

CHESS

MATES

*Players in
Palo Alto
make their
moves until
all hours
of the night*

By Craig Nakano
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Three hours ago, Cafe La Dolce Vita in Palo Alto served its last latte of the night. About 2½ hours ago, the doors were locked and the lights outside were turned off.

But there on the sidewalk, shivering in the early hours of the morning and squinting under the dim glow of a California Avenue street light, a motley crew of hard-core chess players makes its moves. Capture a knight, attack a king, queen a pawn — all under the tick,

tick, tick of a 10-minute game clock.

By 1 a.m., the Thursday night crowd of a dozen players has dwindled to five. Three men watch a match between two regulars: a quiet 22-year-old from San Jose named Jason Ray, and an older, revered master player named Joe who reels off one-liners and refuses to reveal his last name.

"Just call me, 'Joe the Street Dog of Chess,'" he says with a smirk, before tossing out Joe's Chess Axiom No. 1: "It's better to be lucky than to be good."

But enough talk. Chess *must* be played.

They reset the clocks and start to play. Arms swing across the table, as if choreographed. Rooks and bishops fly across the board. Pieces are whisked from the table. Twenty seconds, 18 moves.

As if watching Wimbledon finals on Centre Court, the three spectators "ooh" and "aah" with each move. They dare not block the light and cast a shadow on the board. All eyes stay transfixed

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Jason Ray taps the game clock outside Cafe La Dolce Vita under the watchful eye of Joe the Street Dog of Chess (standing) and Ray's opponent, Roy.

Palo Alto Chess Partners Enjoy Their Knight Moves

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CHESS CAFE

Informal chess matches are played nightly at Cafe La Dolce Vita, 299 California Ave., Palo Alto. Hours vary. Players bring their own chess sets. (650) 323-0478.

on the smudged plastic playing pieces that, at this moment, command everyone's full attention.

The pace slows, and Ray tentatively slides a pawn forward, keeping his index finger pressed to the piece for a few seconds, then gingerly lifting the tip away.

"Na-ya, na-ya, na-ya!" Joe says in a goofy Three Stooges voice.

He slides his black bishop to Jason's back row. In less than a minute, checkmate.

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The game may be over, but the night certainly isn't. For the regulars who come to La Dolce Vita, chess isn't a pastime. It's a passion.

Some nights, only a few people show up. On others, as many as 20 pack the cafe, then move to the sidewalk when the owner calls it quits for the night. All but one are men.

They come and go, leaving only when the brain gets fuzzy, the eyes go blurry or the thought of work the next day sends them to bed. The die-hards stay outside La Dolce Vita as late as 2 a.m., then pack up the pieces and head to a Lyon's restaurant, where they resume play until 4 or 5 a.m.

"We don't stay late," Joe says. "We stay early."

Two regulars are cab drivers. They come after the last barfly has been delivered home safely for the night, and they play until 5 a.m. or so, when they depart for San Francisco International Airport to pick up their first fares of the day.

Driver Paz Waksam, 32, of Palo Alto has been playing at the cafe for about five months. He says the com-

plexity of the game and the camaraderie between players keeps him coming back.

"There's a special interaction with these whack jobs," he says with a grin, tilting his head toward others on the sidewalk. "They're all very peculiar — and all very interesting."

Internet chess clubs, which have exploded in popularity, are too impersonal, he says. And yes, all the late-night chess matches impede his love life, but not too much.

"After playing six or seven or eight hours, I do feel some guilt," Waksam says. "I think, 'What am I doing here wasting my life?' Then I show up the next night."

A middle-aged player on an adjacent table chimes in: "This is cheaper than dating women," he says, pointing to his opponent. "I don't have to buy this man a damn thing."

Joe the Street Dog of Chess has been married for 21 years. The longevity of the relationship, apparently, relies on his wife's tolerance of the chess games.

He adds, "When I'm home at night, she asks, 'What's wrong? Why aren't you playing chess?'"

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Ben Tascian, who owns Cafe La Dolce Vita and runs it with his wife and family, says his place became a chess hangout by accident.

After he opened the cafe two

years ago, Tascian and one of his daughters were playing chess one day when business was slow. A member of a Burlingame chess club happened by and asked if he and his friends could play there.

That was the beginning. When a coffeehouse at Stanford closed for remodeling, chess players there quickly migrated to La Dolce Vita.

These days, people drive from San Jose, Cupertino, San Carlos and Belmont just to play chess. A former U.S. junior national champ may come one night, two grand masters on another.

"I love chess," Tascian says. And even though some players never spend a cent at his cafe, "They're good people. I just like to watch them play. I go from table to table and watch."

Some players acknowledge that their life of chess is far different from what most people would consider normal.

Most, though, seem like intelligent, well-read, well-adjusted individuals. Some are employed, some are students, some are retirees. All are hooked on the game.

Before he retired, Joe says, he was a researcher in a Stanford electronics lab. Born in Moldavia in what had been the Soviet Union, he learned chess at an early age and now provides comic relief for the regulars at La Dolce Vita.

When Waksam says he likes the art of chess because "it's like painting a picture or making music," Joe quips, "That's very good, Paz. That's almost a famous quote."

Waksam brushes off the sarcasm and continues to explain the game's appeal.

"The five-minute game is like cigarettes," he says, taking a deep drag. "You know it's bad, but you can't



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TIME TO MOVE: Doug Obujen (left) and Dr. Guy Marlo play chess at Cafe La Dolce Vita.

"There's a special interaction with these whack jobs."

PAZ WAKSAM
Chess player

stop."

Clearly, not everyone shares his devotion. Most passers-by don't understand the group's dedication to the game.

Some cars flash their headlights to annoy the players. Others honk their horns. Pedestrians passing by occasionally snicker and make snide comments.

Across the street, the band ABC performs its encore at the Edge nightclub. As the bass line from "Look of Love" thumps in the background, a young couple leaving the concert pass Joe and his chess posse, turn to each other with wrinkled noses and exchange comments

about these guys "not having a life." "We're chess bums," Joe says nonchalantly. "What can I say?"

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By midnight on another Friday, pistachio shells and cigarette butts are scattered around the cafe tables. If hunger strikes, Joe the Street Dog of Chess reminds everyone, he can dial up Domino's on a cell phone and have pizza delivered to their sidewalk.

A new player arrives to take on Joe. After about six minutes of play, everyone smells an upset.

"Joe's in trouble," a spectator chimes in, like John Madden providing color commentary at a football

game. "Yes, indeed! Joe's in trouble!" another one says.

It's Joe's move. The clock ticks down — 54 seconds left, 53, 52, 51. Silent, with hands on forehead, Joe studies the board — 41, 40, 39.

With 31 seconds left on this clock, he nonchalantly springs his trap. Boom! Rook advances. Boom! Knight advances.

Sure enough, before the clock expires, checkmate. Joe wins.

The two players set up the pieces again without a word, reset the clock, and play.

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