

# Multiculturalism Thrives in Lamorinda

By Jennifer Wake



Contra Costa Chinese School hosted a barbecue picnic at the Moraga Commons

Photo Andy Scheck

As the 4th of July approaches, a question comes to mind: Who are Americans, anyway?

Commonly known as a people of “baseball, hotdogs, and apple pie,” a cultural shift has even hit American ball parks, with fare now ranging from sushi to sausages, linguini to lattes. We are a nation of cultural diversity. Lamorindans are no exception.

“America (and even my own family) is a melting pot,” Lafayette resident Joanne Tan says.

Her two boys Benny and Daley Toudic have Chinese, French and British ancestry, so when her sons were 3 years old, Tan had them take French lessons for about three years. Now they are beginning to learn Mandarin Chinese.

“I believe that language is a stepping stone to understanding one’s culture,” Tan says.

And she is not alone.

In recent years, immersion programs have become more common, according to the U.S. Center for Applied Linguistics. French For Fun in Lafayette offers immersion programs for toddlers and elementary school aged children, Lafayette-based Small World teaches Chinese to children as young as one year old, and KISS (Kids Into Speaking Spanish) immerses children in the language.

The Contra Costa Chinese School, which was founded by a small group of Chinese parents who wanted to provide Chinese language instruction to their American-born children, hosted a barbecue picnic last July at the Moraga Commons.

“It’s great when both children and parents naturally get to socialize with children and parents who share the same cultural background in these language schools,” Tan says.

When Ute Kelley came to Moraga in 1981 with her two daughters, she started bowling in the Newcomers Bowling League and met some German friends there. Eight years ago, she joined a group called the Accent Club, where women from different countries who speak different languages meet at each other’s homes for pastries and coffee.

“The club has Germans, French, and others from other countries,” Kelley says. “They don’t all speak my native language, so if someone who was French was there we’d speak English. If everyone there was German, we would all speak German because it was so easy.”

Kelley sees herself as having two home countries – America and Germany. She strives to keep up her childhood traditions and pass them along to her children and grandchildren.

Tan says knowing one’s cultural heritage engenders a feeling of “being rooted”, and is fundamental to earning a sense of self-respect. “Knowing other cultures makes one have respect for others,” she added.

A few years ago, Amoroma restaurant owner Michele Lavecchia coordinated Italian Nights at the Rheem Theater with Saint Mary’s Italian Professor Maria Grazia De Angelis as a way to foster Italian culture in Moraga. The evenings began with antipasti and wine prior to the showing of internationally acclaimed Italian films.

Moraga resident Linda Foley liked the idea of these movies at Rheem. Originally from Bavaria, she likes to get together with a couple of European friends to watch German movies. “We try to overlook the subtitles – or we read the subtitles, disagreeing at times with the translation,” Foley says. “We play German Scrabble, listen to German music, and do German puzzles.”

Today, you can find more foreign films at local video stores, yoga studios are commonplace, residents can enjoy the French game of petanque at new courts near the Lafayette Community Center, and the Moraga Bocce Ball Club’s membership has reached capacity at the Moraga Commons.

Cultural diversity and acceptance has even reached the school yard. Next fall, karate will be offered as an afterschool program for Lamorinda middle school students, and heritage days are a regular celebration at local elementary schools.

As a cub scout den leader, Tan invited her cub scouts’ parents, who were from all different cultural backgrounds (Korean, Dutch, Maltese, Chinese, and Russian) to share cultural artifacts, food, and clothing, and share with the den each family’s unique heritage stories.

“I reminded [the scouts] that everyone in America comes from somewhere else,” she says. “Even the longest residents – the American Indians – came from Mongolia when they crossed the frozen sea linking Siberia and Alaska.”

A melting pot of cultures, customs, lifestyles, and heritages, Tan thinks it’s wonderful that we don’t have to travel to all corners of the world to learn about different cultures.

“Only in America,” she says.