



— M A H J O N G M A S T E R Y —



# The Tile Buying Guide

*Find Your Perfect Set*



*🌸 Everything you need to choose the right set —  
for yourself, for your table, or as the perfect gift. 🌸*







# A Letter to the Reader

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*The right set changes everything.*

*I know that sounds like hyperbole — how much could the physical tiles really matter when the game lives in the decisions you make? But anyone who has played on a beautifully weighted set after years on a lightweight budget set will understand immediately. There is something about the satisfying click of quality tiles, the way they sit solid and stable on the rack, the clear and readable printing that lets you scan your hand in an instant — it changes how the game feels, and how the game feels changes how you play it.*

*The problem is that buying your first mahjong set — or your next mahjong set — is genuinely confusing. The market is full of options at wildly different price points, with confusing terminology around materials and sizing, and very little useful guidance on what actually matters versus what's marketing fluff. Walk into the search results for "American mahjong set" and you'll find everything from a \$45 melamine starter to a \$350 artisan resin set, with very little help sorting out which one belongs in your home.*

*That's what this guide is for.*

*I've organized everything you need to make a confident, no-regrets decision: the three types of sets and which one you actually need, the materials landscape from budget to luxury, what to look for in tiles, racks, and cases, how to navigate the used market, and honest budget-tier recommendations for every type of buyer. I've also included a gift guide section for those of you shopping for someone who's already in love with the game.*

*You deserve a set that brings you joy every time you sit down to play. Let's find it.*

With warm regards,  
*The Mahjong Mastery Team*



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# The Three Types of Mahjong Sets

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Walk into a game store or browse online, and you'll encounter a dizzying array of mahjong sets with confusing variety in how they're described and packaged. The first and most important thing to understand is that there are three distinct *types* of mahjong sets — and only one of them is right for American Mahjong.

## American Mahjong Sets — What You Need

American Mahjong requires 152 tiles minimum — and most quality sets include 166 tiles to account for the full extended set with extra jokers and flowers. The tile composition matters specifically: you need the standard three suits (Dots, Bams, Craks), the four winds, the three dragons in four copies each, eight flowers numbered one through eight, and eight jokers. Any set that doesn't include all of these components isn't suitable for NMJL play.

Look specifically for sets labeled "American Mahjong" or "NMJL compatible." These terms ensure that the manufacturer has counted correctly and included the right tile types. Most American sets also include four tile racks, two or more dice, and a carrying case. Some include pushers — small wooden devices that help you line tiles into neat walls before dealing. These extras vary by price point but the racks and dice are essentially non-negotiable for comfortable play.

## Chinese Mahjong Sets — What to Avoid

Chinese Mahjong sets contain 144 tiles — fourteen fewer than the American standard — and use a different flower and wild tile system entirely. They do not include jokers in the American sense, and their tile count is simply insufficient for NMJL play. The tiles are often beautiful, with traditional artwork and a distinctive aesthetic, but they cannot be used to play American Mahjong as written on the NMJL card.

The trap here is that Chinese Mahjong sets are widely available, often attractively priced, and beautifully packaged. Beginners buy them not knowing the difference, sit down to play American Mahjong, and discover they're missing entire categories of

tiles. Save yourself the return shipping — verify "American" or "NMJL compatible" before purchasing.

## Universal and Hybrid Sets — Proceed with Caution

Some sets are marketed as "universal" — compatible with both American and Chinese Mahjong by including a larger tile count that satisfies both formats. These can work, but they require careful verification. Check the total tile count (152 minimum, 166 preferred for American play), confirm the joker count, and verify that the flowers are numbered one through eight as required for NMJL play. If a set passes those checks, it's generally fine for American play even if it also includes Chinese-format tiles.

**The bottom line:** If the set isn't explicitly labeled "American Mahjong" or "NMJL compatible," verify the tile count and composition before buying. One missing tile type can ruin a game night.



# What to Look for in Tiles

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Once you've confirmed a set is the right type, the next layer of evaluation is tile quality itself. What makes a good mahjong tile? The answer involves several factors that are worth understanding before you commit to a purchase.

