

New in the mix: mind-body spas

MINGLING YOGA, PILATES AND CONDITIONING YIELDS ANOTHER APPROACH BY JAMIE HAMBURG

The week Exhale opened in Chicago, I went over for a morning workout at the new mind-body spa.

After a short but relaxing stay in the steam room, I braved the 60-minute Core Fusion class, which brings together several disciplines, including yoga, Pilates, conditioning and orthopedic exercises. About 35 minutes into it, I was glancing frantically around the room to make sure I wasn't the only person who couldn't flex my body into the picture-perfect pose the teacher upfront had achieved.

Twenty minutes later, I walked out of Exhale feeling a sense of accomplishment from having learned a whole new form of exercise. OK, maybe I didn't really pick up all the moves in my first class, but it was invigorating to know I had found a place to challenge myself and relax at the same time.

Exhale, at 945 N. State St., offers a warm alternative to the average gym/day spa experience with its signature Core Fusion and yoga classes in inviting, peaceful surroundings. Already established in New York, Boston and California, "Exhale was born because we felt there was a need for a place people could go on a daily basis to make lifestyle changes," says founder and CEO Annbeth Eschbach. "Here, we offer services and classes that promote mind and body healing and encourage a complete self-transformation."

The Core Fusion class enables the participant to take control of changing his or her physique. It focuses on both physical and emotional improvement, but the fast-paced dance music keeps participants energized. The mind may be in a yoga-meditative state, but the body is constantly moving.

"It's an art form—there really is no endpoint," says Fred Devito, vice president of mind body programming of Exhale and co-founder of Core Fusion. "You can constantly work to improve your skills, and still get results." Devito and wife Elizabeth Halfpapp created the class together after working for more than 20 years in the gym and dance setting. Devito says the goal of the class is to build muscle mass so that the body will burn more calories.

The results, Eschbach claims, can transform the body, creating longer, leaner muscles. "It completely changes your build, posture and emotional well-being all at once," she



Hands-on training at Exhale.

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says. "I see women 50 years old walking around New York City with perfect, healthy bodies." Though the class is particularly appealing to boomers, participants generally range from 20 to 60, Eschbach says.

In addition to Core Fusion, Exhale also offers vinyasa yoga classes, massages, acupuncture, facials and other healing services. Body Enlightening, for instance, integrates yoga, assisted stretching, Thai massage and other techniques in a 60-minute private session.

Newcomers shouldn't be intimidated. As Devito tells his students at the start of the Core Fusion class, "As you begin the warm-up, breathe deeply and connect to your inner self. Focus on the challenge, without being competitive. Accept your fitness level without judgment. Work hard, do your best and you will improve every time you come to class."

I'll keep that in mind at my next session.