

A TOAST TO TRIVIA

Irish quiz nights are the latest draw at pubs

By Cathy Hainer
USA TODAY

SAN FRANCISCO — What do you get when you cross Alex Trebek with James Joyce? Liam McAtasney, quizmaster for several Bay Area Irish pub trivia nights.

Like Angela's Ashes and Riverdance, the growing popularity of pub quiz nights is more proof that America has embraced Irish culture. Quiz nights are so popular here that fans cluster around thicker than a pint of Guinness. Now quiz contests are spreading across the country, particularly to Boston and New York.

"On quiz nights, we're about three times as busy. Sometimes you can't get a table," says Miles O'Reilly, owner of

O'Reilly's Irish Pub in this city's North Beach neighborhood. O'Reilly's has been hosting trivia quiz nights for about 18 months.

Do you know the colors of the Argentine flag? Then you're ready for a pub quiz. "The subjects range from general knowledge to entertainment to sports," says McAtasney, who as quizmaster is in charge of researching questions, emceeing and tallying up the scores. "On average, the typical pub quiz lasts about two hours," he says. (By the way, the flag's colors are blue and white.)

The questions start out on the easy side. Like this one: Name the movie in which the characters James Bond and Blofeld appear. Any film buff knows that's *You Only Live Twice*.

Name-that-tune questions are

among the most popular feature, McAtasney says. He always includes several rounds, and the music ranges from opera to alternative to golden oldies. Who sang *It Never Rains in Southern California*? Ten points if you guessed Albert Hammond.

The questions seem to get harder as the rounds, and the rounds of drinks, pile up. And the competition between teams can get pretty fierce.

"We came in third place for the last two weeks," says regular Scott Barrows, 27, of his team of six friends. "This week, we're determined to win." Most pubs offer cash prizes for the winners and booby prizes for the losers. The third-place prize is often the most coveted: a free round of drinks.

"I know I'm killing brain-cells by

drinking beer, but I'm expanding my knowledge by playing trivia, so I figure I'm breaking even," says Colm Tobin, 27.

For pub owner O'Reilly, the quiz nights are more than just an excuse to drink. "I honestly believe the art of conversation is dying, and this is something to entice people to communicate more at public houses instead of just coming and drinking," he says.

Romances have sprung up over trivia quizzes, reports O'Reilly, and many friendships have been made. "We met here," says Anthony McGrath, 30, with his friend Lisa Lim, 23. "We started as the competition, but now we're a team." Now, they're stumped for the name of an Italian opera composer. (Verdi, it

turns out.)

