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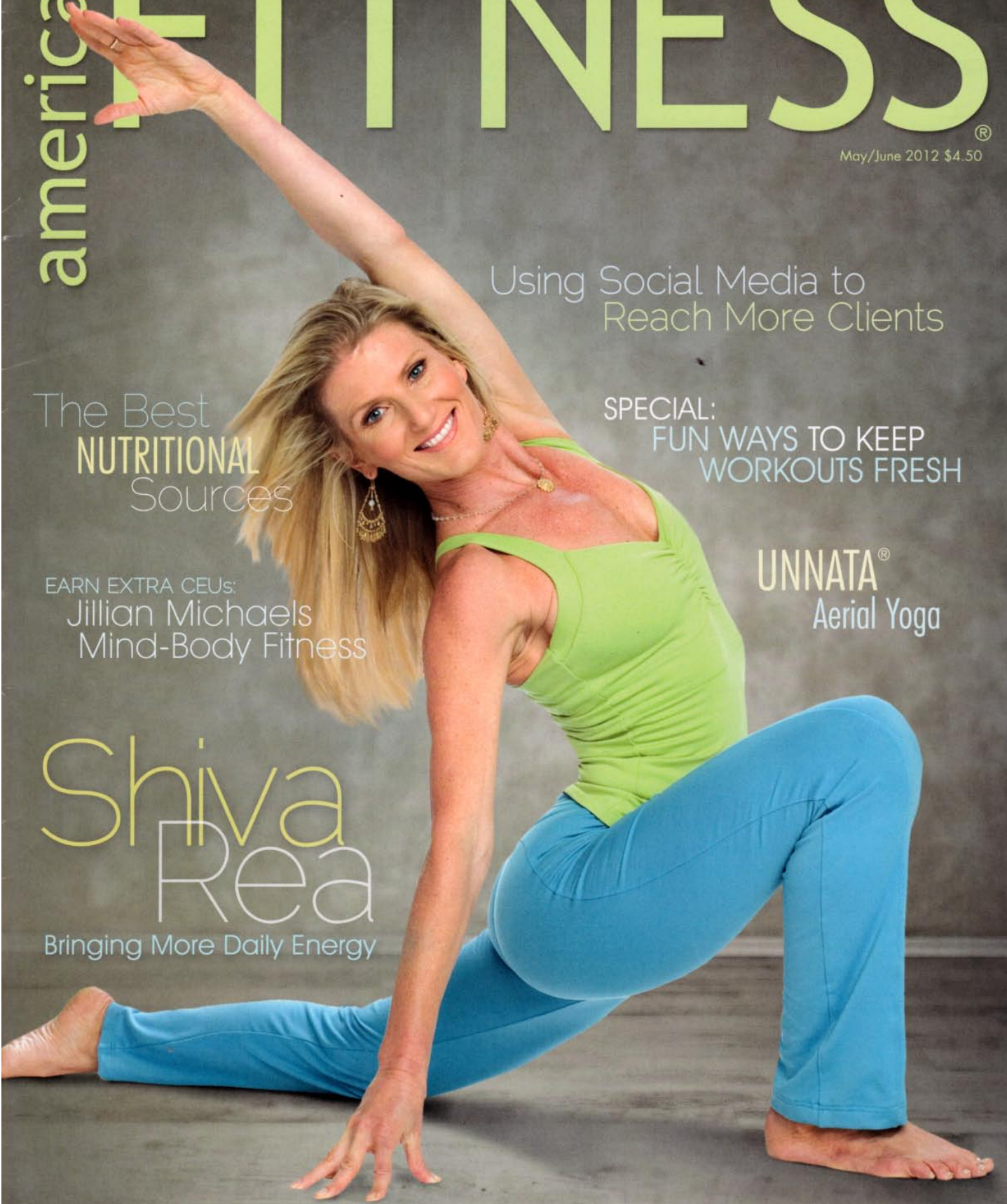
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# unnata<sup>®</sup> aerial yoga

Hammocks aren't just for resting anymore.

