



Bend it Like Karen: Karen Lee of Pilates Central in Lenox, Mass.



CUT TO THE CORE

The exercise fad favored by Hollywood starlets, Pilates is solidly rooted where it was planted by its founder and namesake over half a century ago

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A MAGENTA FEATHER BOA; Wonder Woman Barbie in splits on the windowsill; a red, heart-shaped footstool; a delicate, dangling Betty Boop mobile; and steel monkey bars with leather straps—these are the things that might confuse a gym rat looking for a new exercise regime upon entering Karen Lee's studio, Pilates Central, in Lenox, Massachusetts.

Besides all the pink stuff, glitter, and industrial Pilates equipment, Lee's whimsy, humor, and unrestrained spunk are what makes her distinctive. Her pink terrycloth slippers are bigger than her frame, and that's funny. *Float your wings down your back; set up for stomach massage; let's go to the Wunda chair.* These are the Pilates

phrases that flow out of Lee like song. Tiny and wild-haired, Lee has a voice that is resonant and addictive. *Roll over; do the footwork; move into Mermaid.* She's a fusion of Bernadette Peters and Sarah Jessica Parker, and she knows it. A born performer, Lee tiptoes through the various small rooms of her movement studio; she's excited, warm, and simply captivating. "When I see Karen for Pilates first thing in the morning, I just want to stay there and be with her all day long," says Lenox client Patricia Drykerman.

An actress, dancer, choreographer, and mother of two, Lee opened her Lenox studio in June 2003, after working at Canyon Ranch for ten years. "When you have your own studio, it's the most fulfilling experience," she explains. "You become intimate with your clients, especially if you see them three times a week. I help people find joy in their bodies. We explore how the body speaks and how it holds memory."

Lee became an intuitive teacher and nurturer after maintaining a career in professional theater in New York City, working in commercials, radio plays, chorus lines, and traveling shows. "The body has a universal language and Pilates is a system that allows people to speak. Less is more," she says. "The focus is internal, whole, strengthening, and positive."

With classical roots dating to ancient Greek and Roman physical regimes, Pilates is a trend verging on a fad, sparked in part by all the good-looking people doing it: Charlize Theron, Uma Thurman, and Madonna among them. Even less glamorous celebrities, including Dr.

