

# GUIDE TO CULTURED PEARL QUALITY

Those who know nothing about pearls spend next to nothing on them. This guide to pearl quality is meant to make know-nothings into know-it-alls—and big spenders.





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# HOW TO USE THE CARD

When all is said and done, *MJ's* pearl-quality counter card is a conversation piece that is meant to position the jeweler as an authority on cultured pearls. While it can serve as a display item, it is intended to be a central prop in selling. Since the card's first job is to establish the jeweler's credibility, the sooner it is introduced the better.

Given the lack of pearl-quality familiarization tools and consumer education programs, reluctance to incorporate *MJ's* pearl-quality counter card into cultured pearl sales presentations is understandable. Although it gives jewelers a much-needed opportunity to cast themselves in the role of educator regarding pearls, this is a role few know how to play. Indeed, the ability to present the pearl as a gem with as much variety as the diamond is often as much a revelation to jewelers as it is to their customers.

Hence training in the use of *MJ's* pearl-quality counter card is imperative to feel comfortable using it as a teaching tool. Let's briefly review its layout and the thinking behind it.

As you can see, the card consists of five rows of comparison pearls which serve as "photo masters" to illustrate the relative quality differences between pearls in terms of lustre, surface, shape, color and size—the 5C's, if you will, of pearl beauty. Since it is impossible for photos to serve as substitutes for actual master stones, our chart is meant for general reference purposes only. It is not intended, nor can it be used, for grading or appraising. It is simply a teaching and, above all, a selling tool.

However, it is hoped that *MJ's* pearl-quality counter card reminds retailers and shoppers alike of the similarities between the quality factors for diamonds, with which the buying public is already familiar, and those for pearls, with which it is not. By so doing, cultured pearls benefit from the universal acceptance of the 4C's for diamonds. Jewelers should stress that pearls are the only gem other than diamonds that lend themselves to easy quality evaluation. The card constitutes proof of this statement.

Although jewelers are free to discuss pearl-quality factors in any order they want, the sequence of factors—lustre, surface, shape, color and size—on the card is deliberate, not arbitrary, the result of interviews with jewelers across America who are versed in pearl-quality education.

These interviews made it apparent that lustre becomes the chief aesthetic factor to consumers once they have become educated about pearls. What's more, since there is usually a correlation between lustre and nacre thickness, explaining lustre is key to explaining the overall state of the cultured pearl market and the recent excess of thin-skinned pearls. While sellers of low-quality pearls are usually hush-hush about pearl market facts of life, sellers of better- and high-quality pearls have

nothing to hide. By steering shoppers to higher-lustre, thicker-nacre pearls, jewelers assure customers of buying long-lasting pearls. In this way, explaining pearl beauty is a form of consumer protection.

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# PUTTING THE CARD TO WORK

Since *MJ's* pearl-quality counter card is meant to forge a teacher-student relationship between the jeweler and his customer, it is best to have the card featured prominently in the pearl showcase ready for use. Even browsers can benefit from studying the card because it introduces them to aesthetic factors about pearls they probably had no idea existed. "Most consumers don't know what they're looking at when they look at a strand of pearls," says Bob Moeller of Moeller's Jewelers, St. Paul, Minn. "So how can they be expected to know what they want when they are shopping for pearls?"

For this reason, Moeller features a box of cultured pearl strands graded for lustre, surface, shape and color in his pearl counter. This set of masters is invariably the start-off point for dialogue between him and shoppers. Similarly, *MJ's* pearl-quality counter card provides an opener for discussion between jewelers and customers. As important, it positions the user as an educator eager to share knowledge.

Playing mentor is a role that bothers some jewelers. And not because they're selfish about sharing knowledge, but because they fear playing teacher will waste too much precious time. If you're such a jeweler, be aware that the pearl card is meant as a time-saver. "Once you can show the differences in pearl beauty rather than have to explain them, you shorten the time of the sale considerably," says Rusty Murray.

But even if jewelers don't save time with the card, they may find that using it leads to more meaningful time with shoppers. "Make a customer first and a sale second," Murray advises.

