

CECILIA VILLALOBOS'

SALSA FUEGO

by Nick Walker

At Costa Verde, even the beginner salsa classes move pretty fast. Instructor and choreographer Cecilia Villalobos has a reputation for pushing her students and she doesn't like to break down every step.

You'll have to pay close attention to each new turn because, before you know it, she's already adding another combination. But if you really find yourself lost, just ask one of the members of Villalobos' dance group, Salsa Fuego, for help.

"Before Ceci, I had never tried salsa classes," says Jasmine Vializ, who recently moved to Miami but performed with Salsa Fuego for several years. "When I danced with Ceci it was a huge commitment—I attended all the classes and all the rehearsals—and I saw an improvement in only a few weeks. It was so intense."

"Ceci is very professional—she's strict," says Glenda Olmeda, who first performed with Salsa Fuego at The Salsa Room's Halloween party in 2008. "You have to be very precise. Sloppiness is not an option. You practice until you get it right."



Originally from Perú, Villalobos moved to the United States in 1996, launching Salsa Fuego almost immediately. The group has six dancers and performs about 8 to 10 shows a year. Four years ago, Villalobos also started a local female student group called Chicas Fuego.

Before moving to D.C., Villalobos lived in Sao Paolo, Brazil, where she earned a dance degree and danced with the Sao Paulo Dance Company.

"I studied Argentine Tango, hip hop, ballroom, salsa, cha cha cha, modern, jazz, samba, capoeira, and lambada," Villalobos says.

When she came to D.C., Villalobos started teaching at the Virginia Ballroom, now known as Elan Dance Sport Center. "I started teaching On1, then On2 started. I teach both, but if you're having fun, you can dance On1 through 8—sometimes

you have to anyway, to follow your partner. You dance with your heart."

If you have trouble feeling the rhythm of each song, Villalobos suggests learning to play a musical instrument.

"Whenever someone has a little musical experience, it's easier for them to follow the music. Try the timbales, conga, guitar, piano, whatever—it's just for fun. Take lessons for three to four months."



Villalobos' first performance in the U.S. was at Nick's Nightclub in Alexandria. Soon after, she was performing at the Smithsonian and the Kennedy Center, alongside well-known salsa acts such as Victor Manuel, Tito Nieves, Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, Gilberto Santa Rosa, and José Alberto "El Canario."

One performance Villalobos will never forget came at the Peruvian Festival on July 26, 2002 while on stage with the salsa band El Gran Combo. She remembers the exact date because she was nine months pregnant with her daughter, Mariah, and gave birth later that night.

At her home in Alexandria, Villalobos has converted her basement to a dance studio complete with wooden floors and wall-to-wall mirrors. Most of the time she teaches private lessons, but the members of Salsa Fuego come by to practice on the weekend.

Villalobos estimates she is currently teaching about 150 people between her home studio and Thursday nights at Costa Verde. Some of her well-known former students include Abdul Al-Ali, Karen Aguilar, Galileo López, and Earl Rush.

She teaches others you won't run into at the clubs—a group of five boys and twelve girls ages 6 through 12. "They are already through the basics, and they are going to be performing next year," she says. "With kids, it's about making it fun." She even tried teaching salsa to 3 and 4 year-olds, but found that it was too difficult to

keep the kids focused at such a young age.

Salsa Fuego performed in Perú in 2006, for the country's first ever Salsa Congress. Next year, Villalobos plans to take 30 to 40 students to Machu Picchu for five to six days, hopefully for the Corona Festival, she says, to go clubbing and to perform.

Sometimes charitable groups will ask Salsa Fuego to perform at their fundraisers, and Villalobos tries to be helpful. Salsa Fuego has participated at several events to benefit victims of leukemia, for example.

"When I was in Brazil, the first thing my mentor told me was to be humble;

give a little of what you have," Villalobos says.

Villalobos currently is working on a new set of instructional DVDs featuring intermediate and advanced salsa lessons. Until then, you can learn the moves directly from her at the recently re-launched Thursday salsa nights at Costa Verde.



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