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One, two, three–five, six, seven. One, two, three–five, six seven. Hips sway, skirts swish. One, two, three–five, six, seven. We’re all bound by count yet free to explore a rhythm all our own.

The room is hot, the air heavy with music, and the pulse of the couples thumps–ba, ba, ba–ba, ba. It feels as though everyone in the room is on the dance floor,

Me, the beat, and my two left feet.

By Olivia Gunn
Master Class

**Primo Cubano** Check primocubano.com for dates.

**Pearl** 442 Fore St. Thursday nights: Intermediate lessons at 7:15, Beginners at 8, $5. pearloldport.com

**Avant** 865 Spring St., Westbrook. Group lessons every third Saturday of the month, 8-9 p.m., $10. Latin dancing 9-midnight with DJs Johnny Mambo. avantmaine.com

**Empire** 575 Congress St. Check portlandempire.com for dates.

**Maine Ballroom Dance** 614 Congress St. Salsa, Oct. 14, 8-9:30 p.m., $20/couple. maineballroomdancing.com

but if you look closely—no, not there but back here, testing the water—you’ll find me.

I’ve wanted to be part of this scene since the day I arrived at Empire to see Primo Cubano and walked into a room full of vibrant salsa dancers, a completely unexpected thrill. They twirled and shuffled across the floor, disguising mistakes as shines or personal quirks. *Salsa* was like abstract art to me, colorful and erotic, but I could only visit the gallery so many times before I’d need to paint myself.

That’s when I call Wendy Edwards, *doña* of the Portland salsa mafia. She arrives around 7:30 p.m. and doesn’t waste a minute. With her mixed CD playing, she begins, and I simply follow. She claims having two babies back-to-back has slowed down her social dancing, but believe me, Wendy’s still got it.
Members of the dance troupe Rumba y Timbal perform at Pearl. In the photos at right and on the following page, Portland’s salsa mafia—a loose band of ringers and enthusiastic newcomers—takes over the floor at Pearl.

“You’re nervous.”

“I’m not comfortable with people.” She takes no note of this. Before I can misstep, she leads me into a turn. “Always back with your right. On forward, we’ll turn.”

As she leaves, I ask Wendy what to do if someone asks me to dance.

“Unless they’re hurting you or hitting on you, don’t be rude.” With that, she’s gone. I’m left feeling like Cinderella as her fairy godmother fades into thin air.

STEPPING OUT

“You don’t have to salsa, you just have to move.” Olivia Crupi, 24 and all smiles, coaxes everyone onto the floor. Now it’s my turn. Though I know my basic steps, there’s still that overwhelming feeling that all eyes will be on me and my two left feet.

Primo Cubano is hot tonight, and for a Thursday, Empire has pulled in a decent number of regulars. Olivia points out one of the fancier couples. “That’s Colleen and Fred. They’re dance partners. And married. You’ll see them at El Rayo.”

An hour or two and a beer or more into the night, I’m out on the floor with my girls. There’s plenty of room, but I’m close to the stage, listening for the counts. Back, together, forward, together. I even toss in a few side
steps all my own. It feels good, and I’ve come to the conclusion that if they’re watching me, I must be doing something interesting.

**CHIPS AND SALSA**

“It’s not even raining,” says Ryan, looking up as fierce clouds roll in above us. El Rayo has cancelled, and four very antsy dancers are left with nowhere to cha-cha-cha.

“Well,” Olivia smiles, “we can always go to Brendan’s.”

It’s humid in the third-story apartment, and the fan seems to blow back only hot air, but there with the mattress pushed against the wall and heat lightning striking outside, we dance. Ryan, handsome and warm, leads Cheena, a fun-loving beauty, in *bachata*. And it’s here—with no lights, stage, or DJ—that I come closest to the roots of *salsa*.

The week ends at Pearl, with a quick $5 lesson from Wendy before I’m out on the floor and actually being asked to dance. I’m thrilled to come across everyone I’ve met on this adventure—Brendan, Olivia, Liz—they’re all here on the dance floor with me.

Cultures, ages, and sexes collide on this canvas and each song brings a new stroke: *merengue*, *bachata*, or *salsa*. There is a purpose tonight. It’s not leaving with someone, it’s not outshining or even drinking. We’re all here to dance because we just can’t stop and no one wants to wait for tomorrow.

The dance scene will never be big enough for the truly passionate ones like Colleen and Fred, Olivia, and Wendy. They’d be happy for a big *salsa* wave in Portland, to have a spot for every night of the week. But I’m a tiny fish in this pond, so I’ll just keep stepping back with my right and *forward* with my left any chance I get.
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