 1990s. "It's not like PlayStation. You don't need to boot anything up. All you need is dirt and rocks, and you've got a game."

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Where to play

Bocci's Cellar, 140 Encinal St., Santa Cruz, is open 11 a.m.-midnight Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-1:30 a.m. Friday and Saturday, 3-10 p.m. Sunday. Call 427-1795. Bocce is free.

Campo di Bocce, 565 University Ave., Los Gatos, is open 10 a.m.-11 p.m. Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-midnight Saturday and Sunday. Call (408) 395-7650. Bocce costs \$10 per person for 1.5 hours, groups of 25 and more pay \$75 per hour per court.



Perfect together: bocce ball and beer.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

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Perhaps the Romans played with dirt and rocks; today's players roll balls on courts of decomposed granite and crushed oyster shells. Barnes assures those who are unfamiliar with the game that the wait staff and bartenders are all happy to provide a tutorial and some helpful pointers.

Bocci's Cellar fits the bill for those seeking a broad entertainment experience. Some come for food (both lunch and dinner are served), some for drink (there's a full bar), some for live music and karaoke, and others for sport (several dart boards adjoin the two outdoor bocce courts). Bartenders know regulars by name, and the vibe is high-energy and supremely friendly.

For those who want to fully immerse themselves in the game of bocce, however, a 20-mile drive north to Los Gatos is in order. Here, at Campo di Bocce, the four indoor and four outdoor courts are a bocce player's mecca. While the 9-year-old club offers a full lunch and dinner menu, bocce is its *raison d'être*,

and on warm evenings, with the outdoor gardens beckoning, couples, small groups of friends, and large parties relax and compete, each trying to win a round.

"We can entertain anybody — from corporate groups of 200 to grandparents bringing their grandkids in for a pizza," says general manager Benjamin Musolf. A new outpost will open in Livermore in June.

Players who can't get enough of the game can join Campo di Bocce's local recreation leagues and play in larger tournaments throughout the year. San Mateo resident John Bagneschi, who is also sports director of the Peninsula Italian-American Social Club. Bagneschi originally hails from Lucca, Italy, but unlike many of his Italian compatriots, he came to the sport relatively late in life.

Twelve years ago, at age 55, he endured two back operations and wasn't motivated to leave the house. A friend introduced him to bocce, and he's been playing ever since.

"It was great for me mentally and physically," he says. To

give back to the sport that eased his recovery, Bagneschi helped spearhead the construction of new synthetic, all-weather courts in San Mateo. "Bocce is a game of hand-eye coordination," he says. "We have an 80-year-old lady who

plays very competitively, and my 13-year-old grandson plays, too.

"Just don't play on the same side of the court as your wife."

Contact Cheryl Sternman Rule at csrule@comcast.net.

Bocce rules and terminology

GOAL: To roll the bocce — a 4½-inch, 3-pound ball — as close as possible to the pallino, a 1¾-inch ball that is rolled down the court first. The team whose balls come closest to the pallino scores.

EQUIPMENT: Four bocce balls for each team and one pallino.

TEAMS: Teams consist of four players. Two players from each team are permanently stationed at either end of the court and throw two balls each. At the end of each frame, the game moves to the opposite end of the court.

TO PLAY: A player tosses the pallino past the center court line, careful not to hit the back wall. If the toss is valid, the same player then rolls the first bocce ball. The opposing team then tries to roll its balls closer to the pallino. Scoring: Only one team scores in a frame. One point is given for each ball that is closer to the pallino than the closest ball of the opposing team.



Source: Open Bocce Regulations of the United States Bocce Federation found at <http://www.bocce.com>