

# RAISING THE BARRE

Boost Your Fitness Level And Energize Your Pilates With Challenging Barre Classes

by Diana Whitney

I walked into my first barre class early on a Monday morning, anxious about what lay ahead. The mirrored studio (Rasamaya in Newburyport, MA) was packed with sleek women stretching and talking. Our instructor, Jocelyn, gave me a pair of ankle socks with grippy soles (bare feet are a no-no), a set of hand-weights, a strap and an inflatable "peanut." She led me to a spot at the barre between two, tall, lean blondes who looked to be in their late 40s. "Are you ready for torture?" one laughed to the other. Then the music started pulsing and we were off.

Barre workouts are cropping up in studios and cities across the country, offering students a high-energy, 60-minute fitness method based on ballet, Pilates, yoga and deep, orthopedic stretching. "Barre is not

simply a trend," says Andrea Rogers of Xtend Barre, also a professional dancer and Pilates instructor. "That's because it really works."

"Barre is about body-shaping," explains Suzanne Bowen, who trained for years at the Lotte Berk Method in New York City—the original barre studio from which all other methods derived. "Barre is results-oriented, and people are seeing a difference in only 10 sessions," says Bowen. "It's the hardest workout I've ever done."

Ten minutes into Rasamaya barre class, I was ready to agree. Jocelyn (an exuberant, former dancer) warmed us up with brisk marching, pliés, lunges and first- and second-position heel-raises. Although I teach yoga and love Pilates, I'd never taken ballet in my life. Jocelyn had encouraged me

to modify the exercises if needed, but my ego was determined to survive the complete class.

As the song changed to a catchy, pop anthem, we transitioned seamlessly into a plank sequence with leg lifts, segmented push-ups (down for two, up for two), and tricep pushups. We rested for a breath in Child's Pose, did a yoga Warrior 3 balance, then grabbed our hand-weights for bicep curls, hammer curls, tricep presses and more.

**Barre is results-oriented, and people are seeing a difference in only 10 sessions.**

"This is the warm-up?" I thought to myself, trying to keep up with my experienced neighbors. Two pounds had never felt so heavy. Finally, we set down our weights for a blissful, but brief, stretch at the barre to loosen the hip flexors and arms.

You'll find this strengthen/stretch pattern in most barre methods. "First we strengthen the muscle group, then we stretch the muscle group," explains Elisabeth Halfpapp, creator (along with her husband, Fred Devito) of the Core Fusion® barre program and home fitness DVDs. Halfpapp and Devito worked for two decades at Lotte Berk in New York City, a "laboratory" where they refined their technique teaching six classes a day, six days a week to thousands of students of all levels and body types.

After the stretch, the music amped up to an 80s dance remix, and we began the notorious thigh-work and "seat-work" at the barre. Jocelyn led us through first position leg lifts, alternating full-range lifts with little pulses to the beat. "Can anyone give me more?" she demanded, raising her long legs effortlessly as I gritted my teeth.

In barre, there's so much focus on form, you forget about your problems.



Tracey Mallett's Booty Barre classes are a fusion of Pilates, dance, yoga and cardio-sculpting.

### CLOSE YOUR EYES AND FOCUS

Barre is an intense, mind-body workout that demands absolute commitment. "In barre, there's so much focus on form, you forget about your problems," says Bowen. "You're completely absorbed in the present moment."

It's true, for the 60-minute class my mind was utterly present. "I'm not gonna let you give up!" shouted Jocelyn over the thumping house-music. If I closed my eyes, only the bum in my glutes reminded me I wasn't in a dance club.

"The music is a big piece," says Carrie Tyler, Pilates instructor and creator of Rasamaya Barre. "It keeps it interesting, keeps the students committed. The work is so hard, and the music carries you through."

As the song changed, we grabbed soft, exercise mats and took it down to the floor for core-work in both c-curve and flat-back positions. Pilates students will recognize some of the abdominal exercises from mat-class, though in barre they're mixed up in a fun, new way and driven by the beat of the music, building in tempo and intensity to each song's climax.

There's no doubt a strong Pilates practice is an asset in barre class. "Pilates students already have a strong core and pliability of the spine—this will enhance their barre workout," says Halfpapp. "They'll do well because they understand how to

work with their body in space."

Instructor Denise Crowe, who teaches Core Fusion® at exhale Mind Body Spa in Boston, believes Pilates students will be drawn to the detail-oriented, disciplined work of barre. "It will work their core strength so much and give them information on how to work internally. Plus, it reinforces the mind-body picture."

