

POSSO (A RECIPE FOR DISASTER)

At the end of a meal, when we have the energy, we play *Posso*. A hypercharged rummy, it finishes the work our dinner started – bringing us together around a table, even though at times it may threaten to drive us apart.

Alfred brought the game to us, having learnt it from a group of Franciscan nuns in California, in particular one Sister Ruth, who apparently always carried a gun to the table. It is played in a series of ten hands. In each hand one more card is dealt than in the previous. By hand six or seven you may find yourself holding more than half a deck in an ill-formed fan. The game requires a lot of cards, a lot of time (about an hour, once you get the hang of it), and a lot of rules. Here they are:

Serves 3–5, but up to 8

1 deck of cards less than you have players (i.e. 2 decks for 3 people, etc), which must include the jokers
1 piece of paper
1 pen

Someone you trust to keep score
Many drinks
An ashtray (optional, depending on company)

The goal

The overall goal is to have the lowest score, which is cumulative over ten hands. In each turn, you pick up a card (from the top of the face-down *stack* or face-up *pile*), take it into your hand, then discard one, face-up on the *pile*. In each hand you try to get rid of your cards – any cards left over count towards your score. First you must *go down*, by putting a particular *requirement* (a combination of *runs* and *of-a-kinds*) down on the table. After you have *gone down*, you can get rid of your remaining cards on any *requirements* (your own *runs* or *of-a-kinds*, or someone else's) that are already down on the table. There are therefore two phases in each hand – trying to *go down* and trying to *go out*. Twos and jokers are wild – they can represent any card of any suit you like. You may have a lot of cards to get rid of if you have *Posso*-ed ('bought' extra cards) too often.

For the deal

Cut the deck – the player who draws the highest card is first to deal. The dealer shuffles the deck, the player to his right cuts, and the dealer deals clockwise, starting with the player to his left. In the first hand, 7 cards are dealt to each player. The turn to deal passes clockwise, and the next dealer deals 8 cards in the second hand, the next deals 9 in the third, and so on. The undealt cards are placed face-down in a *stack* in the middle of the table, and the top one turned face-up, starting the separate *pile*.

To play

Play passes clockwise, starting to the left of the dealer. You start your turn by picking up either the top card in the face-up *pile* or the top one in the face-down *stack*, and you end your turn by discarding a card on the face-up *pile*. During your turn, with luck, you may be able to do one of the following:

If you haven't already *gone down*, you may do so if you have the *requirement* in your hand, and as long as it is your turn. You haven't won the hand, though, until you have *gone out* – either put down or discarded your very last card. In the last hand, *going down* is a little different, and harder (we'll come on to this later).

If you have already *gone down*, in this turn or a previous one, you can *put down* – in other words, you can add – cards to *runs* and *of-a-kinds* already down on the table. You can put down on to your own *runs* and *of-a-kinds* **or anyone else's, as long as it is your turn and you've already gone down** – even in the same turn you *go down* yourself. You can't start a new *run* or *of-a-kind*, or move cards between them, but you can add to them – using the correct card, or a wild card (two or joker), which can go anywhere. You may also replace a wild card that is already down, in which case the wild card must stay in the same *run* – it can be moved up or down the *run*, but not into another run or your hand. (When a run is 'full', from three to Ace, no more cards can be added to it, wild ones included.)

You win the hand by getting rid of your last card – either by discarding it, or adding it to a *run* or *of-a-kind* – and *going out*. Of course, this can only be done after you've started your turn by picking up a card.

'Posso'

This happens between turns (and, usefully, immediately after the deal, before the first player has started his turn by picking up a card). After one player has discarded, but before the next has picked up, you may stake a claim to the top card in the face-up *pile* by shouting 'Posso?' ('May I?'). The person whose turn is next may either say 'no', in which case he **must** take the top pile card to start his turn, or 'yes', in which case you must take both the top pile card **and** the top stack card. It is not actually your turn: you have just 'bought' a card you wanted by taking another one you couldn't see, and you don't get to discard. Play continues with the player whose turn it was about to be before you called 'Posso'.

If more than one player calls 'Posso', priority is given to the one closest to the player whose turn it is, moving clockwise.

After someone has *Posso*-ed, 'Posso' may not be called again until the player whose turn it was anyway starts and finishes his turn.

If it is your turn to play, you neither want to, nor are you permitted to, call 'Posso'.

Going down

When you have made the *requirement* for the hand, but only after you have started your turn by picking up a card, you may *go down* by putting the *requirement* face-up on the table.

No part of the *requirement* may be more than half wild cards when you *go down*, although any number of wild cards may be *put down* on it subsequently. Here are the requirements:

Hand one	7 cards dealt	2 threes <i>of-a-kind</i>
Hand two	8 cards dealt	a three <i>of-a-kind</i> and a <i>run</i> of four cards
Hand three	9 cards dealt	2 fours <i>of-a-kind</i>
Hand four	10 cards dealt	a four <i>of-a-kind</i> and a <i>run</i> of five
Hand five	11 cards dealt	2 <i>runs</i> of five (each in a different suit)
Hand six	12 cards dealt	a <i>run</i> of eight and three <i>of-a-kind</i>
Hand seven	13 cards dealt	3 fours <i>of-a-kind</i>
Hand eight	14 cards dealt	2 fours <i>of-a-kind</i> and a <i>run</i> of five
Hand nine	15 cards dealt	2 <i>runs</i> of five (each in a different suit) and four <i>of-a-kind</i>
Hand ten	16 cards dealt	3 <i>runs</i> of five or more (each in a different suit) with no discard (see note under 'going out')

An '*of-a-kind*' is a group of cards with the same number or face (except twos and jokers, which are wild). A '*run*' is a series of consecutive cards in the same suit, with threes low (twos don't exist as they are wild) and Aces high.

Going out

You keep playing until your last card is gone and you have *gone out* – when you have won the hand all the other players, having cards left in their hand, need to add up their scores.

Hand ten, the last hand, is different. The *requirement* is not just that you make 3 *runs*, but that you are able to put them down with nothing left in your hand, and **no discard**. You must therefore, with 3 perfect *runs* in your hand, wait until you pick up the perfect card, when you can put down the lot. Having *gone down* and *out* in one fell swoop, everyone else has lost the hand and must add up their scores, which will be high.

Scoring

Only cards held in the hand (not 'down' on the table) count against you, and the score is cumulative from round to round. The lowest score after ten hands wins. Cards count thus:

Three to seven all score 5 points

Eight to King all score 10 points

Aces score 15 points

Twos score 20 points

Jokers are free (0 points)

If you end up with a score of over 500 you are deemed to be 'in the toilet', which someone normally is.

Alfred's rules

Alfred seems to make up the rules as he goes along. Here are a handful that have stuck:

'Dead card' After the top card in the face-up *pile* has been '*Posso-ed*', the next one is *dead*, and may not be taken by the player whose turn it is next, they can only pick up from the face-down *stack*. I never play this rule, unless I have to because I'm playing with Alfred.

'No Posso down' After you have gone down you may not call '*Posso*' in the remainder of the hand. I prefer not to play this rule, unless Alfred or Ginny insists.

'Cutting to win' When it is your turn to deal, you try to pick up the right number of cards for the deal, without counting cards or fidgeting with the deck. If you get it right (i.e. for round 2 among 3 people, you pick up 24 or 25 cards – 8 cards each, or 8 cards each plus 1 to turn over for the face-up *pile*), your entire score up to this point is cancelled, and you start again from zero. We always play this rule, as it offers a chance of reprieve to players who are 'in the toilet', and haven't a hope in hell of winning.

