



PARTY LIKE IT'S 1825

Whoopin' it up with the Eugene Country Dancers

PHOTO BY BRINKLEY CAPRIOLA / BRINKLEYCAPRIOLA.US

In the annals of things I've made my long-suffering husband Ben do, this latest one might take the cake: "Honey," I said. "Thursday night we're going to the Vet's Club for a night of English country dancing, OK?"

Ben immediately suggested that if we were going to try our hand at the intricate dance forms of the Regency Era, we really ought to be crocked out of our gourds on claret — or at least, he should be.

As a Jane Austen-phile, of course I'm curious about country dancing. "To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love," writes Austen in *Pride and*

Prejudice, my Holy Bible from ages 13 to 17. Austen's novels are peppered with dancing, because in a world dictated by courtly conventions, balls allowed the gentry to mix and mingle. And sometimes fall in love. Sigh.

When we arrive at the Vet's Club for our first dance lesson, folks are lacing up their soft black leather dancing shoes. I feel a little goofy in my vintage Frye boots, but the two teachers, Kate MacQueen and Chuck Ryer, quickly put me at ease.

Aside from welcoming folks of all ages, notes MacQueen, "the group makes no references to gender." Dances are not taught boy-girl but in partners, sets or

groups. Women pair with women, men with men; no partner is necessary to come to class. "And the music is wonderful," Ryer says.

Ryer has been teaching for more than 30 years and is accredited by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. We hop-to, quickly whisked into a circle to learn basic footwork and patterns.

Starting us off with a warm-up, Ryer immerses us in the basic vocabulary of country dance with terms like "singles," "doubles" and "slipping" — rhythmic patterns of movement across the floor that get you where you need to be in time with the music.

Then we plunge into an English circle dance called "Sellenger's Round," a moderate-tempo ditty from 1670 that includes some real heat: In it, you get to touch forearms with your partner *and* make eye contact. (Hey, for Jane Austen's time, this was second base.)

Next we try our hand at "Yellow Stockings." Ryer says this is a children's dance, so apparently kids used to be a lot smarter. The dance is a confounding knot of partners changing place across the circle as they work their way down the line. Fortunately, seasoned dancers cajole newbies like Ben and I to the right spots and spirits stay high throughout.

Then we attempt "Johnny Groat's House," a fast Scottish reel in which three sets of partners slip down the middle of the line and cast off away from themselves. Aerobic and enthralling, all I can say is that this dance felt like I was crocheting my brain.

Though challenging at first, these dances are fun and lively, the music spirited and contagious.

When we dance "Never Love Thee More," a slower, minor-key round, I'm a little bit in love. Alas, Colonel Brandon never showed up. But Ben and I had a great time. ■

Check out the Eugene Country Dancers by dropping in for a first free class, 6:30-9:30 pm Thursdays at the Vet's Memorial Building, 1626 Willamette St. For more information, email dancing@s2graphics.com.

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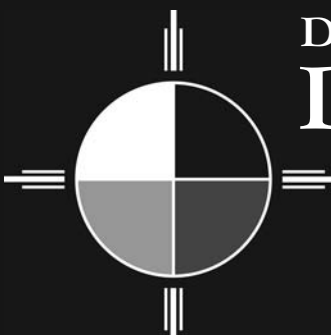
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