

Get moving to the Latin beat with Zumba

"I love to see people let go. There is a glimmer in their eyes and then I know I've made someone happy."

Fitness instructor Linda Muir is talking about "Zumba."

I can describe it as one hour of dancing, with sounds from a tropical island setting, yet a great cardiovascular and muscle conditioning workout.

I was swinging those hips, yeah!

It could be, as "they" say, the next "big" exercise trend.

"Zumba is 70 percent Latin and fitness moves and 30 percent whatever," Muir explains.

"It's something anyone can learn."

And it's the music that makes it.

Zumba originated in Colombia, just by chance and ingenuity.

As legend has it, fitness instructor Beto Perez went to the gym to teach his usual exercise class, but forgot his standard music. He then grabbed his own music from the car and started teaching dance moves to the music.

It happened in the mid-1990s, and Zumba has been growing ever since. The next move for Perez was to Miami, Fla.

Muir used to teach an aerobic exercise class to Latin music, so Zumba is a natural for her.

"When I went to get certified to teach the class, there was such an energy in the room," she said. "It's like a full hour of being in the Caribbean. Someone told me it's a big letdown when the class is over, and you have to go home and clean the house."

"At first we were tentative about it, but now it's the best class of the week," says Belinda Samuel, of Brookfield, who takes the class at The Body Shop in Brookfield. "You don't need to know how to dance."

Classmate Tracy Ipkovich, of Brookfield, agreed.

"It's an amazing workout with great music," she said.

I second that. You're dancing to fast and slow rhythms, with choreographed combinations of meringue, salsa, samba, meringue, flamenco and hip-hop moves.

"You can't help but have fun because you're moving your body in different ways than traditional exercise. One student who came in was the shyest, quietest person, not saying a peep, but by the end of class, she couldn't contain her smile," said Muir.

Good times, good fun.

"Let's face it. There was a time when I used to party a lot, just like a lot of my friends. Then you get married, have kids. You don't get to go out dancing, so this is the outlet," Muir said.

"It's really a mood lifter. It gets you in a good mood and you can forget all your troubles for awhile," said Michelle Winter, of Danbury.

According to the official Zumba Web site, nearly 1 million Americans have taken Zumba classes, following the moves of 3,500 instructors.

Now, it's your turn. You can find classes at The Body Shop in Brookfield and The Club in New Milford, among other spots. The trend is growing, so check your favorite gym schedule or go to www.zumba.com. You can search classes by state, and listen to some of the fast dance beats you'll experience if you decided to attend.

"You're getting your heart rate up, you're moving and it's like a dance party," said Muir.

Shake it up, ladies and gents. Sneakers on!

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Did you know? Zucchini is about 94 percent water. That makes it one of the lowest calorie vegetables, yet it also provides vitamin C, folate and potassium.

When buying, look for the green guys that are firm and heavy. If you want to add them to a garden, know that a single plant can produce a bushel (think apple bucket) of zucchini. Saute with eggplant, marinara sauce and garlic for a great side dish.

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