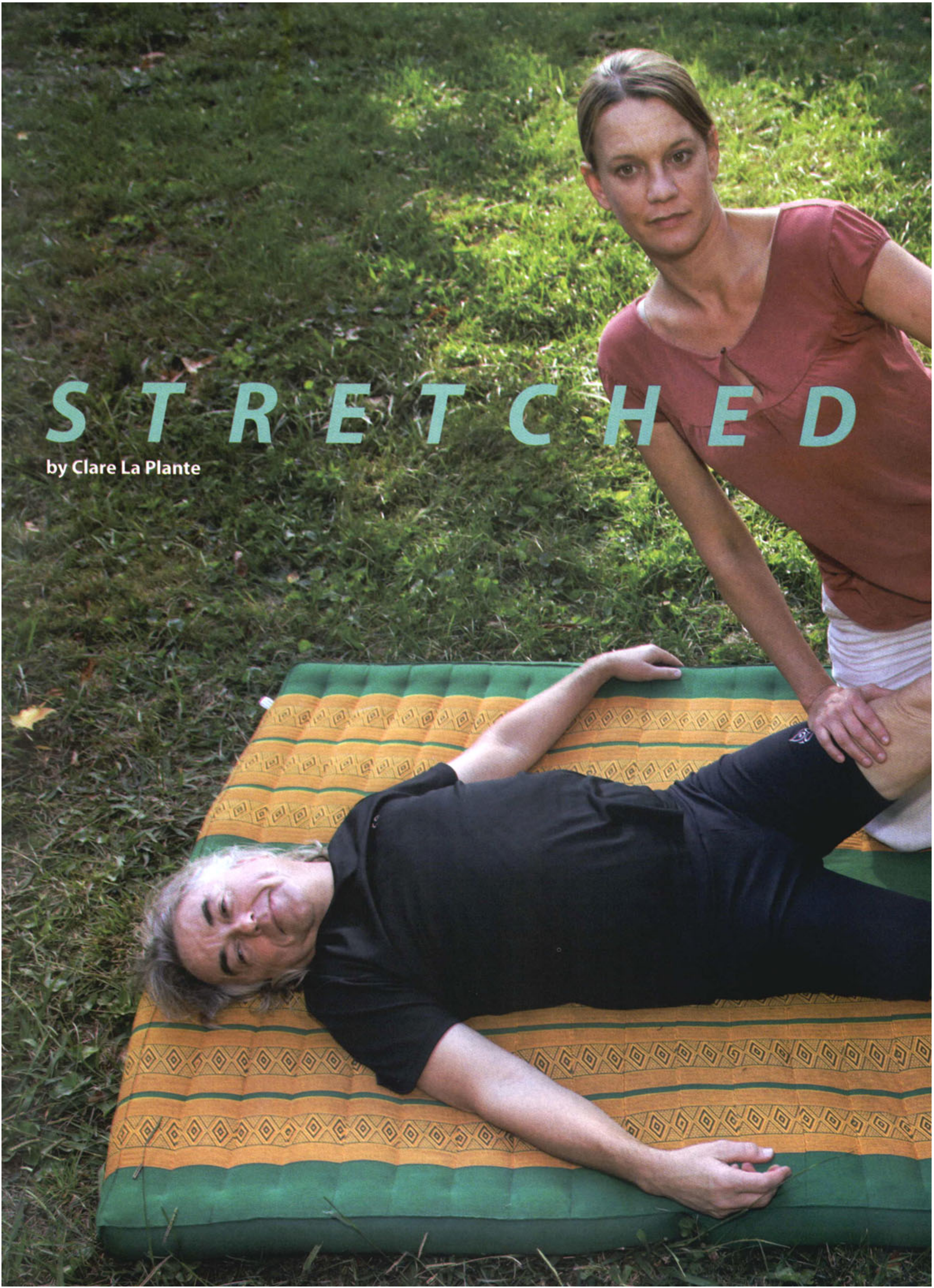
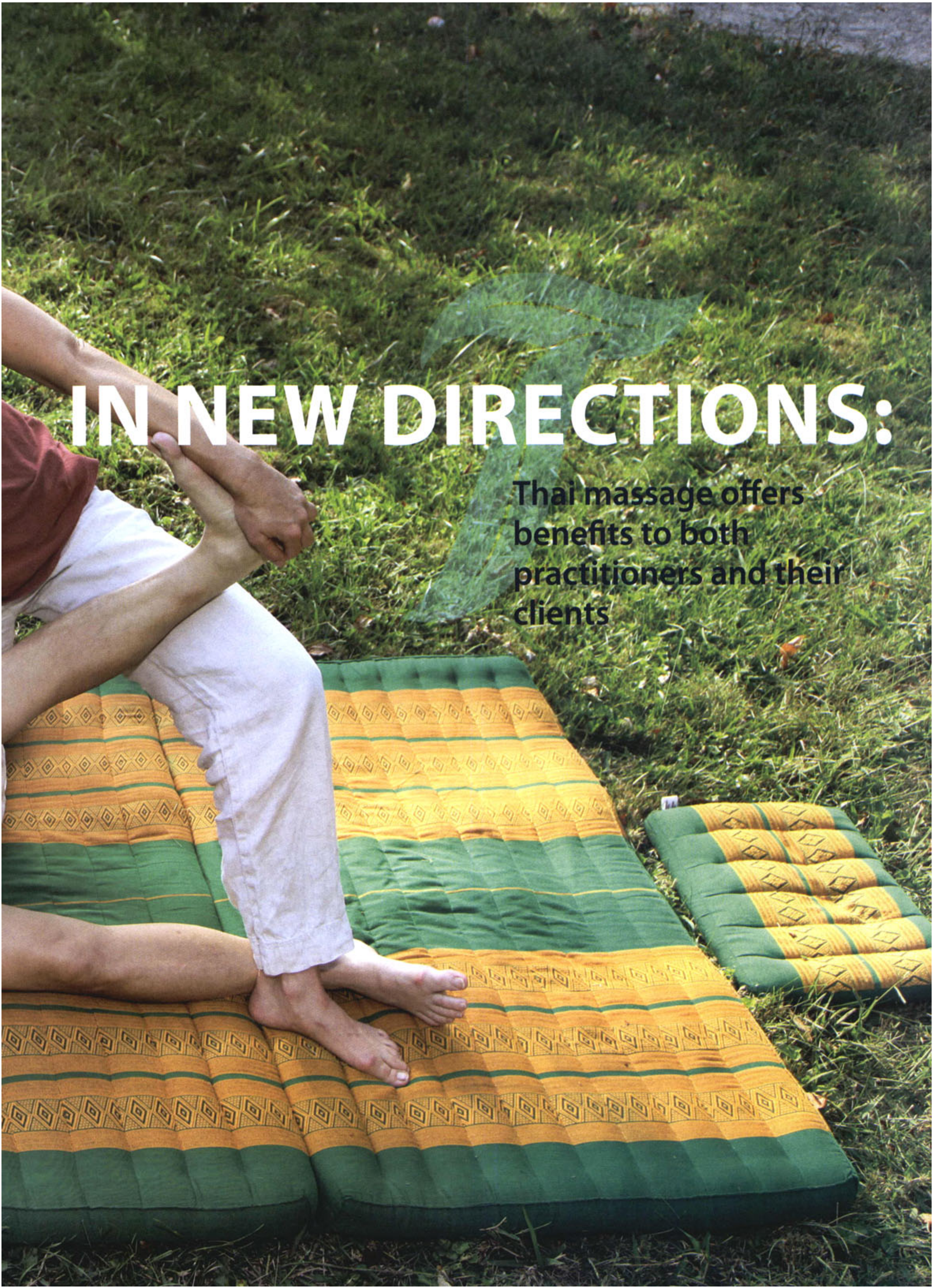


