



**On point.** Lisa Larson is shown at the Newport Academy of Ballet in Newport during a visit home for the holidays. Now living in New York City, she was recently a size 6½-foot model for Natalie Portman and an extra in the film 'Black Swan.' PHOTO BY DAVE HANSEN

# off the lip Feet first

**Heard your feet recently became famous.**

My feet actually did not. It was actually a plastic mold of my feet that were used over Natalie Portman's in some of the scenes in which she's barefoot in the movie because she doesn't have feet that look like dancer feet — basically ugly feet. When we auditioned for the movie, they took pictures of all of our feet. They called me and sent me to a special effects studio to get molds of my feet made that they could use for Natalie Portman's feet. So there's a scene in which she's getting out of bed and cracking her feet and those are technically my feet, but they're really hers. It's a little confusing. (*Laughs.*)

**Was it creepy seeing your feet — or at least the shape of your feet — on someone else's legs?**

No, to me it doesn't look like my feet. Feet are feet to me. I don't like feet, so it was a little weird. (*Laughs.*) Everyone else seems to think it's weirder than I find it.

**How'd you find out about the Black Swan auditions?**

I occasionally, out of boredom, look at casting websites. I was actually looking because I've always wanted to be an extra in "Gossip Girl," and I found one looking for ballet dancers for the dancing scenes of "Black Swan." They ended up using dancers from Pennsylvania Ballet and also American Ballet Theatre, so most of us extras weren't used for dancing. But I was used for the feet and also used as an extra — as a ballet student walking to class around Lincoln Center.

**What's it like being an extra?**

We were there from eight in the morning to eight at night. It was a very long day and very different from what I'm used to in the dance studio when you know when the breaks will be. It was a lot of fun, though, to work very close to Natalie Portman. I definitely did see myself

once or twice in the movie in the background, which was really cool.

**How closely did you work with Natalie Portman?**

I didn't get to formally meet her, but we did one scene where a group of us walk in the stage door and she comes in behind us. I don't get starstruck, really, but it was still kind of cool. It was also interesting working with Darren Aronofsky, who's the director. I think that was more interesting than working with Natalie Portman because he'd created so many successful movies at such a young age. And I did get to talk to him because he was directing us.

**Are you hoping to do more movie work in the future?**

It was a nice one-time experience. If given the opportunity to do this again, I would probably grab it, but for me right now it's more important to work on my dancing career because I really just want to do ballet.

**How'd your friends and family react?**

Everyone else has been making a big deal about it. I don't see what the big deal is. After all the interesting things I've done with my training career, this is the one people get excited about? I don't know. (*Laughs.*) It just doesn't do it for me.

**So what has been the highlight of your career so far?**

I've had many highlights. One was my freshman year of high school I got to perform with the Perm State Ballet of Russia when they were on tour in Boston for their production of "Sleeping Beauty." Performing in Boston Ballet's "Nutcracker" was also a highlight.

**When did you first move away from your home and family in Newport?**

I moved to Boston when I was a freshman to attend Boston Ballet School. My mom, MaryJo Carr, and

LISA LARSON, 19

**Dancer**

Natalie Portman plays a convincing ballerina in "Black Swan," but six months of training couldn't completely transform the actress into a prima ballerina. Her feet still lacked the scars of a life spent on the tips of her toes, evidence she borrowed instead from a mold of Lisa Larson's feet. Larson, a Newport native and the daughter of MaryJo Carr and Bill Larson, has been dancing since she was 3 years old. She moved to Boston and then Brookline, Mass., as a teenager to attend high school and the Boston Ballet School; she moved again to New York City after graduation to continue her training in the Alvin Ailey Professional Division. Larson returned to her hometown last fall to perform in Island Moving Co.'s "Dracula" and "Nutcracker" and Spindle City Ballet's "Nutcracker" in Fall River, Mass. The dedicated dancer is now back in New York, preparing to audition for companies this spring. **BY BRE EATON**

I got an apartment in Boston together, so she made the huge commitment to move with me to Boston and did a reverse commute to Newport, where she has a law firm, for the four years I was in high school.

**Do you feel like you had to grow up faster than your non-dancing peers?**

I grew up really fast. So I was essentially alone in the city all day and would get myself to and from school.

**With all that freedom, did you ever find yourself in sticky situations?**

No, I never got into trouble. School would finish, and I would walk straight to ballet until 7 p.m., and then I would go home, have dinner, do my homework and go straight to bed. (*Laughs.*) There wasn't time to get into trouble, nor do you want to because you would jeopardize your standing at your ballet school.

**Have you ever regretted your decision to pursue a life dedicated to dance?**

I definitely wouldn't change anything. I haven't had a traditional childhood but the childhood I've had is very special to me — the experiences I've had compared to the ones that I would've had with a traditional childhood are ones I wouldn't trade for anything. You become very close with the people you train with; you have a social life with them. I was a very good student because I had to be. If I didn't do well, I wouldn't be allowed to dance. And at the same time, you get really good at time management when you're doing shows and you have class and rehearsals. If I have kids and they want to do ballet I would encourage them, but I definitely wouldn't push them in the direction of ballet unless they want it because it is so stressful. It was right for me, but it's not the right fit for everyone.

