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# Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

June 2003

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## A Pearl by Any Other Name

By Reggie Smith and Susan Nishihira

**E**ven the ample living room brimmed full with more than 50 women of many walks of life crowded around the speaker. And after hearing Australian gemmologist Laura Cunning's informative talk, everyone left the meeting knowing a little or a lot more about pearls than they did when they walked in.

Laura has been in the pearl and gem business for 6 years and fielded our many questions, taking a little of the mystique out of how to discern the good, the bad, and the fake when we make our shopping forays to the pearl vendors in Greenhills. Here's a little of what we learned.

Beginning with the basics, Laura described how a pearl is formed when a grain of sand—or an insect or other irritant—finds its way into an oyster or mussel. What differentiates the quality of pearls are the type of irritant, the type of bivalve, and the length of growing time, giving us the vast variety of lovely, lustrous gems with which we so love to adorn ourselves.

Laura explained that 100% of the pearls we buy are cultivated. So although nature will determine the end result, the type of and shape of the pearl can be manipulated by varying the type of irritants used. Pearl farms generally grow their freshwater pearl crops in the shells of living mussels, as mussels can be very productive, with some growing up to 40 pearls in a single harvest period of 9 months. The main irritant used for freshwater pearls is tissue from the mantle of the mussel.

For saltwater or akoya pearls the irritant used is called a nucleus, which is usually a shell-based product. Interestingly, the almost

exclusively preferred substance for these nuclei originates in the landlocked U.S. state of Tennessee.

The soft bodied creature reacts to the irritant by covering it over and over with nacre, which is the essence of a pearl. The stronger, thicker, and more uniform the nacre coating, the more valuable the pearl.

There are many varieties of pearls, with the small "rice"-shaped freshwater pearls being the most plentiful and inexpensive. These come in many dyed colors and are "fun" jewelry. Saltwater pearls can take from 1½ to 2 years to grow. Most of the pearls available on the market are from Pakistan, China, and Japan. South Sea pearls come from Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Tahiti.

Natural pearls come in a variety of colors: white, white cream, white yellow, white with a greenish tint, champagne, silver-gray, and natural gold. Most other colors are obtained through dyeing, a procedure that can take as long as a year to achieve. Real pearls have a luster, obvious to the trained shopper's eye.

The major grower of freshwater pearls is China. Freshwater pearls are easy to produce, take about nine months to grow and can be found in abundance in Greenhills, hanging at many a stall, in many shapes and colors and are very inexpensive. Laura told us that although they are of lower-end quality, these pearls are absolutely genuine.

The next group of pearls are sea-grown in oysters, farmed mainly in Japan but also in China and Pakistan. Their growth period is from about 1½ to 2 years, resulting in pearls ranging in sizes from about 6 mm to 12 mm. Their luster and size determine the price. The luster is the shine or

brilliance of the coating, the rich glow of reflected light.

South Sea pearls are grown only in two type of oysters: a golden lipped oyster and a black-lipped oyster. They take greater care and longer to produce, 2½ to 3½ years. They are from Australia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, while black pearls are exclusively from Tahiti. South Sea pearls range in size from 7 mm to 20 mm. These are the best and most expensive variety of pearl.

Pearl shapes and textures vary from smooth and round to teardrops, ovals, pearls that are bred to be flat on one side for mounting as earrings or a pendant, and baroque pearls that are irregularly shaped with natural bumps. Pearls are natural gems so they do have flaws, and Laura noted that we should not be disturbed by a slightly pitted surface as that is natural.

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### Next MWF Meeting

**When:** Monday, June 16, 6:30 p.m.

**What:** Renee Speltz will speak about the Philippine Canine Search & Rescue Association, a new group dedicated to improving disaster response efforts in the country.

**Where:** Lisa Lumbao's home, Unit 3B, Cordova Condominium, 138 Valero St., Salcedo Village, Makati, tel. 818-2887.

**Bring:** A contribution to the potluck dinner.

**July meeting:** July 21

However, she cautioned us to beware of pearls given names such as “Majestic” or “Majorca,” noting that there are no special names for real pearls. Mikimoto pearls are a brand name after the Japanese inventor who mastered a particular culturing technique.

How can you recognize a fake strand? Rub one against your tooth—real pearls will have a slightly gritty feel. Check the luster. Check the comparable size of the pearls. Uniform pearls would cost a small fortune—\$2000 would not be enough to pay for a 12-inch strand that was perfectly uniform. And buy from reputable dealers. In Manila,

the company Jewelmer is the best known for high end pearls.

One of the nicest gifts Laura left with us was her advice that it doesn't matter if the pearl is valuable, or even if it's fake, as long as the buyer knows its value and you enjoy wearing it.

“If you like a purple strand, go ahead and buy it. Buy heaps of them, and wear them. Have fun with them. Just as long as you know what they are.”

Laura is available for consultation on pearls and precious gems. She can be reached by email at:

[lombokpearl@yahoo.com](mailto:lombokpearl@yahoo.com) phone: 832-6934, or mobile: 0920-901-7496.

### **The Manila Women's Forum**

The Manila Women's Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, to talk to women of various cultures, and to share information about resources. Our meetings are intended to provide intellectual stimulation and lead to personal and professional development. All women are welcome to join. The current officers are **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair, Programs, Treasurer, and Newsletter. **Penny Poole and Susan Nishihira**, Programs. **Beulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter.

Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P40 for non-members. Please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 818-2887 or 813-0168, or at [lumbao@mozcom.com](mailto:lumbao@mozcom.com) for more information about MWF.

## **Operation Cat Drop**

In the early 1950s, the Dayak people in Borneo suffered from severe and widespread malaria. The World Health Organization had a solution: they sprayed large amounts of DDT to kill the mosquitoes that carried the malaria. The mosquitoes died, the malaria declined; so far, so good.

But there were side effects.

Among the first was that the roofs of people's houses began to fall down on their heads. It seemed that the DDT was also killing a parasitic wasp, which had previously controlled thatch-eating caterpillars. Worse, the DDT-poisoned insects were eaten by geckoes, which were

eaten by cats. The cats started to die, the rats flourished, and the people were threatened by outbreaks of sylvatic plague and typhus.

To cope with these problems, which it had itself created, the WHO was obliged to parachute live cats into Borneo.

This is a true story, and serves as a reminder that sometimes when we try to fix things in our organization, our community, or in our homes, the solution can create more complex problems than the original dilemma. We need to envision, project, and to anticipate all possible endings before employing our innovative or “logical” ideas.

*From the e-mail circuit*

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