



Dora Fourcade

Tahiti's Rarest Pearl

When Dora Fourcade was 18, she and her brother, Jean Pierre, who was 21, bought a fledgling pearl farm with a small production on the French Polynesian atoll of Aratika, about 485 kilometers from Tahiti. It was 1978, and the Tahitian pearl industry was still in its infancy.

By Deborah A. Yonick

Natives to Tahiti, the siblings, who had lost both their parents, took a risk and used part of their inheritance to buy the company, known as Pacific Perles. Their gamble proved worthy. Today, it is one of the leading producers of Tahitian cultured pearls. And, Dora is one of the few women at the helm of a major pearl company in what remains a male dominated industry.

Dora credits her brother for spotting the business opportunity in the venture, joking that she recognized the chance to own pearls. "I was a student at the time and off to study abroad," she explains. "My brother was the one who developed the farm." She described Jean Pierre as a fast study. "He learned as he went along. He improved the techniques and grew the farm, which when we bought it produced 5,000 pearls a year."

Today, Dora manages the two farms on Aratika owned by Pacific Perles. Jean Pierre had sold his shares in the company to Dora in 1997. She also is a partner in a farm on Rangiroa northeast of Tahiti, Gauguin's Pearl, along with her brother and three others, one of whom is the farm manager, Philippe Cabral. Between both farms on Aratika and Rangiroa, nearly one million pearls are produced a year, a little more than 1.5 tons.

The land area of Aratika is about 10 square kilometers, and the total lagoon surface is 30,000 acres. Pacific Perles manages one nursery farm to collect spat and grow



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)





A SORTER EXAMINES PEARLS AT THE PACIFIC PERLES HEAD-QUARTERS IN PAPEETE, TAHITI. (PHOTO: BILL KALINA)



stopped producing pearls.” But what kept Dora afloat was a cash reserve to absorb the shock. “I’d say we’re breaking even at this point,” she shares. “We had to reduce operating costs. But the experience has made us

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more efficient. We’re lean and mean and more selective in how we spend our money.”

Most Important

In addition to running Pacific Perles and being a part of Gauguin’s Pearl, Dora is very active in promoting Tahiti’s pearl. She serves as the vice president of the professional pearl producers association known as, SPPP (Syndicat Professionnel des Producteurs de Perles), consisting of the ten top producers in French Polynesia, and sits on the board of GIE Perles de Tahiti, the marketing arm of the local industry.

Dora, who says she has developed a real passion for Tahitian pearls, describes her main objective in her industry service to protect the future of Tahiti’s pearl. “I want to see the black pearl continue to be produced under good conditions with a slow and steady rate of growth of production to maintain its value on the market. I also want to see the continued promotion of Tahiti’s pearl worldwide.” She especially wants to promote circle pearls. “People may think circle pearls are inferior because they have ridges. But those with great luster, in roundish or drop shapes with all these different colors, are absolutely gorgeous. Our company and the pearl promotion office are trying to educate the industry and consumers about different shapes that are much less expensive but much more interesting, especially for fashion pieces.”

She notes that many things have changed in the business over the years. “In the

beginning, we had a clear channel of distribution; basically all of the pearls produced in Tahiti went to Japan. Now the channels are not so clear. I’m open to ideas, but I want to do it ethically. I deplore [what] I have been observing in the luxury brand channels where the lines of distribution are crossed. The channels are shrinking. Do you go with the flow? I’m asking myself now what to do.”

But, Dora is no stranger to holding her ground in the face of adversity. Being a woman in a male-dominated industry has had its challenges, even as recent as eight years ago when she took over Pacific Perles. “I think that Tahiti is similar to most Western countries, in that it may be a little more difficult for women to establish themselves initially,” Dora describes. “First, they have to earn the respect of their peers; once they have established that they’re as competent as any man, the criticism subsides.”

She says she had to fight those same issues in 1997. “My brother had run this company very successfully and some people were not convinced that Pacific Perles would survive without him. What concerned me most at the beginning was the reaction of our Asian customers, but this concern disappeared quickly, as many of them have become personal friends.”

Moreover, Dora is faced with commuting to work from Los Angeles, where she raises two children, Eva, now 13, Marc, 18. “I lived in the US for a long time before going back to Tahiti to run my pearl farm,” she explains. “My children are American-born and prefer to live in the U.S., which makes my life a little complicated.” She credits the children’s father with easing the anguish and guilt she experiences with monthly travel. “He’s a great dad. When I’m not there, I feel they’re in good hands, and that’s important.”

But, despite these challenges, including the severe price crash of 2001, Pacific Perles is still in business. “I guess the doubters have their answer. As for macho men, I guess they do not come near my office.” **JQ**