My mind-body connection was fired up after three grueling sets of ab variations, engaging the whole core while squeezing the peanut between the thighs. We pushed through to our finale with bun-burning "back-dancing" in a Pilates bridge, and then Jocelyn rewarded us with a Figure-4, glute stretch and some closing yoga poses, including Down Dog, Cat-Cow and Cobra to open the chest. But only one-third to one-half of our workout had actually been at the barre, and I wondered if "barre class" was a misnomer.

"If you did the whole class on the barre, it would be a ballet class, and then people wouldn't come," laughs Rasamaya's Carrie Tyler. The barre segments tone your seat and your thighs, but you need the upper body piece in the middle of the room—push-ups, planks, weights—as well as mat abdominals to make the method a well-rounded workout. "We always work the whole body evenly," says Andrea Rogers.



Anatomy  
Yoga  
Barre & Core  
Pilates  
Aerial Yoga  
Structural Therapy

New Hampshire  
Massachusetts

Maine

Vermont

Wisconsin

Toronto

Spain

Patagonia

Chile

teacher training



retreats

**Chile:** March 2012  
Yoga + Core + Wine + Poetry

**Morocco:** April 2012  
Yoga + Core + Culture

**Spain:** May 2012  
Yoga + Core + Flamenco

**Paris:** June 2012  
Yoga + Core + Sensuality



rasamaya  
www.rasamaya.com

Photo Credit: Papaya Images



Getting a total-body workout at an Xtend Barre class, which combines ballet and Pilates moves.

## If you've always wanted to try dance but felt intimidated, barre could be the class for you.

### VERTICAL MAT CLASS

I walked out of Rasamaya Newburyport elated, my legs shaking and quivering. I still had two barre studios to visit before I traveled home, but now I was excited to try more.

"It's one hour of efficiency," said Kimberly Neely, the tall blonde who'd practiced next to me with impeccable form. A former dancer, Neely used to do Pilates mat-classes and privates on the Reformer before she discovered barre. Now she goes three to five days a week. "I'm fast-minded, and I love the one-hour format," she said. "Barre brought back my dancer's body."

Indeed, barre is legendary for producing long, lean thighs and a sculpted derriere. "We're known for the 'Pure Barre ledge,'" says Rachel Roberts, owner of Pure Barre in Newton, MA. "We offer a smart workout for people with busy lives."

Aside from its toning effects, barre offers powerful strengthening benefits for Pilates students. Most teachers I interviewed described barre as "a vertical mat class"—with the added elements of music and dance. "We take all the Pilates principles and bring them into a vertical position," says Andrea Rogers. "Standing upright with posture—that's how we go about our days."

Elisabeth Halfpapp agrees, "Barre can enhance your range of muscular strength. You're doing upright, weight-bearing movements, working

the large muscle groups with the thigh and gluteal work at the barre." In many barre programs, this powerful, sculpting, isometric work becomes aerobic with the addition of ballet jumps and fun dance combinations.

### THE ROOTS OF BARRE

Most barre workouts today have their roots in the Lotte Berk Method, brought to America in 1971. Lotte Berk herself was a German dancer who fled the Nazis during World War II. She moved to London with her British husband, kept dancing, but suffered a back injury falling off the stage. During her recovery, Berk worked with orthopedic doctors, combining her rehabilitative therapy with ballet bar sequences to form a new system of exercise. She opened The Lotte Berk Studio in her West End basement, where she later sculpted the physiques of celebrity clients like Brooke Shields and Joan Collins.

One of Berk's American students, Lydia Bach, fell in love with the workout and bought the rights to Berk's name. In 1971, Bach opened The Lotte Berk Method Studio on Manhattan's Upper East Side, and the three-story brownstone quickly became busy from 6:15 am until the last class finished at 9:30 pm. The method remained very exclusive, the province of celebrities and socialites. Classes were open only to women, as Elisabeth Halfpapp remembers:

"In 1983, I was managing the Lotte Berk empire at 67th and Madison. Sean Penn was picking up his girlfriend, Kevin Bacon was picking up Kyra. These men really wanted to take the class, but it was exclusively for women."

Then Fred Devito—Halfpapp's husband and a trainer at the New York Athletic Club—started teaching a men's class. "I'd been training my clients with weights and cardio, but I never saw results," recalls Devito. "I was getting disillusioned with the fitness industry. Then at Lotte Berk, I literally saw people's bodies whittle away doing these exercises."

For 22 years, Halfpapp and Devito lived and worked at the Lotte Berk brownstone, helping develop the method in America. Eventually, they were ready to branch off.

"We wanted to modernize the techniques and bring in Pilates and yoga concepts," explains Halfpapp. "We focused on the neutral spine and expanded the range of motion—instead of the small, quick, grippy movements of strict Lotte Berk." In 2003, the duo founded exhale Mind-Body Spa and created the company's highly publicized Core Fusion® program. Their barre classes work with alignment, control and breath, focusing on precise movement rather than a maximum number of repetitions.

