



Madison Kennedy leads a class at Hilliard Studio Method in Charlotte. **Mark Hames** mhames@charlotteobserver.com

The \$30 workout: Charlotte is exploding with high-end fitness studios

BY KATHERINE PERALTA

kperalta@charlotteobserver.com

SEPTEMBER 13, 2017 6:00 AM

Liz Hilliard knew 2008 was a risky year to start a business – let alone one that falls into an “I don’t really have to do it” category like fitness, she says.

But that year she and her daughter, Clary, still launched Hilliard Studio Method, a Pilates-like regimen that incorporates weights and resistance

training. The Myers Park studio exploded in popularity, garnering almost a cult-like following right away.

“That to me said everything. People are willing to make a sacrifice for their health,” Hilliard said. She and Clary opened their [second location](#) last summer in Davidson, and launched a sister concept called HSM | Core, which just opened its [second location](#) in Stonecrest earlier this summer.

From home-grown concepts like Hilliard Studio Method to well-known national chains like [OrangeTheory](#), new high-end, boutique fitness studios have been popping up all over Charlotte in recent years. And their fast growth suggests Charlotteans are willing to pay premium for fitness.

Data show the interest in boutique studios spreads well beyond Charlotte.

From 2012 to 2015, membership surged by over 70 percent at fitness studios across the U.S., according to the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association. Over the same period, membership at traditional fitness clubs grew by 5 percent, and dropped by 12 percent at non-profits like the YMCA.

The explosive growth of posh fitness studios comes at a time when consumer brands of all kinds are feverishly chasing millennial dollars, analyzing their spending habits and trying to figure out how to win them over. Young Americans, in particular, are doling out less of their cash on cable and at department stores, and [more on fitness](#) and technology.

A single class at Hilliard Studio Method is \$27, according to the company’s website, but Hilliard says not all of her clients are necessarily wealthy. Their spending shows they’re choosy and looking for a long-term investment in their well-being.

“People in Charlotte are super smart,” Hilliard said. “They’re driven to get it done with results.”



Liz Hilliard leads an exercise class at Hilliard Studio Method in July 2014.
TODD SUMLIN tsumlin@charlotteobserver.com

Owners of boutique fitness studios say clients aren't just paying for the workout itself.

Hilliard describes a sense of community at her studios – instructors get to know people taking their classes and avail themselves after class to answer questions about nutrition and injuries, for instance.

Technology is a big selling point at [OrangeTheory](#) Fitness, the [fast-growing](#) concept that offers 60-minute interval workouts during which participants use heart-rate monitors to track their intensity. A 60-minute drop-in OrangeTheory class is \$28.

Husband-and-wife duo Chris and Kelli Narveson are opening their [second OrangeTheory studio](#) in Fort Mill's Kingsley shopping center this weekend.

Kelli Narveson says OrangeTheory's corporate research team had planned to open eight studios in five years when the company first came here in 2014. Instead, her Fort Mill location is the brand's ninth Charlotte studio in three years.

“The nice thing about OrangeTheory is numbers,” said Narveson, a longtime runner, of the heart-rate monitor technology. “I had just plateaued when I was just running.”

Another boost to boutique fitness studios’ image? Local celebrity athletes seem to favor them, too.

Carolina Panthers linebacker Thomas Davis got hooked on HSM | Core in Stonecrest with his wife, Kelly, this past summer, and started requesting a reserved spot for his teammates, Hilliard said. Former Panthers wide receiver Steve Smith takes OrangeTheory classes at the Arboretum. Panthers tight end Greg Olsen takes Flywheel, which offers drop-in cycle classes for \$28, with his wife, Kara, during the off season.

Customers of fitness studios tend to be in the 18-25 range, according to the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, although most Charlotte studios say their customer base ranges in age. Hilliard offered a surprising take on one factor driving Charlotte’s high-end fitness craze.

“Vanity can lead to a very healthy lifestyle. It can encourage and motivate you to get you to a gym and to consider what you’re putting into your body is good or not,” she said.

As the area’s economy continues to strengthen, growth in boutique fitness studios in Charlotte is also showing no signs of slowing.

[Fit Atelier](#), a fitness and retail boutique, opened last month in Dilworth by offering a celebrity trainer-led class for \$30 in partnership with Hilliard Studio Method. [Cyclebar](#), which calls itself a “luxury boutique fitness franchise” has new locations in midtown and Waverly and offers 50-minute classes for a drop-in rate of \$24. This summer in SouthPark, two Charlotte entrepreneurs opened [Vibe5](#), which has drop-in classes for \$20.

“That kind of competition gives us all a boost. I’m not competing with CorePower Yoga or OrangeTheory. I’m hoping it gives more credence to the boutique workout,” Hilliard said.

Many fitness studios are quick to point out they offer freebies for newcomers and deals for committed customers.

That's the case with newcomer CorePower Yoga, a Colorado company that opened its first studio at Park Road Shopping Center this year and has another planned in midtown.

CorePower offers a week of free, unlimited classes for first timers. After that, a single class is \$22, and a "black tag" membership, which includes unlimited classes and special discounts, is \$139 a month.

Andrew Nesi, CorePower's senior vice president of growth, says the Park Road studio has been one of the company's most successful new locations.

"As we evaluated new markets for CorePower Yoga, Charlotte immediately rose to the top of the list with its incredibly vibrant community and emphasis on healthy, active living as evidenced by the popularity of things like the Rail Trail," Nesi said.