



A Passion for Pearls

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The unadorned door of Suite E in a small, stark, garden office building in Santa Monica gives nothing away. Neighboring offices house several construction companies, a small nonprofit and a property management group. But Suite E, nearly as modest inside as out, holds great beauty. Tahitian pearls, in an astounding range of hues, and in varying sizes and shapes, are tucked away here, held for the U.S. retail customers of Dora Fourcade Designs.

Dora Fourcade is a surprise in her own right. A petite, pretty, dark-haired woman, dressed for business and exuding an air of competent professionalism, she is in fact a farmer. A native-born Tahitian, she owns and manages one of the largest pearl farms Aratika, an atoll about 300 miles northeast of Tahiti, though she lives in Pacific Palisades. Subject to many of the same threats as any farmer—inclement weather, parasites, and global pricing pressure—she seems to take the risks in stride. "It's labor intensive and you never know," Fourcade says as she talks about production rates.

She's managed the farm on her own since 1997, when she bought out the shares owned by her brother, Jean Pierre. Taking over as sole owner of an island farm 4,000 miles away should have been transition enough for Fourcade, who moved from Mandeville Canyon with her two young children. But she also had to prove herself competent to skeptics who were particularly doubtful about a woman running the show.

"I am not the only woman who has owned a pearl farm, but I am one of only maybe two women who has run a large pearl farm," Fourcade says. "The challenge was that I had come back to Tahiti after living in the States and they didn't think I knew enough to do it."

Fourcade made the transition work, and the farm today produces roughly half a million pearls each year, for sale primarily to the Japanese and Hong Kong markets. Comfortable in her role as producer, she now also creates custom jewelry for retail clients in Los Angeles.

"In a way, design is more creative, so it's more enjoyable. But the farming is great because the islands are so beautiful and it's always a joy to go there, just because of the beauty of the site and the people," she says. "It's kind of nice to have that duality—to follow the pearl through production and then to put it in a setting."

Now she commutes by what she calls her "shuttle," traveling back to Tahiti nearly every month. "It's an easy flight," she claims of the eight-hour trip, but acknowledges that, once there, her schedule is mostly "work, work, work," laughing with her assistant about the fact that she rarely returns with a tan.

It's a bit easier to manage now that her children are grown. Fourcade's son graduated from college this year and is back in Los Angeles and moving into his own place. Her daughter is a senior in high school. They lobbied their mother to return to the U.S. in 2001. Fourcade describes them as "total Angelenos" and imagines that neither has much interest in taking on the business in Tahiti.

Tahitian pearls differ from other pearls by color. They are often called "black pearls," though Fourcade objects to this designation, as none of the pearls are actually solid black.

"Tahitian pearls can be as light as white, white being a rare color. They can be all tones of gold . . . green . . . pink to a rich aubergine. I've seen browns. I've seen bright coppers. And, of course, all the tones of just pure grey . . . to almost black," Fourcade says.

It is this unique coloring, in all its variations, that distinguishes Tahitian pearls from the more familiar white pearls, first cultured in Japan. This colorfully beautiful outcome requires years of commitment, and careful attention must be paid to both environment and process.

The average pearl takes four or five years to produce. The oysters are gathered at an early stage in protective nets and settled in the lagoon to grow for three or four years before they can be grafted to produce a pearl. Grafting is a delicate surgical process of inserting a small nucleus, manufactured from the shell of a freshwater mussel, for the pearl to grow around. In nature, pearls can form at random around a small bit of coral or shell fragment, but they are not often round in shape and thousands of oysters would have to be opened in the hope of finding one pearl.

After grafting, the pearl needs another 18 months to two years to develop to its final form. At any time, disease or weather can destroy some or all of the oysters.

"The oysters are very, very sensitive to any accident [of nature]," Fourcade says. Even an unexpected rapid rise in temperature can create an infection and cause the oysters to begin to die. They also require clean water to survive, so that storms or pollutants are disruptive. Even when well tended, only 50 percent of the oysters, on average, will create a pearl. And, despite best efforts, the ultimate result is largely up to nature.

"We cannot control the oyster," Fourcade says. "It decides whether it wants to produce a perfect pearl with incredible luster or whether it wants to produce something that looks like a rock under the ground."

If an oyster produces a good pearl, it will be grafted again. The species of oyster Fourcade farms, the *pinctada margaritifera*, can produce three or four pearls in its lifetime, unlike smaller oysters which rarely survive more than one "nucleation." The larger size means that the oyster's flesh is not entirely edible, but the center of the oyster is delicious, Fourcade says.

Once harvested and cleaned, Fourcade's pearls are ready for the primary market in Asia or for use in a final design in the U.S. secondary market.

"I use my pearls as they are," says Fourcade, distinguishing between other countries or other types of pearls that may be bleached or otherwise processed in an attempt to improve appearance.



Dora Fourcade's Pacific Perles farm on the atoll of Aratika makes use of the wide and deep lagoon. The airstrip and two navigable passes allow for easy access. Photo courtesy Dora Fourcade.

The quality of the pearl depends on luster (high is better than low); the smoothness of the surface (judged on a scale of "clean" to "heavily blemished"); shape (round is the preference for pearls, though only 10 percent of the harvest is round); and size (bigger is typically better, as with diamonds). Color preference is in the eye of the beholder, Fourcade says.

As a member of the board of the trade association Perles de Tahiti, Fourcade is an advocate for Tahitian pearls and available to speak to groups, large or small, about the pearls which have provided the adventure of a lifetime for her.

She will talk more about "how pearls are born" when the Palisades AARP chapter hosts her at the Palisades Woman's Club on October 8 at 2 p.m. Her presentation will be open to the public and free of charge. Fourcade is eager to share her passion for pearls.

"I have spent countless hours—eight to 10 hours a day—sorting the shapes and the colors, and I have never tired of it because there is always a pearl that will fascinate me because it is such an unusual shape or an amazing color."

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Palisadian Dora Fourcade, owner of Pacific Perles and Dora Fourcade Designs, wearing some of the Tahitian pearls she loves. Photo courtesy Dora Fourcade.

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