**What's a typical day of training like for you?**

Depends on where I am. During guesting, working with Island Moving Co. for example, I would wake up, take a ballet class, and have four to five hours of rehearsing a day. When training, you usually have a ballet class, a pointe class, and a body conditioning class. Sometimes you'll also have a *pas de deux* class, which is dancing with a partner.

**Do you feel the movie accurately captures the life of a dedicated dancer?**

I think the lifestyle of a dancer is all consuming, but at the same time I've never met anyone as crazy as she is in the movie. I also think it did a bad thing for the ballet world in that it overemphasized stereotypes. Clearly in the movie she is bulimic. A lot of movies tend to draw on that stereotype and people assume that eating disorders are a norm for dancers. I think they're present and prevalent but it definitely makes a blanket generalization. Not everyone has one. I think it would be beneficial to have a movie that is based on more research on those types of issues.

**How do you cope with all the pressure and the competition?**

You don't really realize how much pressure there is most of the time. I have a very supportive family and friends outside of dance. So, yes, it's stressful and competitive, but you have to love it. And the rest doesn't really matter as long as you love what you're doing.

**What is it like performing on stage — exhilarating, nerve-wracking?**

It's very rewarding. I enjoy class, but a lot of dancers don't. I enjoy it because it feels like I'm performing. Being on stage is what it's all about. I do get nervous right before I go on stage, but I don't get that nervous because we rehearse enough so it's in your muscle memory. You can't see the audience. You just see the light, and it's just ... (*pauses*) ... amazing.

# Mini-marshmallows need not apply

LIZ DOUCETTE takes a seat at La Maison de Coco's white oak bar and sips her *chocolat chaud* the way it's meant to be enjoyed

LA MAISON DE COCO

28 Bellevue Ave.,  
Newport  
(401) 845-COCO  
www.lamaisondecoco.com

When dessert caterer Michele De Luca-Verley opened La Maison de Coco — the newest gourmet establishment on Bellevue Avenue (across from The Viking Hotel) — in early December, she faced an immediate conundrum. Customers were asking for beverages "to go." And she had to tell them the truth: she didn't have any "to go" cups. It's not that she wasn't prepared; it's just not what she envisioned. Somehow the native Rhode Islander, who has since lived in New York, Massachusetts and, yes, France (with her French husband and three kids), assumed people would sit down to enjoy their French press coffee, estate tea and *chocolat chaud*.

Pardon my French, but it's called for. "Hot chocolate" doesn't begin to describe what I experienced on a recent afternoon with sun streaming in at the Coco bar. Seriously, this was nothing like that dark, scalding (to the point of tongue-burning) drink that pours forth at the push of a button into Styrofoam cups at ski lodges across New England. Or gets rehydrated from a sugary mix with or without mini-marshmallows. Not to knock mini-marshmallows (I happen to love them), but the Coco experience is something different. Familiar yet differ-

ent. Foreign yet local. It's also not so much hot as warm chocolate. Or, more accurately, warm milk heated slooowly then poured over chocolate *ganache*. That being a blend of bittersweet Madagascar cacao and Rhode Island cream. Mine had essence of plum oolong tea.

And there's only one word for it (in any language): Mmmmm.

That said, I will admit to pondering — as I stirred, sipped and maybe even slurped the frothy manna in my *café au lait* bowl — if presentation had something to do with it. Of course it did. La Maison de Coco is the picture of taste, from its antiqued cabinetry stacked with tea tins to its sparkling stainless kitchen, where De Luca-Verley can work as she visits with patrons.

Then there's the taste of tea-infused truffles (I took a tiny box home with me) and dark or white-chocolate *mendiant*s artfully adorned with slivers of dried fruit and nuts. De Luca-Verley cites tarts (and tartlets!) among her other specialties.

"I think of food as my canvas," she says, coincidentally standing beneath one of two textured canvases by local artist Tom Martinelli.



**Bowled over.** Michele De Luca-Verley prepares hot chocolate the way it's meant to be savored: easy on the sugar, heavy on the cream and served in a bowl, below left, the traditional French way. PHOTOS BY DAVE HANSEN

Bizarrely enough, La Maison de Coco — named for a dear family friend, though it's easy to imagine one or two other explanations\* — is considered a fast food establishment by the City of Newport. De Luca-Verley laughs as she describes standing before the city's zoning board.

"I tried to tell them, 'That's really not what it is.'"

But since food (dessert counts) is created on the premises ready to be taken home for consumption, the classification stuck. And the shop will defy classification again later this month when it starts offering pastry classes and co-hosts a Cheese and Chocolate Fondue Night (Jan. 21)

with neighboring foodie destination Le Petit Gourmet.

Just for the record, De Luca-Verley does have "to go" cups these days. She keeps them under the bar, as if she's hiding them from those who might take advantage (thus missing out).

"I want people to stay and enjoy," she says. "I hope they will."

\*Think *cocoa*, *Coco Chanel*, *le coco* (French for coconut) and *mon coco* (a term of endearment). There's another meaning that doesn't fit quite so well (don't you just love on-line dictionaries?): *coco* can mean "bloke" or "dude."

*Liz Doucette thinks it's time to order "Chocolat," starring Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp, from Netflix.*