

Push Comes to Shove in Brooklyn



Emily Hone, Maeve Brady and JoJo and Baris Demirel at the Royal Palms in Brooklyn.

YANA PASKOVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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By JOSHUA DAVID STEIN
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Snow fell at a punishing slant across the darkened warehouses along Union Street in Gowanus, Brooklyn. It couldn't be further from the sunny retirement communities of Florida, but inside one former factory, the spirit of St. Petersburg lived on.

Like the lido deck of some deluxe retirement home, 10 bright blue shuffleboard courts were lined up in a neat

row, but instead of retirees, they were filled with 20- and 30-something players wielding sticks and pints of beer.

The [Royal Palms Shuffleboard Club](#), which opens next week, may be the first shuffleboard club in New York, and it's trying to turn the pastime favored by septuagenarians into the next Ping-Pong among the borough's barhopping millennials.

Brooklyn and shuffleboard may not seem like an obvious fit, but they do share similarities. Shuffleboard is a sport with a low athletic buy-in and offers plenty of time to drink between turns. That may appeal to Brooklynites who prefer to cloak their inner jock in irony and nonchalance.



The Royal Palms Shuffleboard Club in Gowanus, Brooklyn, comes with all the trappings for a night of pushing

biscuits and consuming cocktails.

It's not as quixotic a quest as it may seem. After all, bowling once appeared to be the province of the

potbellied class until 1998, when the Coen Brothers gave it their imprimatur in “[The Big Lebowski](#).” Now the au courant quarters of Brooklyn teem with bowling alleys ([Gutter](#), [Brooklyn Bowl](#)), and last month the advent of hipster bowling went global when Brooklyn Bowl opened a branch in London.

Likewise, Ping-Pong was played by old Jews and young Chinese in basement clubs when an automotive heir named Jonathan Bricklin and a Madagascar-born prince named Franck Raharinosy opened a small table-tennis club in New York at the National Arts Club in 2008 that became known as [Spin](#). One of them, Mr. Bricklin, began dating Susan Sarandon, who also took up her paddle, and now there are Spin clubs in Dubai, Los Angeles, Milwaukee and Toronto as well.

Today, Ping-Pong can be found at art galleries, trendy hotels and private clubs. It even makes a nudity-filled cameo on HBO’s “Girls,” the closest thing to being declared the official sport of disaffected young adults.

The story of the Royal Palms began two years ago, when Jonathan Schnapp, 41, a D.J., [piñata-maker](#), web design professor at New York University and web developer, was driving to Miami with a friend, Ashley Albert, 40, a voice-over artist, front woman for the children’s rock ’n’ roll band [the Jimmies](#), and jewelry maker. The pair were on their way to judge a barbecue contest in Lakeland, Fla. (Mr. Schnapp and Ms. Albert

are also accredited Kansas City Barbecue Society judges.)



Drinks are served in Ball jars. Instead of a kitchen, there's a bay for food trucks.

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Driving south in a rented convertible Mustang through the alligator belt, Mr. Schnapp asked, “We’re going to play shuffleboard, right?”

Like many Jews, Mr. Schnapp had grandparents in Florida and spent the formative winter vacations of his youth playing shuffleboard in their retirement home in West Palm Beach. “It seemed like there was shuffleboard for miles,” he said. “It was a huge scene and everybody was playing.”

Mr. Schnapp and Ms. Albert took a detour to St. Petersburg, home of the prestigious [St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club](#), which was built in 1924. At its height in the 1940s and ’50s, the club had over 8,000 members and 105 courts, which were packed from day

to night. The club appeared in the movie “Cocoon” and on countless postcards, and has hosted the [World Shuffleboard Championship](#) twice.

When the two called to inquire whether they could play, they were surprised to hear the voice of a younger woman on the other end. It was Christine Page, the 43-year-old president of the club.



Shuffleboard has its roots in a 15th-century English game called shovelboard.

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As it happens, the sport was experiencing a revival in St. Petersburg. Ms. Page started a Friday shuffleboard night that draws upward of 500 younger players. Soon Mr. Schnapp and Ms. Albert were pushing their biscuits

(as the ceramic shuffleboard disks are called) with a pair of borrowed tangs (the aluminum poles), in the company of 20- and 30-somethings. A food truck sold vegan hot dogs and a punk band played.

