HEALTH

From big to boutique

Palo Alto gyms ditch the big-box mindset for community and personalization

by Karishma Mehrotra

Christophe Haubursin

Lit by blacklights, trainer Lissy Stalter walks through the aisle of Uforia Studios' underground cycling room to the raging beat of dance music in July. The fitness center, based in a repurposed church, takes a group approach to working out.

Outside of a naturally lit, renovated church with original hardwood floors and stained-glass windows on Ramona Street, people gathered on the steps.

They were laughing boisterously, and they were sweating. They weren't standing outside a church, but instead, their gym, Uforia.

Like several other local gyms, Uforia is part of a national trend: fitness centers that forgo the large warehouses with rows and rows of sometimes-daunting exercise equipment for the focused fitness regimens and personalized appeal of "boutique gyms."

Members "want people who know their names," Uforia owner Sarah Lux said. "They don't want to go into a club that is awkward and people don't acknowledge them."

The boutique fitness experience "is definitely, definitely growing."

Lux may be on to something. One of 2013's major fitness trends is "the rise of specialty gyms," according to Shape Magazine, a monthly women's fitness publication.

"Both franchised small studios ... and independently owned boutique gyms are popping up nationwide, as the trend has expanded beyond major metropolitan areas," the article states.

The 2008 recession favored the growth of small-budget studios with fewer amenities over "all-inclusive gyms," according to IBISWorld, a market-analysis firm.

Clubs smaller than 20,000 square feet had an 81 percent membership retention rate while the largest clubs had a 70 percent rate in 2008, the Los Angeles Times reported. Membership at smaller clubs saw an 11.3 percent net increase while largest clubs saw a 0.7 percent decline in 2008, the Times stated.

Owners of Palo Alto's small gyms have seen this growth. Noxcuses upgraded from a modest 1,000-square-foot space to a 6,000-foot location on Middlefield Road five years ago. Downtown's FORM Fitness made a similar move in 2005, from a 3,000-square-foot space to an 8,000-square-foot one on Bryant Street. FORM's owner said the gym also recently doubled its number of trainers and opened a new location in Oakhurst, a Northern California city near Fresno.

And Lux said Uforia's client base grew 280 percent from 2011 to 2013. Its new 3,000-square-foot location has about 25 employees and offers 50 Zumba, cycling, aerobic and strength fitness classes a week.

At Uforia, boutique fitness doesn't just mean complimentary towel rolls, cucumber water and fresh fruit after every class — although all that is included. It also means instructors with professional dance backgrounds, a concierge who knows all clients by name and themed classes such as wedding or Gangnam style. Lux said Uforia's classes have created close groups of friends who go out for yogurt after class, forgetting about their strenuous workouts.

"A boutique fitness studio is very different from a gym. There are only classes here. You are never going to be alone here," she said. "To me, that's a big distinction from a gym where there is open equipment and you can just kind of do your own thing and put your music in and not really interact."

Even though FORM Fitness owner Sassan Golafshan agrees, don't be quick to call FORM a boutique gym.

"It would break my heart if people thought of us as 'boutique' although I could understand the misconception," Golafshan said, cautioning that the term "boutique" is overly elitist. "That's not us. ... The essence of this place is about average Joes just like (the small gym) in the movie 'Dodgeball.'"

Some may rethink the "average" part after looking at the price tag for small gym membership. While an adult can join YMCA Page Mill for $65 a month with an additional enrollment fee or one of Mountain View's 24 Hour Fitnesses for $40 to $60 a month, Uforia offers monthly passes for $130. FORM charges from $60 to $129 in monthly fees, not including the initiation fee, and Noxcuses monthly memberships range from $79 for individuals to $179 for families.

Golafshan cautions fitness consumers to not just look at the price. In fact, FORM does not post prices on its website. Golafshan wants people to come to the gym and "see what they're paying for."

"It's not like we're buying books on Amazon, where a book is a book. I always say that people need to come in and get a smell and feel for the place to know that 'For this amount, this is what I'm getting.'"

Golafshan added that FORM prices are adjusted by location (for example, FORM's Oakhurst location charges $49 a month).

"You live here for a reason," he said of Palo Alto. "It's not like we are charging a fee that residents of Palo Alto cannot pay. ... As consumers, we expect everything to be cheap without really paying attention to what the costs are for this service to be at (our) disposal."

Golafshan said two main costs elevate membership fees for his gym and many others like his. One, they are located in areas with more expensive rent, while big-box gyms choose areas with "dirt-cheap" rent. Two, they reward their employees with higher wages in order to not "kill the personal touch," Golafshan said.

Lux acknowledged that there will always be a market for bigger, corporate gyms like 24 Hour Fitness and Gold's Gym. But there is something different stirring in Palo Alto, she said.

"There is something about being community-driven in a tech-centric space that is very special," Lux said. "A lot of our clients ... don't necessarily get that sense of community in their day jobs."

Barbara Hoskinson is one of those clients.

"After going to work all day, instead of doing something else, people run over to Uforia," said the 50-plus designer, who drives from Woodside for Uforia classes five days a week, even though she has seven other gym options nearby.

"God, I just love it. I will never *not* go there," she said. "I'm like, 'That is my gym.'"

Hoskinson can call in if she is running late for a class, and they will save her spot. She can go out for coffee with a couple of the teachers. She can send them a song request through Facebook that they will integrate into their next class. And, after every Friday class, she sits on the steps and chats with others, sipping wine and "skinny" cocktails.

"It's more than just going to exercise. ... I actually wanna go because it feels very intimate," she said.

Golafshan has seen similar commitment in his clients. The former semiconductor salesman — nicknamed Sass, Sassy and Susan by others at FORM — said one member, an 82-year-old retired architect whom members nicknamed Uncle Fred, has attended every Zumba class since 2008.

There is an emphasis on retention at Noxcuses as well. Owner Angie Degeronimo said that members stick around because they learn to integrate fitness into every aspect of their life. She holds an initial consultation ("a lifestyle interview") and quarterly check-ins with every client where she asks questions that many members haven't even begun to think about.

"What is the big picture of your life? And how can we set you up to succeed in it?" Degeronimo says to clients. "As opposed to 'Sign a waiver and get on a machine.' It's much more comprehensive and lifestyle, wellness-integrated."

That psychological component, she said, drives true behavior modification.

"They have the understanding that, 'Oh, I don't just do this short term. This is like my dentist appointments, like my haircuts.' I see retention."

Like Lux, Degeronimo said Noxcuses members find camaraderie through fitness.

"This is their one hour where it's about (them) and their connection to friends," Degeronimo said.

But the group training is not for all. San Jose State University student Caitlin Warmack-Tirador has been going to the Mountain View 24 Hour Fitness for nearly four years to train for softball during the off-season.

"It's convenient because it's open 24 hours a day, it's relatively cheap and they're located all over," she said.

She said she disregarded smaller gyms because of the price and the emphasis on group training.

On the other hand, Noxcuses member Alison Crane and many of her friends sought out a smaller, less crowded gym after going to a big gym for half a decade.

Degeronimo said she gives clients what they are interested in.

"They are looking for education," she said. "They are looking for self-care. They are looking for a little bit of pampering." ■

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> ***—Sarah Lux, owner, Uforia***

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Form Fitness instructor Marcus Romo sits in on Emily Adams' session at The Annex, the fitness center's smaller offsite gym, on July 17.

About the cover: Shadowboxing with dual weights, Form Fitness member Whitney Woods keeps up the pace during one of trainer Emily Adams' routines at the gym's The Annex. Photo by Christophe Haubursin.