With this goal in mind, he recommends that jewelers use *MJ's* card as a chance to give a much-needed crash course in pearl basics. "It won't take long and it will mean a lot," he says.

In short, introduce the card at the earliest opportunity in the pearl sale, perhaps as soon as customers mention they are looking for them. And always refer to the card when you discuss a factor of pearl beauty or when you question customers about the kind of quality they want.

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# THE EDUCATION PROCESS

From the moment *MJ's* pearl-quality counter card is incorporated into a sales presentation, the jeweler is able to talk the pearl profession-

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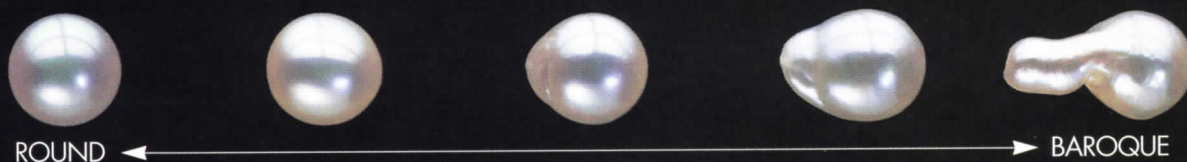
## LUSTRE



## SURFACE



## SHAPE



## COLOR



## SIZE





## LUSTRE



al's language about pearl beauty. Indeed, the card makes the jeweler into a one-man Berlitz for pearl lingo. Letting the customer in on the language of the trade and being able to define it in concrete terms by showing photos on a card builds confidence in both the seller and his pearls. Look how well this technique works with diamonds. *MJ's* counter card is meant to make it work for pearls, too.

## LUSTRE

When consumers first make side-by-side comparisons of pearls, they invariably note that some look gleaming while others look dull. On closer inspection, they notice that the reflected images of overhead lights are crisp and distinct in the gleaming pearls while they are smudgy and washed-out in the dull ones. The trade describes the sharpness and intensity of reflected light from a pearl's surface as lustre. And jeweler after jeweler who teaches pearl quality tells us this flips from being the least to the most appreciated factor of pearl beauty once explained.

That's why lustre is at the top of *MJ's* pearl-quality counter card. Just as advocates of finely cut diamonds stress the brilliance and fire of properly proportioned stones, advocates of fine pearls stress the brightness and glow of high-lustre pearls. Like the radiance of diamonds, this glow is what first strikes the casual observer of pearls when they are viewed from a distance and none of their other quality characteristics are or can be as conspicuous.

As lustre is defined and customers see the difference for themselves, bring in essential pearl product knowledge. Start by explaining that no pearls in the world can match the Japanese variety for this trait. Why? Because Japanese pearls grow in waters whose colder temperatures affect the crystal structure of the nacre and make it potentially more lustrous than the nacre of cultured pearls grown elsewhere. Suddenly, lustre becomes a major value-element in the cultured pearl purchase.

The importance of lustre is further reinforced by explaining its relationship to nacre thickness. Here jewelers like Paula Thrasher drum into customers the point that high lustre is an indicator of good nacre thickness and, as such,

is an assurance of durability. "Most consumers aren't even aware that thin-nacre pearls with life expectancies of a few years are being sold," she says. "But when you show them a typical low-end strand of chalky, lustreless pearls, they often realize these are the kinds of pearls they were shown in other stores."

A word of caution here: don't overplay the correlation between nacre thickness and lustre, since South Sea pearls usually have deeper nacre coatings than Japanese pearls but lack their intense lustre. Nevertheless, you can bet money that a chalky pearl with a faint or indistinct reflection is as leanly layered with nacre as an electroplated earring is with gold, if there's any nacre at all. What's more, customers don't have to buy pearls with peak lustre ratings to be satisfied with their strands in terms of quality and durability. "If you buy a strand with medium lustre, you're still buying a strand in the upper 30% echelon of overall pearl production," says Dente.