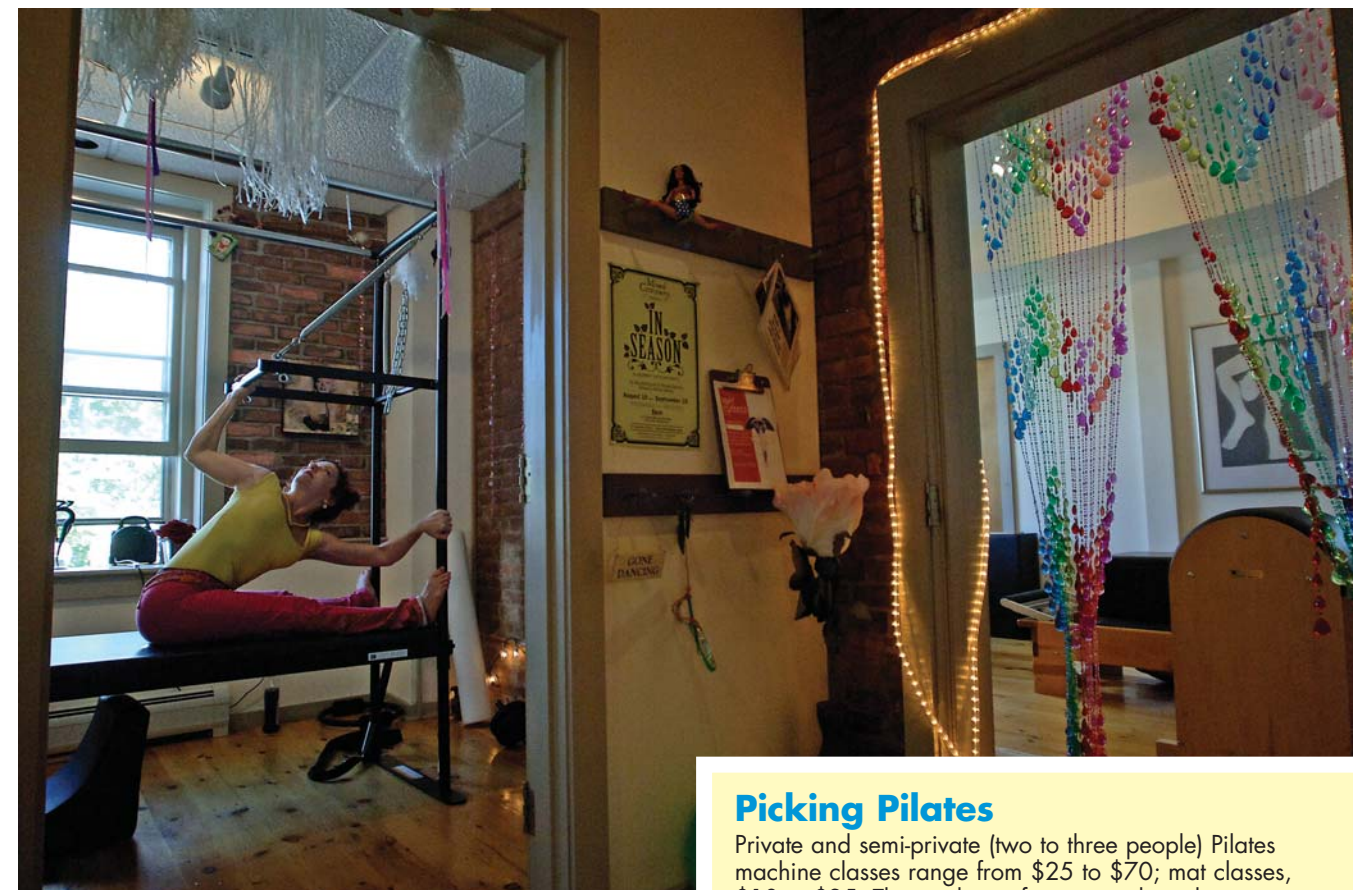
"In ten sessions you'll feel the difference, in twenty you'll see the difference, and in thirty you'll have a new body" was Joe Pilates's mantra.

Phil's wife, actor/comedian John Cleese, and the San Francisco 49ers, adhere to weekly workouts. Jennifer Aniston told Oprah Winfrey, "Pilates versus weightlifting is the difference between Bruce Lee and Schwarzenegger, body-wise."

The Pilates Method (pronounced *pub-LAH-teez*) is named after its creator, boxer/gymnast/guru Joseph Pilates. His summer haven from 1939 to 1951 was Jacob's Pillow, in Becket, Massachusetts, where he trained dance-world darlings like George Balanchine and Martha Graham. He called his method Contrology—a form of body conditioning that strengthens, lengthens, and balances the "powerhouse," the core of the body from the knees to the elbows. "In ten sessions you'll feel the difference, in twenty you'll see the difference, and in thirty you'll have a new body" was his mantra. A 1945 manual, *Return to Life Through Contrology*, is filled with pictures of the author, a middle-aged, barrel-chested hunk wearing a white bikini and dance shoes, performing exercises with colorful names like Swan, Saw, Frog, Seal, Elephant, Short Spine, and Spread Eagle that he designed during World War I to rehabilitate injured sol-



Lean Machine: Karen Lee strikes a pose ... and holds it.



Picking Pilates

Private and semi-private (two to three people) Pilates machine classes range from \$25 to \$70; mat classes, \$10 to \$25. Thorough certification and teaching experience of instructors is essential. Canyon Ranch, Jacob's Pillow, and the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Lenox offer seasonal, specialized instruction and workshops. Most health clubs, such as the Kilpatrick Athletic Center at Simon's Rock College, Lenox Fitness Center and Spa, and Berkshire Nautilus and Berkshire West Athletic Club in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, offer mat classes. Some yoga studios, including Yoga Integration in Lenox and Frog Lotus Yoga in Williamstown, Massachusetts, offer Pilates instruction. To get started, try a few private classes for individualized attention, assessment, and thorough bodywork training. See "The Goods" for a list of Pilates teachers.

diers, using bedsprings as equipment.