## Readability — The Overlooked Priority

The single most important practical quality in a mahjong tile is readability. Can you glance at a tile and identify it instantly? In fast-paced play — when someone calls "Mahjong!" and everyone needs to verify the win quickly, or when you're scanning your rack to find the tile you need — clarity of print makes a significant difference.

High-contrast tiles with bold, clear numbers and strong color differentiation between suits are the gold standard for readability. Green bamboo on white background for Bams, clearly distinct dot arrangements for Dots, and strong red numbers for Craks — these color conventions are standard, but the quality of their execution varies considerably between manufacturers.

Test readability with a simple question: can you read a tile clearly from three feet away in normal room lighting? If not, those tiles will slow down your game and create errors. Consider larger tiles or a set with bolder printing.

## Feel and Weight

Tile feel is subjective but real. Heavier tiles tend to produce a more satisfying click when stacked, more stable placement on racks, and a generally more premium experience. The specific material drives weight more than anything else — melamine tiles are lightweight, acrylic sits in the middle range, and premium resin tiles are genuinely substantial in the hand.

The "click test" is simple: pick up two tiles, tap them together, and listen. A hollow, plasticky tap indicates melamine or lower-quality acrylic. A solid, resonant click

indicates quality materials. If you're buying in person, this test takes ten seconds and tells you a great deal about the set.

## **Edge Quality**

Run your finger along the edges of several tiles. They should be smooth, consistent, and without sharp corners or rough spots. Sharp edges are both unpleasant to handle and a sign of lower manufacturing quality. Tiles from quality manufacturers have consistently smooth edges — a detail that becomes very relevant when you're picking tiles up and setting them down hundreds of times in a single session.

## **Suit Distinction — Avoiding Confusion**

One of the most common quality issues in budget sets is poor suit differentiation. The six and nine of Dots can look identical if the printing isn't careful about orientation. One Bam tiles — which traditionally show a bird — vary wildly between manufacturers, and some versions are so abstract they're hard to identify at a glance. Craks with faded or light-colored printing are particularly problematic for older players or anyone in lower lighting.

Before buying, confirm: are the six and nine clearly distinguishable? Is the one Bam obviously different from the two Bam? Can you tell a white Dragon from a blank tile at a glance? These are the specific confusion points to check.



# Tile Materials — From Melamine to Resin

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The material a tile is made from determines its weight, durability, feel, sound, and in large part, its price. Understanding the three main material categories will save you from both overspending and underbuying.

## Melamine — The Budget Option

Melamine tiles are the most common budget option, and they're the right choice for a specific type of buyer: the player who wants to learn whether they enjoy the game before committing to a quality set, or the player who needs a portable, lightweight set for travel or teaching. Melamine sets typically range from forty to eighty dollars, are available everywhere, and will hold up reasonably well for casual use.

### THE GOOD

- Affordable — lowest entry point
- Lightweight — easy to transport
- Good enough for learning
- Easy to clean

### THE TRADE-OFFS

- Light, "plastic-y" feel
- Hollow click sound
- May yellow or chip over time
- Lighter weight less satisfying for regular play

## Acrylic — The Sweet Spot

Acrylic tiles represent the best balance of quality, durability, and price for most players. At eighty to one hundred and fifty dollars, an acrylic set delivers meaningful improvements over melamine: better weight distribution, a more satisfying click when tiles are handled, sharper and more durable printing, and resistance to the yellowing and surface degradation that affects melamine sets over time.

If you're a regular player — someone who will sit down to a game weekly or more often — acrylic is the right material. It will last for years of regular use, look good throughout, and provide an experience that's genuinely pleasurable rather than merely functional.

#### THE GOOD

- Great balance of quality and cost
- Satisfying weight and click
- Sharp, durable printing
- Resistant to yellowing and scratches

#### THE TRADE-OFFS

- Heavier than melamine (less portable)
- Can crack if dropped hard
- More expensive than budget options

## Premium Resin — The Investment Piece

Premium resin sets — and high-grade specialty materials at the top of the market — are the luxury option. At one hundred fifty to four hundred dollars and beyond, these sets are not for everyone, and they're not for every budget. But for the serious player, the weekly game host, or the person who sees their mahjong set as a companion for decades rather than years, the investment often feels completely justified.

