

A Touch of France in Bryant Park

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A Handful of Pétanque Clubs Keeps This Relaxing Outdoor Bowling Sport Alive in New York City



Chris Artis, the vice-president of La Boule New Yorkaise club, plays a game of pétanque in Bryant Park. The object is to land boules as close as possible to a small wooden ball.

Daniella Zalcman

Martial Raissiguier, a tourist from Marseille, did not feel like shopping anymore when he wandered into Bryant Park. His friends could keep diving in and out of stores if they wanted, but he had found a better option. Three thousand miles from home, he had stumbled across the familiar feel of the south of France in the northwest corner of Bryant Park.

And he was going to play pétanque.

"I'm perfectly happy here," he told his friends in French. "Playing boules in the shade, under the trees."



Each player in pétanque uses a set of three metal boules.

Daniella Zalcman for The Wall Street Journal

More than an hour later, his traveling companions were sitting by the court, waiting for him to finish so they could catch their flight back to Europe. But even they had to admit they felt right at home. The only things missing, they said, were the clicking of crickets and a glass of pastis, the aniseed liqueur that cools hot afternoons of pétanque across France.

Still, to the tune of Midtown traffic instead of crickets, the game has been a fixture at Bryant Park for more than a decade. The two gravel courts are the main location for the city's oldest pétanque club, La Boule New Yorkaise, founded by a group of French waiters in 1968. At least two other clubs play in Brooklyn—the New York Pétanque Club and Brooklyn Boule—and several more are based in Westchester.

Pétanque is a bowling sport, native to the south of France and similar to the Italian game of bocce. Like its cousin from beyond the Alps, the object of pétanque (pronounced pey-TANKH) is to land as many of your balls as close as possible to a target. In this case, the balls are made of metal and weigh a little less than two pounds. The target is usually a tiny wooden ball known as the cochonnet, or jack.



Francois Le Lan, left, and Roger Benjamin play pétanque during their lunch break. Daniella Zalcman for The Wall Street Journal

On a daily basis from April to November—and sometimes in the dead of winter—the game brings together Bryant Park regulars. Many are retirees from the restaurant business. Others have day jobs that they tailor around pétanque. And all the characters are known exclusively by their first names.

For instance, there is Pierre, the Hell's Kitchen native who switches effortlessly between his New York accented-English and flawless French. There is Jean-Paul, who has played in New York for nearly half a century and wanders the courts between games like the mayor of Bryant Park. And there is Ernesto, the sharp-shooting president of the club, who also organizes their monthly tournaments.

"You've got a core of old French guys, you have a core of native French speakers from Africa and other places, and you have your interested New Yorkers who work nearby and just started playing," said Esat Alijaj, who, on one afternoon two years ago, fell into the category of interested New Yorkers who just started playing.

For aspiring regulars, La Boule New Yorkaise offers free lessons and use of their equipment from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. every weekday. (Players have to bring their own boules on weekends.) Through those, the club constantly attracts passers-by to a game they have never heard of.



Patrick Hayes measures the distance from various boules to the cochonnet to determine which team scores.

Daniella Zalcman for The Wall Street Journal

During a recent weekday lunch rush, the Bryant Park regulars played beside women in high heels and suited men who checked their BlackBerrys between turns. Robert Rezzano, a native of Italy, was one them. He has played in a suit and tie during his lunch break for the last five years.

Alongside him, Saul Dingfelder, an internal consultant at a nearby law firm, was crouching in the gravel to weigh up a shot. A pink tie dangled between his knees, hanging from his starched white collar. A thin film of dust covered his black leather shoes.

The story of Dingfelder's relationship with pétanque is typical of most of the non-Francophone players. Two years ago, Dingfelder was eating lunch in the park when he spotted the courts. He watched for a couple more days and then, figuring he had come to grips with the game, joined in. Now he steals away from his office during his lunch break to play several times a week.

"No matter what else is going on in my day, I can come here and focus on this for an hour and it's very relaxing," he said.

At 2 p.m., the crowd thinned out, leaving only the regulars and a handful of tourists. The lunchtime aficionados dusted off their shoes, stepped out of Bryant Park's French quarter and back into the Midtown fray.