

PEARLY BLACKS

*When a gem is made by an
animal and cultivated in the
sea, much can go awry.
Tahitian pearls are
among the world's most
ravishing, yet the farms
producing them almost went bust.
One man helped save them.*

BY LAUREL DELP • PHOTOGRAPHS
BY KATHRYN HILLIER AND REBECCA VEIT

Tahitian pearls in their natural habitat.

Robert Wan sets off an exquisite single pearl with a swathe of gray French mousseline silk in the Fleur d'eau Douce necklace (to order at H. Lorenzo, \$1,267). Michael Schmidt's cheeky pendant attaches a skull to a pale gray pearl (\$445 from Kreiling & Dodd). Earrings by Utopia pair Tahitian pearls with moonstones to haunting effect (\$5,300 at selected Saks stores; matching bracelet available).





he emperor of pearls looked satisfied but weary, as if all he really wanted to do was bolt for home. Robert Wan slid through the crowd at his winter show on a hot December night in Papeete, Tahiti, a group of attractive pearl-encrusted women attached to him like pilot fish. A teenage model towered over him, her formidable necklace resembling a pearl breastplate. Flashbulbs burst around the local socialites, including the French territorial governor, who was accompanied by guards in writing white naval attire. Women draped in loops of black pearls the size of marbles balanced champagne flutes while they peered into the softly lit jewelry cases of gleaming Tahitian black pearls.

Black pearls—called *poa rava* in Tahitian—are second only to South Sea pearls in value (and are followed by the Japanese Akoya), but, as I soon discovered, none of them are actually black. They're far more exotic, ranging from pale silvery gray to deep charcoal, with striking iridescent tones of green, blue, aubergine, even gold. Some of the darker pearls display multiple colors as they're turned in the light, just as the mother-of-pearl, or nacre, on the interior of the black-lipped oysters in which they're cultured can bear lines of blue, teal, green, and purple. Once you've seen the Tahitians, your mother's pearls suddenly seem pallid and puritanical.

Wan (pronounced Vahn) produces more than half of Tahiti's pearls and runs the most prestigious auctions on the world market (in Hong Kong and Kobe, Japan). Yet eight years ago he found himself facing the imminent collapse of the entire industry—an industry that itself was only three decades old.

After tourism, cultured black pearls are the most important segment of Tahiti's economy, and both industries are mere infants. Before the jet age Tahiti was out of reach for the average tourist and, though the French Polynesian government (the five archipelagos, called Tahiti by natives, are a territory of France) sponsored some Japanese-led experiments in culturing black-lipped oysters in the early 1960s, it wasn't until the '70s that pearl farming took off. By the end of the '80s, farming was becoming so viable that the jewels were considered Tahiti's "black gold," and the rush was on.

By the late 1990s, the rest of Oceania had taken note of Tahiti's success. The Cook Islands had begun producing black pearls. Two farms opened in the Marshall Islands, and someone had started a successful farm in Fiji. (In 2007 the last farm in the Marshalls closed, due to insufficient financial backing.) The Japanese had played around unsuccessfully with turning pearls black using silver nitrate, but the Chinese, who'd already overtaken the Japanese in production of their signature Akoya pearls, perfected a method for dyeing and irradiating freshwater pearls that yielded results that were startlingly like real black pearls.

For a big producer like Wan, the idea of foreign competition wasn't particularly threatening. But the stampe-de-join in the bonanza once black pearls became prized internationally resulted in the opening of some 2,700 farms in French Polynesia and a market so flooded with pearls, many of poor quality, that prices plunged precipitously. "People are dumb," Wan told me. "They spoil the market, the reputation, the credibility, I pushed the government a lot at that time, told them we must regulate, otherwise everything will collapse. They listened to me because they know I am a logical man."

So what do you do when it looks as if all is lost? Rebrand, of course.

In 2001 Tahiti's black pearls officially became Tahitian Cultured Pearls. The government took oversight of the pearl industry away from the Department of Fisheries and created a Ministry of Pearl Culture. Regulations went into (and out of, according to the political winds) effect, and the market slowly began to right itself, though it has never recovered anything like its pre-glut prices.