The difference in feel is immediately apparent. Resin tiles have exceptional weight — they sit in the hand with authority. Their printing is typically crisp and deep, resisting the surface wear that eventually affects even good acrylic sets. And there is an acoustic quality to the click of resin tiles that players describe as genuinely satisfying in a way that cheaper tiles simply cannot replicate.

**My recommendation:** For most players, start with acrylic. It's the sweet spot — good enough to be genuinely enjoyable, durable enough to last for years, affordable enough to not feel like an intimidating commitment. Upgrade to premium resin when you know the game is a permanent part of your life.



# Tile Size and Readability

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## Standard vs. Large Tiles

Standard mahjong tiles measure approximately one and a quarter inches tall by three-quarters of an inch wide — compact enough for comfortable handling and modest table space requirements. Large or oversized tiles run about one and a half by one inch. The difference sounds minor until you're at the table trying to scan fourteen tiles on your rack under dim lighting.

For most adult players with normal vision in good lighting, standard tiles are completely adequate. For groups that include older players, players with vision concerns, or anyone who finds themselves squinting at the tile markings, large tiles are a significant quality-of-life improvement that's worth the slight premium in cost and additional table space.

## Who Should Choose Large Tiles

Consider large tiles if your regular game group includes anyone over sixty-five, if your playing space is not well-lit, if you often play with players who mention difficulty reading tiles, or if you simply find yourself leaning forward to see your own rack clearly. The cost difference between standard and large tiles is usually small — ten to twenty dollars — and the benefit is concrete and immediate.

The practical downside of large tiles is proportional: larger racks are required, more table space is consumed, and the set is somewhat heavier and bulkier to transport. For a home game with a dedicated table, none of these are serious concerns. For a player who travels frequently with their set, the weight and bulk become more relevant.

## The Three-Foot Test

Here is a simple way to evaluate tile readability if you're buying in person or viewing a product demonstration: hold the tile at arm's length, approximately three feet from

your eyes, in the lighting conditions where you'll typically play. Can you identify the suit, the number, and any distinguishing characteristics without squinting or moving the tile closer? If yes, the tiles will work well for you. If no, consider larger tiles or a set with bolder printing before purchasing.





# Racks, Pushers, and Accessories

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The tiles are the heart of a mahjong set, but the supporting components — racks, pushers, dice, wind indicators — make a meaningful difference to the overall playing experience. Here's what matters, what's optional, and what to watch out for.

## Racks — Flat vs. Angled

Every mahjong set includes four racks, and the quality and style of those racks can significantly affect your comfort over a long game session. The fundamental choice is between flat racks, where tiles sit horizontally on a level surface, and angled racks, where tiles tilt back toward you at a comfortable viewing angle.

Angled racks are strongly preferred for regular play. When your tiles are tilted toward you, you can scan your entire hand at a glance without leaning forward or lifting tiles individually. You maintain better table posture over a long session. And the angled presentation makes the game feel more organized and professional, which contributes to the overall enjoyment of the experience.

Flat racks are found primarily in budget sets. They're functional but less comfortable for extended play. If you're buying a set that comes with flat racks, it's worth checking whether the manufacturer sells angled replacements separately — many do, and the upgrade is usually inexpensive.

Whatever the style, check racks for stable construction, smooth tile movement, and consistent sizing. Racks that wobble, that tip forward with a full hand of tiles, or that grip tiles so tightly they're difficult to remove will frustrate you in every game.

## Pushers

Pushers are the small wooden or plastic devices used to align tiles into neat walls before dealing. They're not strictly necessary — you can set up walls by hand, as players have done for decades — but they speed up setup considerably and create a cleaner, more satisfying game experience. If you're hosting regularly, the few minutes

saved across setup and teardown accumulates meaningfully over a season of weekly games.

Most quality acrylic and premium sets include pushers. Budget melamine sets often don't. If you find yourself wanting them and they're not included, a set of four pushers can be purchased separately for ten to twenty dollars and is compatible with any set that uses standard tile dimensions.

