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BUSINESS

Belly Up to a Healthy Bar this Year

Jessica Prasse brings the Bar Method of ballet-inspired exercise to St. Louis.

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Losing weight and getting healthy can often be found at the top of many New Year's resolution lists. Jessica Prasse wants to show St. Louis gym goers that you can get in shape this year without breaking a sweat or taking huge chunks of time out of your day. To do so, she opened the first St. Louis [Bar Method](#) studio in October, located in Town and Country Crossings. The method promises students a long lean "dancer's" body, but without all the sweat.

"You can get a good workout without sweating," said Prasse. "Sweating has nothing to do with changing your body."

The Bar Method is a low impact workout that uses stretching, hand weights and a few props, like a cross between Pilates and ballet training.

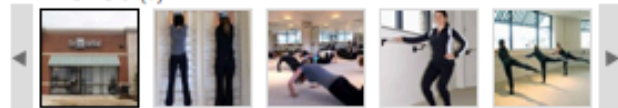
Prasse first learned of the Bar Method while she lived in San Francisco, where the technique is extremely popular. She studied under Burr Leonard, founder of the Bar Method, and soon became an instructor. Prasse said that Leonard prefers to offer franchises to students she personally trains and that her business degree made her a perfect candidate to open a studio of her own.

She chose to locate the Bar Method in Town and Country for a number of reasons. Though she moved away from St. Louis when she was 18-years-old, she still has family in Chesterfield and felt comfortable with West County. She looked at studio space on Manchester Road, but didn't want to deal with the traffic. She also likes having her studio near a [Whole Foods Market](#) and feels that women in the area would appreciate the workout Bar Method can provide. About half of Prasse's clients are from the surrounding area, though some drive from as far away as Illinois to attend classes.

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The studio has natural light from two walls of windows, and when combined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors and a white floor, the room is very bright and airy. Ballet bars with enough space for 25 students are bolted around the perimeter. The studio floor is an extra springy Berber carpet where students are asked to work out in sock feet without mats. The floor isn't just plush—it has a gymnastic grade underlayment, required for safety reasons by the corporate office.

The locker room is co-ed and there are no showers—though the restroom does offer privacy and ample space should anyone need to change their clothes. A Bar Method workout is slow paced, so students are not expected to get messy. Prasse said the 60-minute classes fit her client's lifestyles, allowing them to get in a workout and then continue their day without a fuss.

Floor quality and bar spacing aren't the only things corporate requires of Prasse. She must maintain her skills by teaching—and taking—Bar Method classes. She is also subject to quarterly reviews.

Prasse's students are mostly women in their 20's to late 40's, though she has a handful of men who take the class. The low impact workout is appealing to a wide range of people, including former dancers, athletes with stressed knees and newbies who like being able to use a ballet bar.

"Ex-dancers love it, they're flexible and they love being next to a ballet bar. But you don't have to be all that coordinated, because it's not dance," Prasse said.

She says the workout can be tailored for expectant mothers and she will be offering a special pregnancy package soon.

Prasse hired three female instructors and trained them in her home while the studio was under construction. One of the instructors is a former ballerina who also teaches children's dance, while another is an at home mom who began learning the Bar Method while she was pregnant. The third instructor teaches two early morning classes before heading off to her day job as an attorney. Instructors must also take classes to stay fit and hone their own teaching skills.

Prasse already has a database of 400 customers despite only being open for three months. She said many clients found her through the internet or by word of mouth.

"From day one the classes had five people—I just ask the customers to spread the word. It is a testimony to the quality of the product. People bring their friends," she said.

Clients can [sign up](#), [schedule and pay for classes online](#)—which Prasse feels is convenient for her students while also eliminating the need to hire a full time receptionist.

"My fear is getting too big--because you don't want to turn anyone away." She is already eyeing Clayton as a possible location for her second studio.



The Business Break-Down

By [Denise Bertacchi](#) | [Email the author](#) | January 4, 2011