It's the first sight of that equipment upon entering a Pilates studio that has a novice asking: *Will my knees go weak and my face look as blissful as that lady I passed in the stairwell? Is that monkey-bar bed a torture chamber rack? Is Pilates only for ballet dancers? Only for women? Only for trapeze artists? Is there sex involved?* Mainly, one asks if the whole thing is too good to be true. Clients are instructed, usually in a tender yet tough way, to put their shoulders in the blocks, their legs in the straps, or to bring their navels to their spines. Even though they're being bossed around and watched over with a keen, facilitating eye, even though they're working up a sweat by "rolling like a ball," standing on their toes, and doing pliés, people tend to walk away happy, strong, supple, and raving. Some devotees even go so far as to perform floor exercises at dinner parties to show off their "hundred," a raised-leg, pumping-arm motion that spikes one's heart rate.

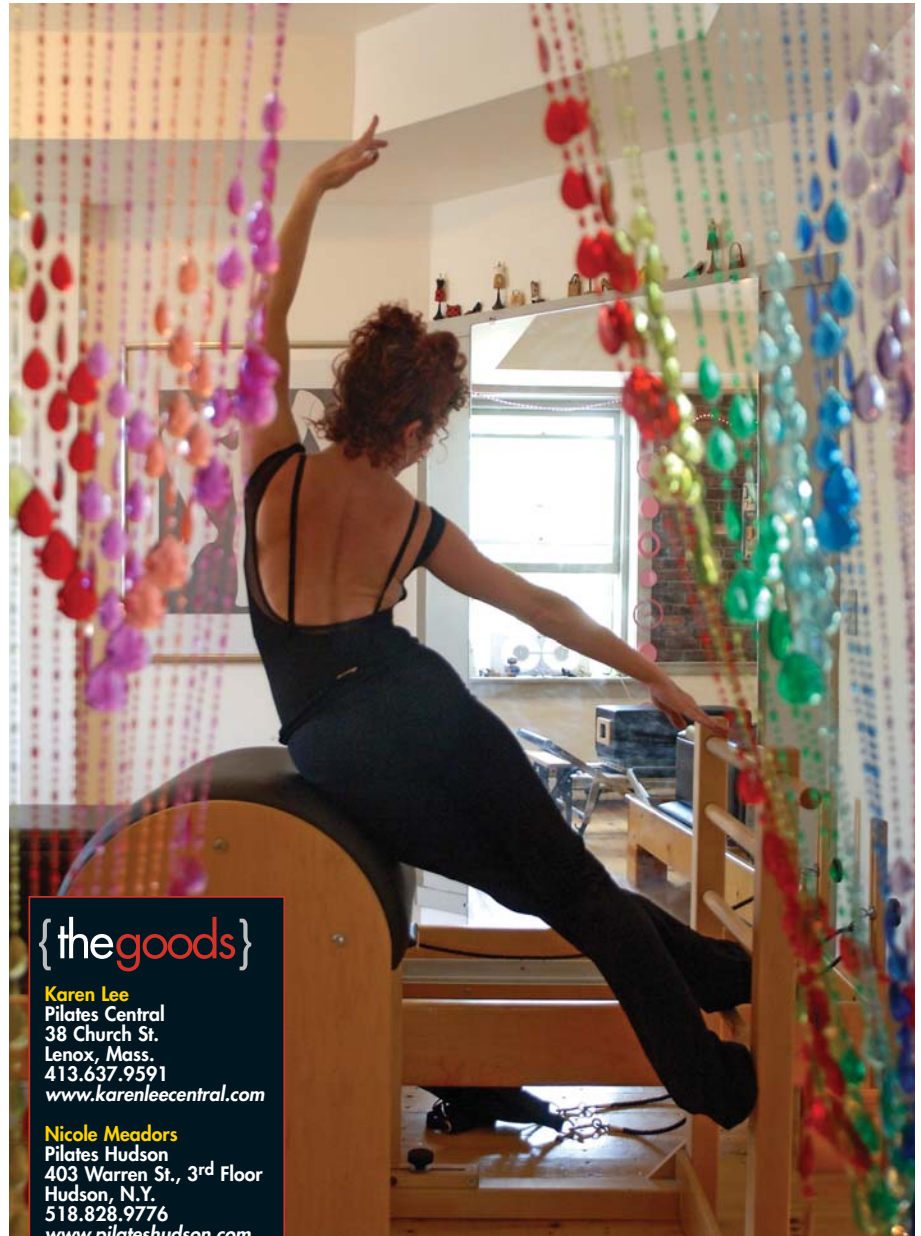
Made up of more than five hundred exercises that isolate different muscles, Pilates is the buzzword at the gym after years of being the sweetest and snobbiest secret of professional dancers, performers, and bohemians. Now it's practiced pretty much everywhere—in an institutional gymnasium like the one at Simon's Rock College in Great Barrington, Massachusetts; in a scented spa room at Canyon Ranch; atop pink pillows at Karen Lee's Pilates Central; or among Persian carpets and padded floors in an old-fashioned New York City brownstone similar to Joe Pilates's original studio—and offers an addictive regimen that is actually an enjoyable method of exercise.