# STRETCHED

by Clare La Plante







# IN NEW DIRECTIONS:

Thai massage offers  
benefits to both  
practitioners and their  
clients



Two years ago, Raleigh, North Carolina-based massage therapist Assunta Rosler, then 58, took her first intensive on-the-mat Thai massage workshop, a form of bodywork featuring stretching and traction, traditionally practiced on the floor. She struggled to get to the floor, however, because of arthritic knees.

"I couldn't go from standing to squatting," she says. "I couldn't get back up. I had to sit, roll to my knees, and lean on something."

As she continued to take courses and practice, though, Thai massage began to work on *her*. Rosler had an eye-opening moment as she was practicing a common Thai massage stretch. Squatting on her toes behind her seated client, Rosler placed her knees into the client's back. With her hands on the client's shoulders, she pulled the client backward over her knees, similar to a passive cobra stretch in yoga. Rosler realized, to her surprise, that she was securely in a squat position, without knee pain.

Thus, she learned a valuable lesson: Even though Thai massage requires specific physical strength, stamina and flexibility of the practitioner, the focus on good body mechanics, alignment, stretching with gravity, and mindful breath can actually help the practitioner develop the very qualities it requires.

### The Start

Known as *nuad phaen boran* in the Thai language, the English name Thai massage may seem a misnomer to practitioners of traditional Western-style massage therapy. Clients remain fully clothed. You do not use oils (although some practitioners use hot herb packs), and the focus is not necessarily on specific muscle groups.

Practitioners typically use a variation of different sequences of techniques on clients, who are on the floor, on a mat, fully clothed, either in supine, seated, side or prone position. Thai massage typically works with compression, with practitioners using their feet, elbows, knees and hands to compress and stretch the client. Breath work accompanies the stretches, which often look like a form of passive yoga. "It's like going to a massage therapist, yoga class and chiropractor," says Jill Burynski, an Asheville, North Carolina-based massage therapist and Thai massage instructor.

Although thousands of years old, Thai massage didn't arrive on these shores primarily until the 1990s, when Westerners began practicing it. Burynski took her first course in 2001 in California. "I felt as though I had met my massage soul mate," she says. She took her first trip to Thailand in 2003, studying at the Old Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai, one of the hubs of Thai massage education.

