

Woman power in Tahitian pearl trade

Two women: one was among the first to start pearl cultivation in Tahiti and is probably the only woman to own a large pearl farm in the island paradise; the other opened probably the only specialist Tahitian pearl jewellery company in Italy last year, and has long been a lover of Tahiti, frequenting the place for the past 13 years. Two very different lives with one feature in common: the same passion for the beautiful black pearl.

By Melissa Wong

Pacific Perles

Hoping for prices to rise, production to stabilise

President of Pacific Perles in Tahiti, Dora Fourcade, had three New Year wishes for 2006:

- Tahitian pearl prices to stabilise and continue their growth
- Overall Tahitian pearl production to be maintained at the current level
- The industry to emphasise quality rather than size in a bid to increase the proportion of rounds and to enhance pearl lustre

"The average Tahitian price has increased 15 to 20 percent in 2005 compared with the preceding year," Ms Fourcade said. "It will be good if the price can increase 10 to 15 percent further in 2006. If it can, it will prove demand is really picking up."

Demand for Tahitian pearls is rising across the world. As she pointed out: "The European economy is slow, but demand for Tahiti-



President of Pacific Perles, Dora Fourcade, has been in the pearl cultivation industry for almost 30 years



Pearl farm workers on Aratika Island, the base for Pacific Perles

ian pearls in the market, for example in France, has been up because of the fashion trend for retro of the 1920s to 1960s and for the Coco Chanel and Audrey Hepburn looks. The trend is shown continually in the latest fashion shows. Long strands mixing different kinds of pearls and stones are popular, resulting in rising demand for less expensive circled pearls."

She said her company has much more demand than supply. "We have very good clients from Asia. Many of them have been buying from us for two decades, and demand from them is always strong, even in the past few years. They come back, I think, because of our good product quality and our way of doing business."



baby oysters and one grafting farm to cultivate pearls. On Aratika, there are a handful of small cultivation farms in addition to Pacific Perles. Rangiroa, on the hand, is the biggest atoll in French Polynesia, Dora says, noting that there are many 10 small farms on the atoll, in addition to the grafting site managed by her other venture in Gauguin's Pearl.

The Challenges

When there are many farms on one lagoon the challenge, tells Dora, is in keeping the environment healthy. "If we have a parasite, a kind of anemone, in the lagoons, it's a real problem." She says that there are regulations on how to transport oysters as many farmers bring shells in from other islands. "One farmer purchased shells from another island and left them in the original nets. They were contaminated and infected the lagoon on Aratika and we never got rid of it. Over the course of five years the whole lagoon was contaminated. We need to clean our oysters more often to keep them healthy, otherwise, the anemone can weaken or even kill the oysters."

Another challenge to pearl farming is hurricanes, which can totally devastate infrastructures. But Dora notes that French Polynesia sits on the rim of the tropical storm region. "We don't have them that often. The last one was in 1994. It went right over Aratika. Fortunately, the oysters were not ripped out of the water. We had lowered the lines. But buildings were damaged. Perhaps

the worst thing was that the water stirred up and the bottom rose. Oysters got sick. We lost at least half of them. We almost went out of business. Our biggest fear is to have another. The stakes are high."

But the ongoing test is to produce consistent harvests yearly. "We depend on nature," she reminds. Research and development of new techniques is a constant endeavor, like improving the quality of second operation pearls that have a tendency to lose color and luster. She notes that factors such as choice of oysters, ideal times to harvest, and appropriate lengths of time in the water (anywhere from 16 to 22 months) all contribute to the quality of pearl produced. Dora boasts that less than one percent of her company's total pearl exports are rejected after inspection for not meeting minimum requirements such as a nacre thickness of at least 0.8mm.

Dora applauds the efforts of the French Polynesian government and the industry for implementing regulations that have helped to stabilize production and prices, like a minimum nacre thickness for export, issuance of professional licenses, and a freeze on new farm concessions through at least 2005. She said hard times in world economies in 2001, coupled with the flooding of the market, and a severe drop in pearl prices hit the industry hard and many did not survive. "The government estimated that about half of the farmers →

DORA EXAMINES PEARLS COLLECTED TO MAKE A NECKLACE, WHICH CAN TAKE YEARS TO BUILD. (PHOTO: BILL KALINA)



PEARLS ARE NOT JUST A BUSINESS BUT A PASSION FOR DORA FOURCADE. (PHOTO: BILL KALINA)



A STRAND OF CIRCLE PEARLS. (PHOTO: BILL KALINA)

