



PHOTO CREDIT: STAFF

**SALSA INSTRUCTOR** Tomaj Trena dances with Walnut Creek resident Terri Franklin during a dance class at the Lafayette Community Center. The center is just one of the many venues that offers salsa lessons.

## Spicy salsa breaks down barriers

■ Sexy dance is going mainstream in Lamorinda and Walnut Creek

By Janice De Jesus

STAFF WRITER

It was cold outside, but inside Sates Supper Club in Walnut Creek, it was sizzling.

Tuesdays, Sates transforms into "Salsa Lounge," where couples

and singles eagerly walk in dressed in their nightlife best at 8:30 p.m., ready to dance. For an hour, hips move back and forth, steps are quick and slow as there is a constant changing of partners.

After the salsa lessons, under the dimmed lights, with African, Cuban, Brazilian rhythms filling the room, couples swirl and move sensually to the music.

But at 7 p.m. on Fridays, couples

practice basic steps in a more casual setting at Lafayette Community Center taught by Tomaj Trena who's determined to get his students salsa-confident for the dance floor.

Rick Walton grew up with "hard rock" dancing but longed to learn partner dancing. He's traveled to the Caribbean, speaks Spanish and has always had an affinity for Latin music.

One day, he and his girlfriend decided they wanted to try learning salsa.

"We thought it would be really fun to do together as a couple," says Walton, 51.

So they started taking lessons at the Lafayette Community Center where classes started forming last summer. After six

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### SPOTLIGHT

## Salsa instructor teaches from deep in the heart

By Janice De Jesus

STAFF WRITER

Being a champion swimmer, diver and wrestler before going on to modern dance made Tomaj Trena aware of natural body movement.

Entranced by salsa scene and dancing while visiting Vancouver, Trena vowed to spread the passion of the dance as far as he could.

"The band was unbelievable," he recalls the music performed by 17-piece salsa band. "The skill level of dancing, the excitement and the passion blew me away."

So he learned about salsa dancing wherever he was — Los Angeles and Mexico, to name a few places. Eventually, he acquired enough skills to teach salsa in Maui in 1998.



THE SAN FRANCISCO

**SALSA INSTRUCTOR**, Tomaj Trena (center), leading a class at the Lafayette Community Center, knew he wanted to be a major player in the West Coast salsa scene.

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# Personal style

How I stay fit



## TOMAJ TREDA

**AGE:** 47

**HEIGHT:** 5 foot 6

**WEIGHT:** 140 pounds

**PERSONAL:** Single, lives in Emeryville

**OCCUPATION:** Dancer and salsa instructor

**BACKGROUND:** As a pre-med student, Trenda discovered a passion for dance that changed his life. Once a week, he would go western-swing dancing and take a modern dance course. He was so taken with the latter style, he changed his major to modern dance and movement education.

Trenda became a professional dancer and spent 15 years in Seattle, where he was a member of the Robert Davidson Company, Men at Play and Catch This Performance Company, among others. He also started to teach dance. Seven years ago, he discovered salsa dancing — and a new love.

"Salsa is a favorite form of dance because it's very playful and passionate," he says. "And I adore the music. It's very exciting and alive musically."

Salsa, a fast-paced partner dance, has gained popularity because of its easy learning curve and constant evolution. In just a couple of classes, one can learn enough basic steps to get out on the floor and have fun, Trenda says.

Trenda has started a dance studio, Salsa with Tomaj, where he teaches nine classes a week and also offers private lessons. All together, he spends up to two hours dancing six days a week. When he's not teaching, you can usually find him hitting Cafe Cocomo's in San Francisco or other clubs for even more dancing.

**DIET:** A low-fat diet made up of two meals and one protein shake a day. He also pays attention to calorie restrictions and

compares labels when he's food shopping.

**BOREDOM BEATER:** "I continue to take classes, buy instructional videos, learn new stuff."

**MOOD MUSIC:** Africando, an African salsa band

**SECRET WEAPON:** "I usually try to keep some citrus fruit or a couple of apples on hand. If my energy is low and dragging a bit, I eat a couple of oranges and I'm good to go."

**GUILTY PLEASURE:** A glass of red wine

**BEST BODY PART:** Chest

**BENEFITS:** "I get a great workout without feeling like I'm exercising. When I'm dancing, I'm really having fun. I get social time with other people. The more I dance, the more relaxed I feel about life. It's stress-reducing."

**ESSENTIAL GEAR:** A pair of good dancing shoes and loose, comfortable clothes

**OBSTACLES:** "Injuries. If I dance too much or don't listen to my body and don't modify the dancing, the injury will get worse and I have to back off."

**TIPS:** "Find a really good instructor and a dance partner. Those are the two most important things. And stick with the teacher and do an ongoing series of classes."

— Kristina Nicholas

*How do you stay in shape? Whether it's running, rock climbing, salsa dancing or thrice-daily meditation, we want to know. Write to Kristina Nicholas, Mercury News, 750 Ridder Park Drive, San Jose, Calif. 95129; or e-mail knicholas@mercurynews.com. Include a full-body photo or jpeg of yourself in workout mode.*



**Tomaj Trenda** and **Alexandra Fiske** sizzle while dancing the hot and spicy salsa.

# Feel the Heat

Between two people, actions sometimes speak louder than words, and dance can give spectacular voice to your body. Three minutes of Argentinian tango, hip-swiveling salsa, or disco inferno hustle can break down more barriers than a week of dinner dates.