BY ZOIE CLIFT

Unnata<sup>®</sup> Aerial Yoga is a new blend of traditional yoga with the physical training of an aerial acrobat. The practice was developed by yoga instructor and aerialist Michelle Dortignac in 2006. Since its creation, the practice has drawn people from around the world to a small studio in Brooklyn, N.Y., to be trained in the craft and take it back to their communities.

## But Is it Really Yoga?

"Because circus arts are becoming so popular, I think there's a misconception the class is just a trend, and that it's not really yoga. Or that you need to be very advanced in order to do the practice," said Jordan Anderson, Unnata Aerial Yoga instructor at Aerial Fit<sup>™</sup> in Charleston, S.C., among the first teachers trained in the practice. "In fact, the class was originally designed for beginners to experience the unique sensations that aerial silks provide. We were taught in every class to always ask ourselves, 'Why is this yoga? How is this yoga?' so that everything we teach comes from that motivation. And the class itself is very balancing, relaxing and mentally challenging just like any other yoga class."

No yoga (or aerial) experience is necessary to take a class. Students are asked to bring a yoga mat and a hand towel and don what they'd normally wear to yoga practice (no tank tops though). In class, students use a low-hanging fabric trapeze to support the weight of the body. With this support, students learn proper postural alignment through relaxation rather than effort.

## Finding Yin and Yang

According to Dortignac, some people think that this practice aims to replace traditional yoga. "Rather, it's trying to enhance a traditional practice," she clarified. "Most people are surprised to find we practice floor yoga asanas in class in addition to using the hammock prop. The air and the floor are not mutually exclusive—

they are complements to each other. Yin and Yang. To have a fully enriched yoga practice we need both."

Dortignac added that the practice can help students better understand traditional yoga. The majority of adjustments (both manually and verbally) that yoga instructors give during classes help students lengthen their spines in order to breathe deeper and more fully into the lungs. "The theory I've always used when developing the Unnata [which means 'elevated' in Sanskrit] Aerial Yoga technique is that gravity can assist the student in finding that length through relaxation, rather than effort," said Dortignac. "I feel a student needs to know where they are going first, before they can get there themselves. If they are guided into an advanced yoga asana, they will then know what they are looking for when trying to achieve the same posture without use of the hammock prop and out of necessity, using more effort."

## The Silks Challenge and Inspire

As in all new things, a fear of the unknown (in this case, the hammock) may come into play. Some might worry if it can hold their weight or if they will fall out of it. According to Dortignac, there is no need to fear. "We use the same equipment that professional aerial acrobats use. Meaning, the equipment can hold around 2,000 pounds. And we hang the hammocks close enough to the floor so that when a student is hanging off the ground, they are only a few inches away from the floor and can always touch it with a hand or a foot."

Even though Dortignac has been a student of yoga for about 20 years, she acknowledged there were still areas of her body that wouldn't bend/move completely and easily. Using the hammock, she's been able to find movement in those places. "First of all, [it] has been inspiring for me that after so much time, my practice and my body can still change and develop," she said. "Also, because I





aerial upward  
facing dog

enjoy seeing how the physical and the emotional/mental are intertwined, I've been finding more freedom in other areas of my life as well as in my body."

#### Validation of a New Practice

In the practice of yoga, Unnata Aerial Yoga is a young gun. In light of its youth, questions might arise as to whether it is a valued form of the ancient practice. "I would say that even though the science of yoga has been around for 5,000 years (or so), none of the teachers out there have been teaching for 5,000 years," remarked Dortignac. "All are teaching what they have been instructed, infused with the understanding they gain through their personal practice. There are lots of different yoga styles, each one is the personal expression of the founder's understanding of how to practice. In my opinion, they are all valid."