“We were like, ‘Oh my God,’ ” Ms. Albert said. “This the most magical place we’ve ever been to in our whole lives.” They decided to bring it to New York.

The history of shuffleboard is as fuzzy as the velour track suits that some players favor. It has its roots in a 15th-century English game called shovelboard, which, along with beheading his former wives, was a favorite pastime of Henry VIII. Its modern form arrived on American shores in the early 20th century, aboard trans-Atlantic liners with vast open decks that were ideal for the game. Soon the game blossomed wherever the ships docked, in port cities like Daytona Beach and St. Petersburg.

The sport is as social as bocce and can be as mellow as croquet. Two teams of two stand on either side of a 39-foot-long concrete court. Each team takes a turn pushing four discs, aiming for a triangular zone to earn points. This is called sending a biscuit. The first team to reach a certain score, say 75, wins. (It can also be scored by frames, as in bowling.)



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By the 1970s, shuffleboard had become a national obsession, with books like “Shuffleboard: Those Capricious Discs” and Karl von Shuler’s “Let’s All Play Shuffleboard” appearing in the pile-carpeted parlors of America. But as its fan base aged, shuffleboard companies folded and clubs dwindled. Only one company, Allen R. Shuffleboard in Seminole, Fla., still makes biscuits and tangs.

Ms. Albert and Mr. Schnapp, however, are betting that what appeals to older people will appeal to younger ones, too. They committed \$150,000 of their own money and raised \$2 million through Kickstarter and investors. They found the building at 514 Union Street through Loopnet.com, a commercial real estate site, and signed a 10-year lease.

“We didn’t want to be in Williamsburg and Bushwick,” Mr. Schnapp said. “Gowanus represented a unique opportunity because it’s in the middle of a bunch of

diverse communities,” including, he pointed out, Park Slope, Prospect Heights and Boerum Hill, and it is only a few blocks from a new Whole Foods.

After gutting the 17,000-square-foot factory, they poured and painted 10 courts in Benjamin Moore’s Tropicana Cabana blue, added palm trees and park benches, and ordered 120 biscuits and 60 aluminum tangs. Brooklynites of a certain persuasion will feel right at home. Drinks are served in Ball jars. Instead of a kitchen, there’s a bay for food trucks, which will change nightly. There is flamingo wallpaper in the bathrooms and a D.J. booth in the back, where Mr. Schnapp has put on some of his favorite albums (the “Pink Panther” soundtrack by Henry Mancini and “Provocative Percussion” by Enoch White and the Command All-Stars). Court fees will average about \$40 an hour, and reservations can be made for larger parties.

“We’re going to have lobster rolls and yacht rock,” Mr. Schnapp said. “Serge Gainsbourg nights with a crepe truck.”

For the last several weeks, the Royal Palms has hosted private parties for companies like Brooklyn Brewery and Mondo, as well as its 3,000 Facebook fans and 338 Kickstarter donors. Although the club has not officially opened, it has already filled all 60 teams for the Monday night shuffleboard league, with each team of four paying the \$500 registration fee.

On a recent Wednesday night, while the arctic vortex ensnarled the city, the club was packed with handsome young men and women in heels, holding tangs and sending biscuits. Reps and friends of the liquor company [William Grant & Sons](#), who were throwing a social mixer, mingled with Kickstarter donors and other investors. A food truck sold Gouda-filled grilled cheese.

There were newbies and veteran shufflers alike. Sam Bayard, a lawyer and a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard, was learning his way around the court. “This is even better than Ping-Pong,” he said. “In Ping-Pong, you’re either good or bad. If you’re good, you don’t want to play someone bad. If you’re bad, you don’t want to play at all. But in shuffleboard, the bar is much lower.”

Nearby was Shannon Flannigan, 30, a representative for a Singaporean beer who lives in Williamsburg. She wore a shuffleboard-themed bolo tie and a black-and-white bolero. “I started a shuffleboard league back in Minneapolis,” she said, “and I’ve been waiting for years to find one in New York.”