## TANGO

Don't be intimidated by the Argentinian tango's show-biz stereotype of a glossy, red-blooded pair vamping acrobatically across a dance floor. The Argentine tango is essentially a walking dance, albeit one that requires absolute precision.

Tango music, always featuring the accordion-like *bandoneón*, can at first be hard to follow. There are no drums to speak of. "All the rhythm is created from the melody and how it's played," says **Tomaj Trenda**, who teaches private tango and other group dance classes for city recreation districts in Lafayette, Danville, Concord, and Antioch (415-505-3536, [www.salsawithtomaj.com](http://www.salsawithtomaj.com)). "You're riding the melody of the music, not the drums."

What makes the Argentinian tango one of the most tender, spontaneous, and

intensely beautiful dances is that it's improvised. "When you dance salsa or swing, you have a basic rhythmical pattern that you stick with," says **Marcelo Solis**, who teaches tango in Lafayette, Walnut Creek, and Oakland (925-299-6945, [www.marcelosolis.com](http://www.marcelosolis.com)). "But in tango, you're free. You get to improvise and create all the time."

**ALSO CHECK OUT: Dance Masters.** 5 Country Club Plaza, Orinda, (925) 254-7272, [www.orindadancemasters.com](http://www.orindadancemasters.com); **Demetrius Gonzalez, Jingtowntango.** 2639 E. 9th St., No. 4, Oakland, (510) 757-7545, [www.sonic.net/~demet/jingtowntango](http://www.sonic.net/~demet/jingtowntango).

## SALSA

This dance is hot, and it's become one of the most popular partner dances in the East Bay. "Salsa clubs are springing up all over the Bay Area," says **Tomaj Trenda**, who also teaches

group classes in salsa.

A very close descendant of the mambo, the spicy, energetic salsa follows a simple quick-quick-slow rhythm. The steps are compact, quick, and playful. "It is very flirtatious," says **Kurt Senser**, co-owner of Dublin's **Rhythm Street Dance Studio** (6635-D Dublin Blvd., 925-833-2559, [www.rsdance.com](http://www.rsdance.com)).

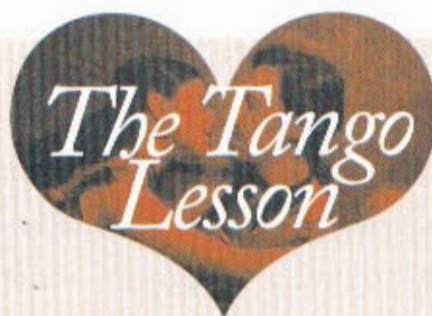
The most basic moves look impressive—even without turns or fancy footwork—making it one of the simplest partner dances to learn. Most of the Latin dances share the same backbone. If you master salsa, you shouldn't have much difficulty adding the cha-cha and the merengue to your repertoire.

It helps that salsa music, generous with the brass and rhythm, is the toe-tingling, can't-sit-still kind of stuff. "It has a lot of African and Brazilian influences," says **Evie**

"ARGENTINE TANGO IS LIKE A contrived love affair between two people," whispers **Alex Pappas**. "The couple moves as one. They say nothing. All the conversation is done with the movement of their bodies."

Strangers to dance and wordless conversation, my husband and I listen apprehensively to our tiny tango teacher. It's hard to imagine us, with our Northern European heritage, pulling off such feats of Latin spiciness. But we're here to learn. "You must learn to move like a panther," says Pappas. "Close to the ground and with heavy feet."

With knees bent—and my husband as close to the floor as his 6-foot-4-inch frame will allow—we pad our first tango steps. I move forward with my left foot, he back with his right; we step to my right and take two steps back, landing—if we're lucky—



with my left foot crossed neatly over my right for the count of five.

Locked in an embrace and with our noses almost touching (for that is how the tango is danced), we have difficulty maintaining the tango intensity. Giggles and apologies abound. We throw a couple of *ochos* into the mix: a step where the man opens the embrace, cueing his partner to do a sexy pivoting move.

Are there flashes of tango brilliance? It's difficult to tell when you're trying hard not to knock knees, but one thing's certain: we

don't much resemble Pappas as he glides expertly across the floor with his partner. As we watch, they show how the tango is a surprisingly subtle and understated dance. The steps are small, the embrace soft. The somber music feeds their dance a sensuous melancholy that leaves onlookers unable to avert their eyes, though they feel they should. "I've never seen a dance that evokes more deep emotions in people than this one," says Pappas. "It's like a love lost or not yet found; not a sexual hunger, but like the soul is crying out for love that is elusive or unrequited."

Pappas is right. Few dances ooze such pensive passion. My husband and I bid our farewells, and we take our beginner's tango home to practice.

*Alex Pappas teaches group and private classes in Pleasant Hill (925-933-5743).*

"I just wanna dance the night away / with señoritas who can sway" —THE MAVERICKS