



Official Rules — Version 1.10 · Invented by Javier and Imelda Flores, Texas, 2026

Like Canasta but Not Really

Cesta is a rummy-family card game for 2 or more players, played with standard 52-card decks. Players race to build sets of matching rank and grow at least one into a six-card Cesta. If you already play Canasta, you'll recognize the bones of this game immediately. But don't get too comfortable. Canasta is the responsible older sibling: happy to play out a slow afternoon at the retirement community card table. Cesta is her Gen Z little sister, and she plays with knives. No wild cards, no per-card scoring, no frozen piles to keep track of — you don't need a college degree to play, just a little street smarts. Build more Cestas and you don't just smirk — you reach across the table and steal an opponent's set. And every Three you discard is a double-edged blade — it forces the next player to draw extra cards, which could hurt or help them. Same family resemblance; entirely different attitude.

Object of the Game

Form sets — combinations of three or more cards of the same rank — and grow at least one set to six cards, forming a Cesta. When a player goes out (lays down all cards still in his hand) while holding at least one Cesta, the round ends; scores are tallied, and the highest score wins.

Terminology

Set: A group of at least three cards of the same rank. A set may be laid face-up on the table once formed — except a player's very first lay-down of the round, which must be either one set of at least four cards, or two sets of at least three cards each.

Cesta: A set that has grown to six or more cards of the same rank. Once six cards of the same rank are confirmed by the other players, the cards are stacked neatly — no longer in a vertical cascade — to signify they now form a Cesta.

Laying Down: Placing a set face-up on the table in a vertical cascade — each card slightly overlapping the one before it — so every player can see and count the cards in it. (Once a set becomes a Cesta, it's stacked neatly instead — see Cesta, above.)

Forgotten Set: A set taken from an opponent under the Taking a Set rule (see Special Rules). It's stacked beneath the taking player's Cesta and can never again be used to build a set or Cesta, nor does it count toward anyone's score.

Discarding: Placing one card face-up on the discard pile to end a turn. Mandatory, except when going out, when it's optional. The discard pile must always be squared so only the top card is visible; any player may straighten it at any time.

Drawing: On each turn, a player draws either two cards from the stock, the top card of the discard pile, or the entire discard pile. Drawing from the discard pile (top card or whole pile) requires immediately use of the top card to form or extend a set — the decision to draw the top card or entire pile is final and cannot be reversed partway through.

Going Out: Laying down all remaining cards in hand — by forming new sets/Cestas or adding to existing ones. Discarding the final card is optional. A player cannot go out without at least one Cesta; otherwise, the round continues.

Setup

Number of Decks and Players

Cesta plays best with 2 to 8 players, but more can join as additional decks are added. Jokers are not used.

Players	Decks Needed
2 – 4	2
5 – 6	3
7 – 8	4
9 – 10	5
11 – 12	6

Formula to determine number of decks needed for larger groups: $[(\text{Players} \times 10) + (\text{Players} \times 16)] / 52$. Example: 15 players $\rightarrow (150 + 240) / 52 = 7.5 \rightarrow 8$ decks.

Multiple decks don't need to match in color, but must match in size, thickness and material, and all must be shuffled and cut thoroughly each round. The dealer may enlist other players to pre-shuffle pairs of decks before a final combined shuffle; dealer uses his best discretion. Card shufflers are allowed. With many players, undealt stock can be split into two or more piles at different ends of the table for easy reach. Decks cannot be added once a round has begun — confirm the correct count before dealing.

The Dealer

To open a round, each player draws a card from the shuffled deck; the highest card deals first. On later rounds, the deal rotates clockwise, and the player to the dealer's left is always dealt to first.

The Shuffle, Cut, and Deal

Shuffle thoroughly and cut multiple times given the large card count. The player to the dealer's right cuts last. The dealer deals 10 cards face-down to each player, one at a time clockwise, starting to their left and ending with themselves. The remainder becomes the stock, placed face-down in the center; its top card is turned face-up beside it to start the discard pile. With many players and decks, the stock may be split across the table for easy reach.

Turn Structure

Each turn has three parts, in order:

1. Draw — draw two cards from the stock, or the top card of the discard pile, or the entire discard pile (see Drawing). Two Special Rules can change this: the Threes Discard may require drawing 3 or 6 cards instead of 2, and the Forced Match Draw may require drawing from the discard pile instead of the stock.
2. Laying-Down (optional) — lay down new sets or Cestas or add cards to ones already on the table. A player's first lay-down of the round must either be one set of at least four cards, or two sets of at least three cards each — every lay-down after that can be any legal set or Cesta. Forming a second (or later) Cesta triggers Taking a Set (see Special Rules).
3. Discard — mandatory, one card, unless the player is going out, then it is optional.

Special Rules

A. Taking a Set on a Second Cesta

When a player forms their second (or any later) Cesta in the same round, they must immediately take one laid-down set from any opponent of their choosing — there's no restriction on rank or size; the taking player picks freely. The taken set becomes a Forgotten Set: stack it beneath the new Cesta. If no opponent currently has any laid-down ordinary sets, no set is taken that turn. Cestas themselves can never be taken this way — only ordinary sets.

B. The Threes – Discard and Laying Down

Discarding a Three forces the next player to draw 3 cards instead of 2. That player can either accept the draw or discard a Three of their own to escalate it to 6 for whoever's next — 6 is the ceiling; it cannot escalate further within that exchange. Once resolved, the chain can start again on any later turn.

Cap: no player can be forced to draw 6 more than once per round. If an escalation would force a second 6 on the same player, it's blocked — the player who'd otherwise escalate must draw the 3 instead, and the exchange ends there.

Also, threes can only be laid down as a set or Cesta when a player is going out.

C. Forced Match Draw

If a player discards a card whose rank matches a set or Cesta already laid down by the next player, that player must draw from the discard pile rather than the stock — they still must choose between the top card only or the entire pile, as normal — and must immediately add the top card to their matching set or Cesta.

Going Out and Scoring

Going out requires a minimum of one Cesta; otherwise, the round continues. The player who goes out earns a 20-point bonus. Before final scoring, the going-out player looks at all opponents' remaining hands, selects one opponent's hand, and may form additional sets or Cestas from those cards — which are added toward the going-out player's own total, combined with everything else, as a single score.

Per-player score:

- **Cesta:** 10 points each
- **Set:** 5 points each
- **Cards outside a set or Cesta:** 0 points
- **Player that Goes Out:** 20 points

Penalties (deducted at final score):

- **Took the entire discard pile without immediately using the top card:** −20 points
- **Witnessed looking through the discard pile for advantage:** −5 points
- **Witnessed changing their mind mid-draw from discard pile (returning or drawing more cards after committing):** −5 points

Exhausting the Stock

If the stock runs out before anyone goes out, play continues — players may still lay down sets and Cestas and must still discard — until no more moves can be made. The round then ends, sets and Cestas are scored as usual, but no player receives the 20-point going-out bonus or the opponent's-hand bonus, since they did NOT go out.

Length of Game

With few players, a single round can decide the winner. Alternatively, set a target score (100 or 200 points) and play rounds until someone reaches it, or impose a time limit or fixed number of rounds for larger groups — highest total score wins.

Tournament Format

Run tournaments as single-round heats at tables of four or eight players. The winner at each table advances; losers are out. Continue seeding winners into new tables until a single overall winner remains.