## SURFACE

Like lustre, surface is an aspect of pearl beauty about which consumers know little. But ignorance of lustre does not inspire the unrealistic expectations about pearls that ignorance of pearl-complexion matters does. Ask the average pearl shopper to close his eyes and imagine the surface of a pearl and he will probably conjure up a porcelain-smooth finish. Given the pearl's almost archetypal association with purity and femininity, it's easy to see why the average pearl-strand buyer, at least 75% of whom are men buying them as wedding gifts, lets his imagination run wild when asked to describe the ideal pearl's complexion.

This is where the strong similarity between pearl-surface and diamond-clarity comes to the rescue. Consumers can be told, with no fear of let-down, that just as few diamonds are flawless, few pearls are perfectly smooth. The presence of blemishes, whether slight, mild or severe, is called "spotting." And given the fact that a good-quality pearl spends at least 18 months growing in an oyster, rare is the pearl that is completely devoid of surface imperfections.

Again, the similarity to diamonds helps consumers adjust to the possibility of skin prob-

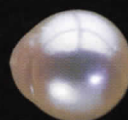
## SURFACE



## SHAPE



ROUND



BAROQUE

lems for pearls. Usually, the problem is nothing more than a few tiny wrinkles, bumps, welts and the like—flaws invisible at arm's length. So just as a consumer will often need a microscope to see diamond flaws, he will often have to peer at a pearl close up to see its blemishes. Stand a few feet away from the same pearl and you'll need the eyes of a hawk to see the same flaws, especially if the lustre of the pearl is good. Lustre can drown out pearl blemishes the same way brilliance can drown out diamond flaws. This being the case, the jeweler might suggest to the budget-minded consumer a strand of less expensive pearls with slight or mild spotting but enough lustre to hide it. Such trade-offs, the jeweler can explain, are like buying finely cut I1 diamonds whose brilliance and fire make flaws as hard to find as Waldo but still keep stones affordable.

## SHAPE

Possibly the most common preconception about pearls is that they are round. Indeed, roundness is an almost archetypal expectation of pearls. But just as jewelers are finding consumers increasingly receptive to fancy-shape diamonds, some jewelers are starting to find consumers receptive to fancy-shape equivalents for pearls: off-round, drop and baroque shapes. In fact, Eve Alfille in Evanston, Ill., has built a prosperous business as a specialist in fancy-shape pearls. Her approach to selling is as exotic as the shapes she carries. "In America, there is more resistance to buying non-round pearls than in Europe," she explains. "So you must create an environment in which that resistance can be broken down."

For Alfille, that means "removing consumers from the normal jewelry store environment" with its emphasis on round pearls and placing them in "a different world" where the emphasis is on fancy shapes. "I ask every customer the same question: 'Do you like symmetry or asymmetry?'" She continues, "Ten percent say they must have symmetry and another 10% say they must have asymmetry. That leaves 80% who are, to varying degrees, open to asymmetry. My store is designed to persuade that 80%."

While few jewelers are willing to make as

heavy a commitment to fancy-shape pearls as Alfille, they can take some pointers from her if they want to increase sales of drop shapes and baroques.

First, develop a positive attitude toward all non-round pearls—whether of oval, drop or baroque shape. That means to stop treating them as deviations from the ideal of roundness.

Second, give non-rounds space to themselves where they can be appreciated in their own right. Forcing them to compete with rounds is a form of second-class citizenship that perpetuates inferiority notions.

Once non-round shapes—whether oval, drop or baroque—become separate genres, each with its own quality standards, sales are bound to increase, especially when consumers learn that they are generally much less expensive than rounds. But don't base your case for fancies on cost alone. Mix economics with aesthetics. "By the age of 40, most consumers are open to things that depart from the norm," Alfille says. "Exotic pearls give these consumers a way to express this openness"—as well as the deepening need for individuality that accompanies it.

## COLOR

American consumers share somewhat Nordic ideals for pearls and feminine beauty. Or at least most of Alfille's customers do. Usually male, her pearl customers all conjure up the same rose-white hue when asked to describe the ideal pearl color and the same blonde, blue-eyed features when asked to describe the ideal woman.