Burynski came home and saw how quickly she could help clients with chronic problems. As she began to integrate Thai massage stretches into her table massage, her clients would speak up: "That feels amazing," they would say. Eventually, Burynski returned to Thailand for further instruction, and then went on to become an instructor, opening her own Thai massage school, Living Sabai, in Asheville.





JILL BURYNSKI PRACTICING THAI MASSAGE.  
PHOTOS BY MEGAN RICHARDSON



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## The Benefits of Thai Massage

**Career longevity.** As an instructor, Burynski saw how the work benefited the students themselves, many of whom were massage therapists. “I realized that Thai massage could hold a key to career longevity for therapists,” she says. “When you are delivering downward pressure in a regular massage, you use your wrists, or biceps, for example, or other small muscles we can overuse.” With Thai massage, massage therapists use the larger muscles, along with gravity. The practitioner’s movements originate from their core, and they keep their back straight, shoulders open and chest relaxed—even when moving. Body mechanics and working with gravity helps with the heavy lifting, so to speak.

Eric Spivack, who is a Thai massage practitioner and instructor based in Seattle, Washington, found this out first hand. Plagued with repetitive neck, shoulder and hand injuries, Spivack considered giving up his practice—and then he attended a Thai massage demonstration. “It was the first time I ever saw a therapist use feet,” he says. He has now been to Thailand 10 times, studying under nearly two dozen different teachers, and runs his own Thai massage school, Soaring Crane Massage & Acupuncture in Seattle.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania-based massage therapist Beth Brown also finds that practicing Thai massage can help her deal with her own pain and stress. “If I am holding stress—a headache, for example, or tightness in my shoulder—doing a Thai massage often takes my pain away,” she says. Often, too, after a long day of massage, giving a Thai massage at the end of the day will rejuvenate her, as a yoga or meditation class might.

**Versatility and increased client base.** Although Thai massage is traditionally practiced on the floor with a mat, some techniques can be modified for use with a massage table. Or, too, practitioners can choose to incorporate elements of Thai massage into their regular massage therapy sessions.

Brown is one such therapist who has incorporated her Thai massage work into her table massage practice. And she’s found the addition of a table Thai massage has had unexpected benefits to her practice. For one, she attracts new clients who were always interested in massage but didn’t want to take off their clothes, as well as current clients interested in Thai massage but uncomfortable being on the floor.

At age 33, Brown adapted quite well to the deep stretches and compression of Thai massage. Others, such as Rosler, may have to ease into the work. In those



first classes, for example, Rosler placed bolsters behind her arthritic knees to allow her to squat. Thai massage practitioner and instructor Ananda Apfelbaum, author of *Thai Massage Sacred Bodywork*, has degenerative discs and vertebrae from a previous dance career. She had to learn to work in ways to avoid injury. “This includes letting go of certain moves if the client is too heavy or too inflexible for me to manage well,” she says. “Each practitioner has to know his or her limits and work within that.”

## Benefits for Clients

Similar to other forms of massage therapy, the benefits of Thai massage for clients can include relaxation, increased mobility, as well as relief from the pain associated with many chronic conditions. However, Rosler cautions that she doesn’t recommend Thai massage to all her clients. “I have clients who I know just wouldn’t want to do this,” she says.

She does talk with these clients about Thai massage, though, and she practices aspects of Thai massage on all her clients. For example, she integrates Thai work by placing clients in positions that maximize the length of the muscles.

Thai massage works best when it’s tailored to the





client. “I have had clients from ages 15 to 80,” Spivack says. “Each of their treatments will look very different, specific to their needs.” He has worked with those with whiplash and knee replacements, as well as those who are obese or frail. “For those individuals, I modify a lot of the poses and stretches, and always work with their comfort range,” he adds.

### Looking to Learn

Massage therapists interested in learning Thai massage should first definitely receive it, says Margaret Bilinski, a massage therapist based in Seymour, Connecticut. “The more you practice, the better you get. Receive it, take a class—get your feet wet,” she adds. The supplies for a beginner are relatively inexpensive: A mat or two, a pillow and some bolsters. Bilinski takes new classes as her work schedule and life allow. “I’m a Thai novice,” she admits, but has fallen in love with the modality and receives the work once a month.

Burynski suggests starting with a weekend continuing education course, perhaps an introduction to Thai massage class. “You won’t finish workshop on Sunday and advertise yourself as Thai massage on Monday,” she says, but you will have tested the waters.

Similar to other forms of massage therapy, the benefits of Thai massage for clients can include relaxation, increased mobility, as well as relief from the pain associated with many chronic conditions.

And if you wonder how Thai massage might fit into your existing practice, Spivack has some encouraging words. “I would like to remind those who are considering Thai massage that it is very easy to incorporate into a conventional massage practice,” he explains. “It doesn’t have to replace your practice. It can enhance it. You can still do table massage—and all the techniques you’ve already learned—and incorporate some Thai massage easily without having to shelve all your other knowledge. It is very adaptable.” ■