

Diva Lounge: City style in New Jersey

Continued from D1

foyer, with its dark red walls with copper highlights and tea light chandeliers hanging overhead. Ob-long sofas and high-back chairs covered in velvet sit around little drink tables often displaying "reserved" placards.

Walk up the wheelchair ramp to the bar area. Like any good bar, this one has a small ledge to prop up a foot, cowboy style. Past the bar is the dance floor. The spacious room has a quasi-colonial feel: Old San Juan meets Pier One Imports. It has tall black ceilings, two faux stained glass windows and walls painted to resemble stonework. A small "VIP" room is off to the side.

The club uses themed nights to draw different crowds: live jazz on Wednesdays, salsa and reggaeton on Thursdays. Fridays is for hip-hop, and Saturdays are "ultralounge" nights, with an Arabian Nights theme of hookahs, belly dancers, tents and tarot card readers. "From a business standpoint, it keeps it new," the club's owner, Seth Lawrence, said. "If you had salsa every night, it would dilute the concept."

And starting next Tuesday, on Valentine's Day, the club will feature a new weekly night of live Latin jazz. This replaces Diva's attempt at a weekly gay night, which Lawrence said fizzled last summer after a few successful months.

But what keeps people coming back, said general manager Erin Taggart, is their desire "for the upscale, for the safe environment, for the not-thugged-out environment." That last point especially seems to resonate with the crowds here. Although several police cruisers, lights flashing, congregated briefly at Diva that Thursday night because one banished patron refused to leave its sidewalk, those who frequent the club said they felt more secure here than most places.

"I don't really like Spanish nights," said Gloria Bailey, 36, of Linden, "but the crowd is really so mature. You don't have to worry about people getting all rowdy and immature."

Bailey criticized one element of Diva — one of the more New York-like elements of the club. "It is a bit pricey," she said.

The club's kitchen serves a variety of tapas — the trendy Spanish term for bite-sized bar food — costing \$8 to \$14. These include a "crock of chili" (\$8); "Diva disco fries" (\$10); "black Angus sliders" (\$10); and filet mignon (\$14).

Beers cost \$5 and \$6. Standard

cocktails, such as martinis, capirinhas and Cosmopolitans, run \$9. Ambitious drinkers may opt for a bottle of liquor, which can cost up to \$200, or a bottle of Cristal champagne for \$400.

There are also Diva's "specialty" cocktails, which may be ideal for those who can't decide what to order. Take the club's signature drink, the Show Stopper: a combination of vodka, gin, brandy, rum, sloe gin, amaretto, Chambord, Bacardi 151 (the liquor people use to blow fireballs), pineapple juice, orange juice, cranberry juice and a "flaming orange slice." The \$16 drink is poured into a giant wine goblet, set afire and served with the promise and/or caveat: "The Show Stopper was created to numb any and all of your troubles . . . guaranteed."

The night started on simmer. Between 7 and 9 p.m., a dance instructor named Hugo led a few dozen men and women in a two-hour salsa lesson, delivering his "rules" like a drill instructor. "Rule number one," he said, "We always have one knee bent, one knee straight."

"Rule number two: Your arms are going to be swishing with your knees. When your left knee goes forward, your arms go to the left." A dapper man named Danny Day watched from the sidelines. Dressed in a slim black suit and a red shirt with butterfly collar, Day said salsa dancing is his "recreation" and that he drove from Harlem to dance here. He was diplomatic about the skill level he saw on Diva's dance floor. "Let me put it like this: The best dancers are the ones who are having the most fun. As far as style is concerned, New York does have this beat."

But soon dancing style wouldn't matter. At 10:30, the DJ let his music mutate into a harder, more bombastic salsa. The dancing grew clumsier, the strobe lights swung harder and the energy felt wilder. Then, 20 minutes later, an air raid siren sounded and the dance floor underwent a sea change. The speakers began to blast something different, something slightly sinister. It was the staccato thud of a reg-

gaeton beat.

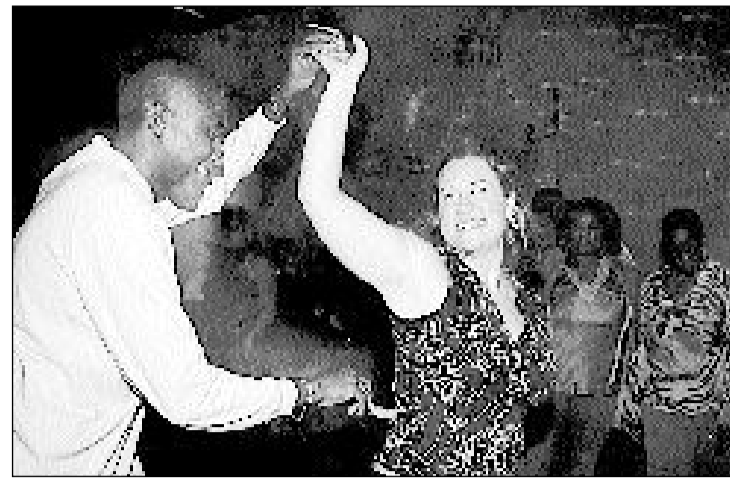
The dance floor suddenly grew flush. Women in twos and threes clutched pinkies and squirmed through the crowds. They danced in clusters, arms raised over their heads, long curls draping their backs. Men stood behind them, scanning the scene. The few who dared venture forth sometimes found a partner, sometimes found themselves dancing alone.

An hour later, the crowds had spilled into the bar area, forming a nearly impassable moat of humanity. People used their shoulders to slice their way to the bar, to the

bathroom or to the relative peace and quiet of the front room. But more people wanted in. They edged their way onto the dance floor like surfers paddling to a wave moments before its break.

It was about to hit. Two minutes before midnight, the DJ sounded the siren again. The howl hung in the air, a long and lonely cry above the crowd. But no one seemed worried, no one took cover. Instead they seemed to take it as a sign that the night had just begun.

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MICHAEL KARAS/Herald News

Chesnel Jeudy and Amanda Boyer salsa dance on Latin night at Diva Lounge in Montclair.