## **Dice and Wind Indicators**

Quality dice make a small but real difference. You want dice that roll cleanly, land stably, and show clear, high-contrast numbers. The dice included with premium sets are typically solid, well-weighted, and satisfying to roll. Budget set dice can be light and unbalanced — not game-breaking, but a minor annoyance.

Wind indicators — the device that tracks which player is currently East — are included with some sets and not others. They're genuinely useful for longer sessions where it's easy to lose track of wind position. If your set doesn't include one, a simple written card or coin system works perfectly well as a substitute.



## Cases and Storage

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A mahjong set without a good carrying case is like a deck of cards without a box — technically playable, but missing something important. The case protects your investment, makes transport practical, and honestly contributes to the overall presentation of the game. Here's what to look for.

### Essential Case Features

At minimum, a good mahjong case must hold all 152 to 166 tiles without them rattling loosely, include space for four racks, accommodate dice and any accessories, and close securely with reliable latches or a durable zipper. These are non-negotiable for anything you plan to transport regularly.

The better cases go further: individual tile compartments or trays that prevent tiles from shifting and banging against each other during transport, padded interior walls that absorb impact, a card holder pocket for your NMJL card, and a handle that's actually comfortable to carry when the set is fully loaded. A fully packed mahjong set with 166 tiles and accessories is heavier than it looks — a good handle is not a luxury.

### Hard Case vs. Soft Case

Hard cases offer superior tile protection — they're the right choice for anyone who transports their set frequently, travels with it, or stores it in environments where it might be bumped or compressed. The tradeoff is weight: hard cases add meaningful heft to an already substantial set, and they're less convenient for quick pickup and go situations.

Soft cases — padded zipper bags or fabric cases — are lighter and easier to carry but offer less protection against impact. For a set that mostly lives in a dedicated home location and travels occasionally, a good soft case is perfectly adequate. For a set that rides in car trunks, gets carried to weekly game nights, or lives an actively mobile life, invest in the hard case.

## Storage at Home

For a set that primarily lives at home, the case is largely about organization and protection from dust and humidity. Keep your set out of direct sunlight, which can fade printing and affect materials over time, and away from high-humidity environments, which can cause wood components (racks, pushers) to warp slightly over months. A dedicated shelf or cabinet where the set can live upright and undisturbed is ideal.



# Budget Tiers — Good, Great, and Luxury

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Let's talk honestly about what your money gets you at each price point — and who each tier is right for.

## **GOOD** \$50 – \$80

*The right choice for curious beginners and casual players*

At this price point, you're getting a melamine tile set — lightweight, functional, and adequate for learning the game. Expect basic flat racks, a soft case, and standard dice. The printing will be readable if you buy from a reputable brand, though you'll notice it lacks the crispness and depth of more expensive sets.

**Who this is for:** The player trying the game for the first time, someone buying a set to teach a group that may or may not become regular players, or a travel set that's going to live in a bag and take some abuse. Buy here, see if you fall in love with the game, then upgrade.

**Recommended brands:** Yellow Mountain Imports (budget line), Cardinal Games

## **GREAT** \$100 – \$150

*The right choice for most regular players*

This is the sweet spot — and where most serious players should be buying. At this price point, you're getting acrylic tiles with substantially better weight, feel, and print quality than melamine. Angled racks are typically included. The case is usually padded or hard-sided, and pushers are often included. This set will last for years of regular weekly play.

**Who this is for:** Any player who has decided mahjong is a permanent part of their life, game hosts who want to present a quality experience, and anyone who has already bought a budget set and wants to upgrade meaningfully.

**Recommended brands:** Yellow Mountain Imports (premium line), Mose Cafee & Company, White Swan

## LUXURY \$200 – \$400+

*For serious enthusiasts, collectors, and gift-givers*

Premium resin or high-grade materials, often with wooden racks, a deluxe case with individual tile compartments, and a level of craftsmanship that elevates the game to something you'd be proud to display. These sets are heirloom-quality — the kind of thing you pass down rather than replace. The experience of playing on them is genuinely different from any lower tier.