By this point, longtime Lotte Berk instructor, Burr Leonard, had already left the empire to create The Bar Method in Greenwich, CT, and former teacher, Carrie Rezabek, had founded Pure Barre in Michigan. But when Halfpapp and Devito broke off on their own, they gave other teachers the confidence to follow suit. The exodus of so many key teachers caused the Lotte Berk Method itself to fold in 2005. There are now dozens of spin-off barre programs across the country, some, like Suzanne Bowen's BarreAmped, in direct descent from the original method (see sidebar).

### SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

If you've always wanted to try dance but felt intimidated, barre could be the class for you. Although I worried my dance inexperience would slow me down, it didn't, and I found the ballet moves fun and deeply satisfying. "The workout makes you feel like a dancer, but you don't have to be a dancer," says Suzanne Bowen.

"Dancing is good for the soul," says Tracey Mallet, a Pilates instructor who created The Booty Barre™, a dance-infused version of traditional barre. "My workout is about having fun, feeling good, using your hips."

And it works. In Newburyport, I met Kim Lively, a mother of three kids under five, a new student who had "fallen in love" with barre. "My body has changed dramatically in only four months," she told me. "I'm so much stronger. When I started, I couldn't hold plank for 20 seconds." Now Lively attends barre class three times a week and works out one day on the Reformer, finding the two disciplines reinforce each other.

Pilates studios can attract new clients like Lively with high-energy barre programs, then get these students on the apparatus. "There's a lot of cross-over within studios," says Andrea Rogers. "After taking barre, students bring the principles back to the Reformer and the mat. They remember the cues from when they were vertical and use them to enhance their Pilates."

## BARRE-NONE

Here's a sampling of top barre programs around the country. Single classes range from \$16 to \$35, with multi-class packages offered.

### Core Fusion®: Elisabeth Halfpapp & Fred Devito

The duo created their award-winning program drawing from Lotte Berk fundamentals, Pilates, yoga, interval cardio training and 50 years of combined fitness expertise. DVD series and luxury retreats available. Located in 18 spas across the U.S. and the Caribbean. [exhalespa.com](http://exhalespa.com)

### BarreAmped: Suzanne Bowen

The renowned Lotte Berk teacher founded BarreAmped after years of precise training in the method, emphasizing neutral spine and pelvic floor engagement to fire up the core. DVDs available. Locations in Tennessee, Texas, Kansas, Kentucky and Ohio. [barreamp.com](http://barreamp.com)

### Xtend Barre: Andrea Rogers

The acclaimed professional dancer and choreographer is a classically trained Pilates instructor who incorporates ballet sequences into her dynamic barre workout. DVDs available. Locations nationwide. [xtendbarreworkout.com](http://xtendbarreworkout.com)

Barre attracts a diverse clientele, from busy moms to college students to senior citizens. "It's a very safe method that's safe for all ages," says Rogers. "One of my best clients is 73 years old, and she's a rock star!" Denise Crowe at Core Fusion also works with older clients, some who've been told by their doctors that they need to build up their bone-density. And with the concentrated, weight-bearing work of barre class, they see improvement.

Others students seek out barre to enhance their athletics. "Core Fusion is gender-neutral," says Elisabeth Halfpapp. "We have a lot of men coming to our classes—professional tennis players, runners. They find the core work and leg strengthening takes their sport to the next level."

### BARRE-TENDER

After three barre classes in two days, I was hooked—although I needed a massage for my sore backside. I loved the music, the fast pace, the exhilarating challenge. Most barre methods follow a similar template—

warm-up, Plank and arms, thigh and seat-work, abs, Bridge — but every class is a unique fusion of exercises, alternating strengthen/stretch. "Pilates students will find more variety of movement in barre. They'll enjoy the music and higher level of intensity," says Halfpapp.

Bowen adds, "I have teachers who are highly qualified, Romana-trained Pilates instructors and they adore barre work. It's a great complement to Pilates because it gives you weight-bearing exercise and low- to no-impact interval cardio."

With commitment, barre will increase your endurance while testing your willpower and focus. And you just might become addicted. Says Lively, "No matter how good you get, there's always room for more." **PS**

*Diana Whitney, owner of Core Flow Yoga & Sport in Brattleboro, VT, is a syndicated parenting columnist and mother of two. She fell in love with barre while researching this article and is already integrating barre core-work into her yoga flow.*



Suzanne Bowen and other barre devotees feel the burn in Wide Second Position at BarreAmped studio in Franklin, TN.