"Pilates is a fantastic system," says Uli Nagel, a tall, relaxed instructor who teaches private clients in a tranquil, spare room at Foxhollow, a spiritual community in Lenox. In her soft-spoken German accent, she says, "One can see people transform. Joseph Pilates was brilliant." Nagel says her clients pay more attention to

their bodies and have more confidence. "People feel anchored," she says. Nagel moved to the Berkshires from Australia where among other things she ran an alternative video store, operated a flower farm, taught German, and practiced years of bodywork and massage.

Besides being a rigorous and graceful artistic discipline, Pilates can also be therapeutic, gentle, and restorative. In her practice, Sharon True, an instructor in Great Barrington and the mother of twin twelve-year-olds, concentrates on rehabilitation, using creative problem-solving for people who have injuries or other physical challenges. "I'm very motivated by the healing aspects of Pilates, but I really get a charge out of physical challenges too." As a movement analyst she's learned to recognize how tension flows through the body. Her work is gentle, sometimes slow, and supportive.

A Canyon Ranch veteran, True incorporates other movement therapies, such as Laban movement analysis, massage, and mind/body healing. In weekly mat classes at Simon's Rock and in her private practice, she emphasizes balancing. Her teaching addresses holding patterns as she works to unblock the body from negative energies and tension. True is not alone in her healing approach.



{ thegoods }

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Major sports-medicine professionals, chiropractors, and physical therapists incorporate Pilates into their work.

True says that her older, sometimes skeptical clients are most inspirational. “The transformations one continues to have—it’s the discovery, for my older clients, that [they’re] not all washed up.”

Whether your passion is spinning, skiing, skydiving, or Pilates, if you love the high, the satisfaction, the physical transformation that comes with it, you’ll likely keep doing it. Exercise changes the body, but with Pilates, the end product is less about the models you see in pictures than the joy and motivation it brings.

“Stepping inside Karen’s door takes me completely out of the ordinary world,” says Dana Bixby, an architect from West Stockbridge, Massachusetts, who calls Lee’s studio “Pilates Heaven.” “It’s a chance to connect, rather than escape, the link between the mind and the body.” And clients like Bixby are what keep a little lady like Lee going, too. Brushing her fingers against one of the pink paper mobiles that hangs from the Cadillac—a raised bed with steel springs and furry foot loops—Lee confesses, “I love what I do.” As the shapes drift and dangle, she sits quietly, smiling, like a kid in a candy store. **BL**

Nicole Meadors is a freelance writer, certified Pilates instructor, and owner of the Pilates Hudson studio in Hudson, New York.