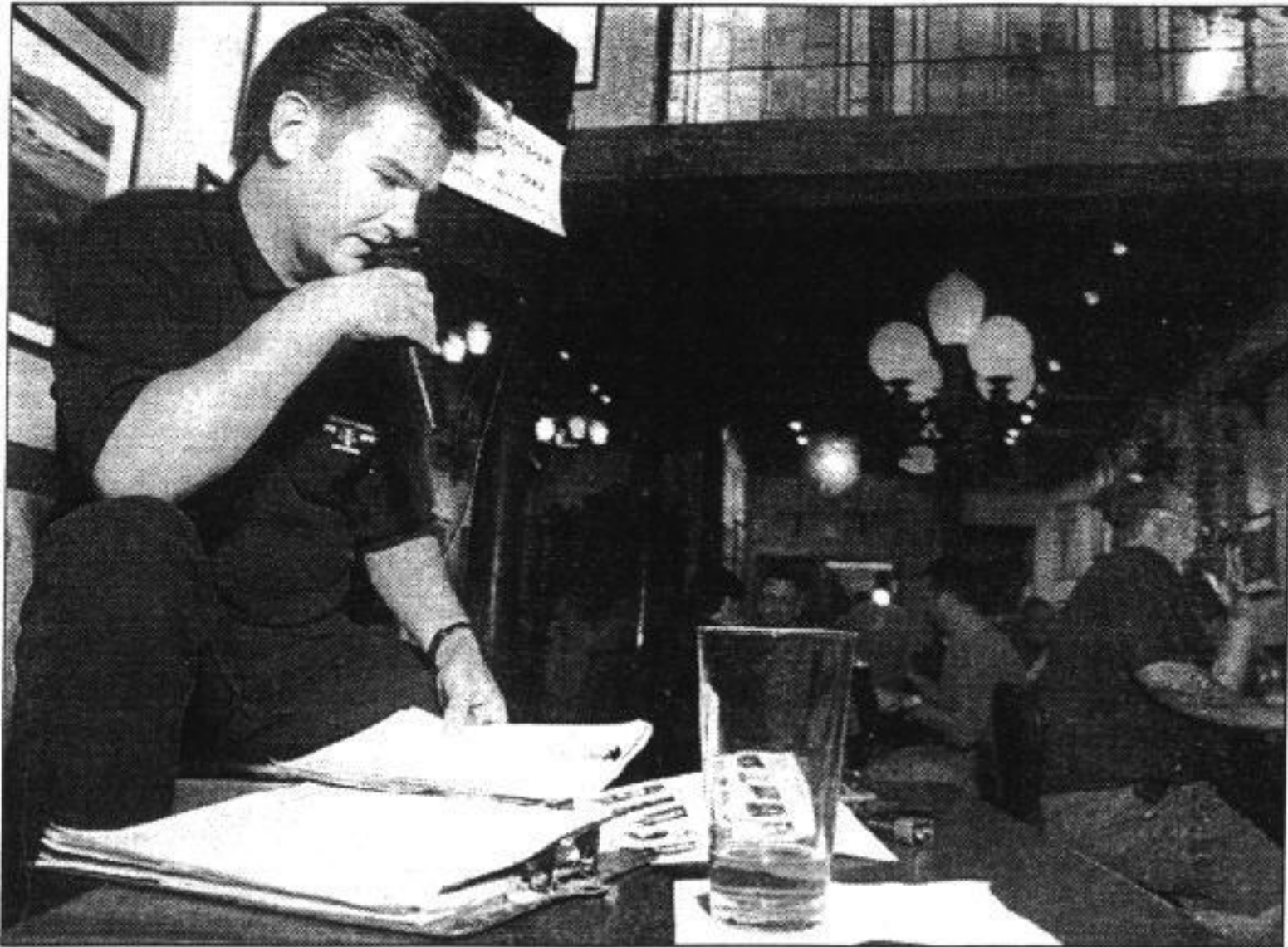
The origins of the pub quiz are shrouded in a beery haze, but everyone agrees the games are an extension of an old barroom trivia game tradition. The popularity of TV quiz shows added to the pub night's al-

lure, McAtasney says. "Most of the regulars bone up by watching *Jeopardy!*" he says.

Quiz nights draw a diverse age group, says Dermot Clarke, bar manager of Thady Con's, a New York pub that has been hosting quiz nights

and always listen carefully to the wording of each question. It may contain a hidden clue.

As does the last question on a recent evening: Give the stage name of comedian Arthur Stanley Jefferson, born in 1890. Answer: Stan Laurel.



Mind games: Above, O'Reilly's customers Scott Barrows, left, Keith Martin, Martin Gloeckle, Heather Smith and Ryan Young join forces to answer trivia questions posed by quizmaster Liam McAtasney, far left.

for several months. "We get business people and locals as well as the college kids. Sometimes we have to tailor the questions to include the different age groups."

Despite their academic aura, quiz nights often become rowdy, says Roger Howell, co-owner of Mad Dog in the Fog, a popular pub in San Francisco's Haight district. "They're not mellow. In fact, it gets pretty noisy, especially during the music rounds. Sometimes people shout out the answers."

And that's a big no-no, McAtasney says. Among his pub quiz tips: keep abreast of current affairs; keep up to date on popular singles and album charts; bone up on recent winners of the Oscars, Grammys and sporting events;