**Who this is for:** Dedicated enthusiasts who have played for years, regular game hosts who want their setup to make a statement, and gift-givers buying for someone who already plays and deserves something exceptional.

**Recommended brands:** Linda Li Mahjong, Mahjong Time, select artisan and custom set makers



## Where to Buy — New and Used

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### Buying New

The easiest and safest way to buy a mahjong set is from a reputable retailer with clear return policies. Amazon carries a wide selection at all price points, and the review volume makes it relatively easy to identify sets with common quality issues — check specifically for reviews that mention tile clarity, rack quality, and missing tiles on arrival. For premium sets, purchasing directly from the manufacturer's website is often the better choice: you get access to their full lineup, accurate product information, and typically better customer service for any issues.

Game specialty stores — both local and online — are worth patronizing if they stock mahjong sets, partly for the ability to see tiles in person and partly because the staff at specialty stores often play themselves and can give genuinely useful guidance. If you're fortunate enough to have access to a store where you can handle the tiles before buying, take that opportunity.

### Buying Used — The Smart Way to Upgrade

A used acrylic or premium set purchased carefully can be one of the best values in the game. Mahjong sets are durable, and a well-maintained set from a careful owner will often be in excellent condition even after years of play. The savings can be substantial: forty to sixty percent off retail is realistic for sets in good condition, which means a set that would cost one hundred twenty dollars new might be available for sixty to seventy dollars used.

The key word is "carefully." The risks in the used market are real: missing tiles, chips and cracks, faded printing, warped racks, and damaged cases. Here is the protocol for buying used without regret:

First, count everything. All 152 to 166 tiles, depending on the set. Count the jokers specifically — they're the most commonly lost tiles. Count the flowers. Count the winds and dragons. If anything is missing, the set is not complete and replacement

tiles are very difficult to match. Pass on sets missing more than two or three tiles unless the price reflects the incompleteness dramatically.

Second, inspect visually. Look for chips, cracks, fading, yellowing, and sticky or warped tiles. One or two very minor surface marks on tiles that have clearly been played with for years is normal. Widespread cracking, heavy fading, or structural damage is not — pass on those sets.

Third, check the racks. Warped, cracked, or excessively worn racks can sometimes be replaced, but it adds cost and effort. Confirm they're sturdy and functional before including them in your value assessment.

## Pricing Guide for Used Sets

| Material      | Good Condition Used Price | Fair Condition |
|---------------|---------------------------|----------------|
| Melamine      | \$20 – \$40               | \$10 – \$20    |
| Acrylic       | \$50 – \$90               | \$35 – \$55    |
| Premium Resin | \$100 – \$200             | \$70 – \$110   |



## Red Flags — What to Avoid

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Not every mahjong set deserves a spot on your shelf. Here are the specific warning signs to watch for — things that should stop you from buying a set or cause you to significantly discount what you're willing to pay for it.

### Red Flags in New Sets

- **No "American Mahjong" or "NMJL compatible" label.** Don't assume. Verify explicitly that the set is designed for American play and includes the right tile count.
- **Tile count below 152.** Any set with fewer than 152 tiles is missing something essential. Do not purchase it for American Mahjong play.
- **Reviews mentioning missing tiles on arrival.** A manufacturer who consistently ships incomplete sets will do it to you too. Find a different brand.
- **Printing quality complaints in reviews.** Faded, blurry, or low-contrast printing is a real usability problem, not just an aesthetic one. Check reviews specifically for printing quality mentions.
- **No rack type information.** If a listing doesn't specify angled or flat racks and the photos aren't clear, assume flat — budget sets almost always come with flat racks.

### Red Flags in Used Sets

- **Seller unwilling to count tiles before sale.** Any reputable seller should be willing to confirm complete tile count. Refusal or evasiveness is a significant warning sign.
- **Multiple missing tiles.** One or two is borderline manageable. Three or more is a set that will be perpetually frustrating to play with.
- **Cracked or chipped tiles.** Cracks worsen over time and can snag on each other, damaging other tiles. A few chips on older tiles is cosmetic; structural cracks are not.