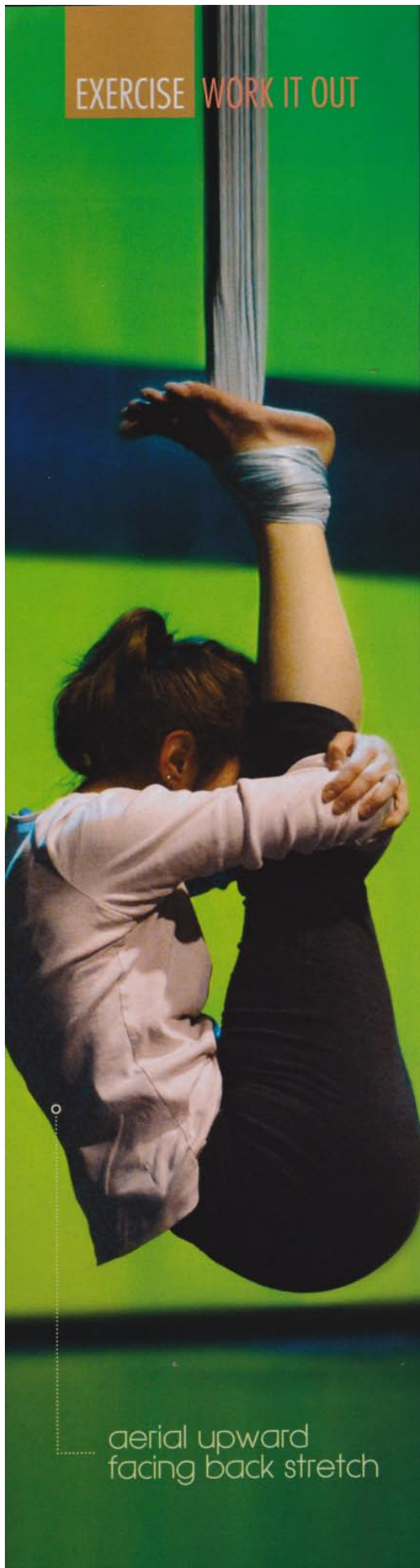
And the reaction so far from the public and the yoga community? "Some people love the idea and can get a sense, even through just looking at a picture, that their spines will love the sensation of hanging, and that they will more easily learn how to release and relax," said Dortignac. "Others have a more skeptical attitude toward the use of this particular prop because they think it's some sort of a gimmick, and that aerial yoga classes don't pay attention to the more subtle parts of yoga practice such as meditation and breath awareness/control."



aerial  
pigeon



## EXERCISE WORK IT OUT



aerial upward facing back stretch

aerial rotated side-angle



aerial downward facing dog twist



### Not All Aerial Practice Is the Same

Dortignac said she understands the viewpoints from both sides. “I don’t mind the skepticism I hear because quite honestly, as aerial yoga has become more and more popular, there are many classes being taught by instructors who have a limited understanding of the science of yoga. To them, yoga is only a fun technique that stretches and strengthens the body.”

Dortignac pointed out that is the difference between Unnata Aerial Yoga and other forms of aerial yoga. “I, and all the teachers that I have trained to instruct Unnata Aerial Yoga, were already certified yoga instructors and sincere in our practice prior to using the hammock prop,” she said. “We understand the ways the hammock can affect our breathing, emotions and thoughts because we also understand how the postures on the floor have the same purpose.”

### Fun and Accessible to All Levels

Anderson had been teaching yoga for about 5 years before she discovered

the Unnata practice when she went home to NYC for the holidays. She had been exploring other forms of flying yoga like acroyoga, and was drawn in by her first introduction. “I loved that the class I took was challenging for me, with many years of yoga experience under my belt, while at the same time being fun and accessible to the friend I brought who was a complete beginner to yoga....Yoga is an incredibly powerful practice. It enhances anything else that you do in life. With so many different styles and varieties to choose from today, there is something for everyone. Unnata Aerial Yoga is a yoga class at heart, so don’t be afraid to try it out.”

More about the practice and teacher training program can be found at [www.aerialyoga.com](http://www.aerialyoga.com). AF

**ZOIE CLIFT** graduated from the University of Colorado and has a Master’s in Journalism from Boston University. She has written for various media outlets including the United States Olympic Committee, Red Bull, Runner’s World, Trail Runner, Marathon & Beyond, The Times-Picayune and LAVA magazine.