The second question is a trap meant to make her customers see the unreality of these ideals. Immediately after describing a woman who is nothing less than a white goddess, Alfille asks, "What percentage of the population is blonde and blue-eyed?" It's a rhetorical question that makes customers examine and re-think their ideals. In this way, Alfille weans customers from their attachment to the rose-white color ideal and develops a fondness for other pearl colors.

Jeweler Vince Dente is more direct in the way he breaks customers of their attachment

## COLOR



ROSE



SILVER/WHITE



CREAM



GOLD



BLUE/GRAY



# SIZE



to rose-colored pearls. He simply drapes different-color strands over their wrists and asks shoppers to decide which best matches their skin tone. In California, with its ethnic diversity and sun-worshiper tans, lots of colors besides white and rose-white, the two most popular pearl colors, look good against the skin. *MJ's* pearl-quality counter card can be used to make the same point. Also cite changing attitudes about color in the diamond world where it's easier than ever before to break consumer loyalty to whites by showing customers creams and golds. The new popularity of cape and champagne diamonds sets the stage for acceptance of the pearl-world equivalents to fancy-color diamonds.

## SIZE

A few years ago, pearl size was an area where consumers were very flexible. So once pearl beauty was explained to them and they sud-

denly wanted costly high-lustre, round, nearly spotless, top-color strands, the only way to hold down price was to downsize. But that was when Japan's farms were still producing scads of 5mm to 7mm sizes. (Millimeters are to pearls what carat weight is to diamonds.)

Now the emphasis in Japan is on growing 7mm to 10mm sizes. So smaller sizes are in relatively short supply and their prices have been rising around 15% a year. Meanwhile, large sizes are abundant in better-to-fine grades and their prices have been holding fairly steady (despite withering dollar devaluation). As a result, strands of large Japanese cultured pearls present some of the best values in fine jewelry today, especially because of growing competition in this size range from the South Seas. When explaining size, jewelers have nothing to lose by making customers aware of the many good buys in 8mm to 10mm Japanese and South Sea cultured pearls currently available.

## MATCHING

Before consumers are given guidance in pearl beauty with tools such as *MJ's* pearl-quality counter card, pearls all look pretty much alike. Or so consumers think. It is a common defense mechanism to minimize differences—even when obvious—between gems rather than admit to ignorance of them. But once consumers learn about the quality characteristics of cultured pearls, and feel confident about their ability to judge them, they expect strands to exhibit greater overall uniformity. The degree to which pearls in strands blend together and harmonize with one another is called "matching." And while matching *per se* is not depicted on *MJ's* pearl-quality card, it follows that consumers will become far more aware of and demanding about this aesthetic factor once they are educated about pearl beauty.

Indeed, jewelers who educate customers about pearl quality told us they were continually complimented on how much better matched their strands were than those in competitor stores where no attempt to educate was made.

As pearl-quality education becomes a more common occurrence, consumers will expect better matching than they're used to seeing now. Indeed, poor matching will be seen as a sign of sloppiness or, worse, ignorance on the jeweler's part. Such jewelers will have no one but themselves to blame when they find pearl-selling even more of a struggle. Meanwhile, jewelers committed to pearl-quality education will slowly find the tide of battle has turned in their favor. □

*Girls Love Pearls*  
brisbane's pearl specialist

### Girls Love Pearls

Shop 17, Balcony Level, Brisbane Arcade  
160 Queen Street Mall  
BRISBANE QLD 4000  
Australia

PO Box 12573  
George Street  
BRISBANE QLD 4003  
Australia

Ph (07) 3012 8361  
Email: [mark@girlslovepearls.com.au](mailto:mark@girlslovepearls.com.au)  
Website: [girlslovepearls.com.au](http://girlslovepearls.com.au)  
Facebook: [facebook.com/girlslovepearlsofficial](https://facebook.com/girlslovepearlsofficial)  
Instagram: [instagram.com/girlslovepearlsbrisbane](https://instagram.com/girlslovepearlsbrisbane)  
Youtube: [bit.ly/glpoofficial](https://bit.ly/glpoofficial)