- **Sticky or tacky tile surfaces.** This indicates material degradation that typically cannot be reversed. It's particularly common in older melamine sets stored improperly.
- **Tiles that don't lie flat when stacked.** Warped tiles are a manufacturing defect or damage sign. Pick up a stack of five or six and confirm they sit evenly against each other.



# The Gift Guide

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Mahjong sets make extraordinary gifts — not just for players, but for anyone who values the combination of beautiful craftsmanship and social connection that the game embodies. Here's how to match the gift to the recipient.

## For the Brand-New Player

The new player needs a set that's complete, readable, and enjoyable without being an overwhelming investment on either side. A quality acrylic set in the eighty to one hundred twenty dollar range hits this perfectly — good enough to validate the gift as a serious one, practical enough to be a working first set rather than shelf decoration. Include a current NMJL card and, if you can find it, a copy of a beginner's guide.

## For the Regular Player Who Deserves an Upgrade

This is the best gift scenario: someone who already plays regularly but is still using the melamine starter set they bought years ago. An acrylic or premium resin set will transform their experience in a way they'll feel in the first game. For this recipient, you can invest at the one hundred fifty to two hundred dollar level confidently, knowing the gift will see real use immediately.

## For the Serious Enthusiast

For the player who already has a quality set and knows the game well, the meaningful gift options are at the luxury end: a Linda Li set, a limited-edition design from a specialty maker, or an artisan set with custom artwork. These are investments, and they signal that you see and value how much this person cares about the game. Budget accordingly — two hundred fifty dollars and up for this category.

## For the Game Host

The person who hosts regular game nights has different needs than the average player: they need a set that can handle heavy use, looks impressive on the table, and accommodates the full range of players who come through their home. An oversized tile set with premium materials — in the one hundred fifty to two hundred fifty dollar range — serves this recipient best. The larger tiles accommodate everyone from experienced players to occasional guests who find standard sizes difficult to read.

**The universal gift rule:** Always include a current NMJL card with any mahjong set gift. The card changes every year and is available from the National Mah Jongg League directly. Without a current card, the set can't be used to play. With a current card, you've given a complete, ready-to-play experience.



# My Recommended Starter Setup

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## The Sweet Spot Setup (\$100–\$130)

For most new players buying their first real set, this is the configuration I recommend without hesitation: an acrylic tile set with high-contrast printing, standard sizing (or large if playing with mixed-age groups), angled racks, a padded or hard-sided carrying case, and pushers included if possible. This setup delivers a genuinely enjoyable experience, will last for years of regular play, and looks good enough to be proud of when you set it on the table.

**Specific recommendation:** Yellow Mountain Imports American Mahjong Set (acrylic version, approximately \$110–\$120). Strong reviews, widely available, verified tile count, good racks, and a case that does its job. The printing is clear and readable. It's the set I'd hand to a friend who asked me what to buy.

## Budget Alternative (\$60–\$80)

If cost is a genuine constraint, a melamine set from a reputable brand is absolutely playable. Verify it includes angled racks — not all budget sets do — and confirm the tile count before purchasing. You can always upgrade later once you're certain you want to be a regular player. The game is excellent at any tile price point; the material is just the vessel.

## The "Forever Set" (\$180–\$250)

If your budget allows it and you already know you're in this game for the long haul, spend the extra hundred dollars and get the premium set now rather than upgrading in two years. High-quality acrylic or resin, oversized tiles for broad accessibility, wooden racks if available, and a proper carrying case with tile compartments. This is your set for the next twenty years.



# The Complete Buyer's Checklist

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## Before You Buy

- Labeled "American Mahjong" or "NMJL compatible"
- 152 tiles minimum (166 preferred)
- Includes 8 jokers, 8 flowers, 16 winds, 12 dragons
- Material matches your budget and use case
- Angled racks included (not flat)
- Case with secure latches/zipper and space for racks
- Reviews confirm clear printing and tile quality

## For Used Sets — Additional Checks

- All tiles counted and confirmed complete
- No chips, cracks, or sticky tiles
- Racks stable and undamaged
- Case closes securely
- Tiles lie flat when stacked (no warping)
- Price reflects any imperfections honestly