Today Wan has cut back to four farms, and in 2002 he took a seven-month hiatus in production, hoping it would speed the recovery in prices. His share of the market fell from 85 percent to just over 50 percent, but he claims he welcomes competition. An up-and-coming jeweler named Tahia Collins is someone he admires. Aside from winning international awards for her designs, Collins, a former Miss Moorea, has a business model that includes American marketing experts to train her sales staff, a 30-day return policy, and a service center in the U.S. She has 8 boutiques, including her Moorea flagship, several in resorts, and one on the cruise ship *Paul Gauguin*.

"It's not good to have a monopoly too long," Wan says, grinning amiably. He was half serious, half mocking my earnest note taking. He's in his mid-70s now, inclined toward a droll view of life, but you can still catch flashes of the driven young entrepreneur who in 1974 talked his >



Live the dream: Le Maitai Dream Fakarava has no air-conditioning. Do we care?

VISITING

Arrive:

Air Tahiti Nui makes the eight-hour flight from Los Angeles to Papeete twice a day on a still new fleet of Airbuses with cheerful lagoon-blue interiors. The cabin staff is attentive, and the bathrooms are immaculate. Seats in business class don't fully recline, but everything is done well, from the food service down to good earphones and pillows. airtahitiniui-usa.com

Stay:

LE MAITAI DREAM FAKARAVA
The 30 bungalows here turn into ovens in the afternoon sun, and there's no air-conditioning. That said, the food is pretty good, and the service is pleasant. Fakarava is one of Tahiti's most gorgeous islands, with top-flight diving and areas where you can walk forever across white sands in thigh-deep turquoise water.
FAKARAVA
689/63-000
RATES: \$330-\$470
hotelmaitai.com

MANIHU PEARL BEACH RESORT

The bungalows suspended over the water are a bit small here, but they're beautifully designed, with light wood, glass side tables, and glass counters in the bathrooms. And they're over deep enough water and coral that tossing out half an old baguette will draw everything from greedy mullets to parrot fish to Picasso and reef sharks. In addition, guests can visit one of the best of the 67 pearl farms in this small atoll's lagoon. The tour is ideal, because there's no shop attached and no pressure to buy.

But you can buy, at the resort's shop, Pearls by Corrier, stocked from the farm.
TURIPOAO, MANIHU
800/657-3275
RATES: \$295-\$630
pearlresorts.com

MOOREA PEARL BEACH RESORT

This hotel is the site of the legendary Bai Hai resort, started in the 1960s by three runaway American professionals known as the "Bali Hai Boys." Accommodations range from a reasonably priced conventional room to garden bungalows (some with private pools) to over-the-water bungalows. The small, attractive spa is full service, with its own line of products using local ingredients.
MAHAREPA, MOOREA
800/657-3275
RATES: \$285-\$715
pearlresorts.com

SHERATON TAHITI

A 200-room business hotel (no bungalows here), the Sheraton has improved in recent years (better service and rooms, hardwood floors, good beds, and a quasi-colonial decor are standard), and you can't beat the access to downtown Papeete—walking distance to Robert Wan's flagship store, with its extensive jewelry collection, and also to his informative Pearl Museum.
PK2 CÔTE MER
AUAÉ FAABA
PAPEETE
689/864-848
RATES: \$250-\$445
starwood.com

ST. REGIS BORA BORA

Tahiti's most extravagant resort has immense bungalows that are spread out over a large enough area that even the most determined walker will soon be

calling for a golf cart. Lagoon restaurant is from Jean-Georges Vongerichten, and there's also a small sushi spot. The Robert Wan shop here is mini, but it carries top-quality jewelry and accessories.
MOTU OME'E
BORA BORA
689/607-888
RATES: \$1,060-\$4,380
stregis.com/borabora

Shop:

GILBERT WANE PEARLS OF TAHITI

Wane's shop isn't in French Polynesia; it's in Denver. Both original jewelry designs and loose pearls are available, priced from \$300 to \$50,000
200 CLAYTON ST.
STE. 100,
DENVER
888/355-5569
gilbertwane.com

ROBERT WAN

Wan is the undisputed emperor of pearls. In addition to shops in Tahiti's high-end resorts like the St. Regis, he has branches in Paris, Dubai, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and elsewhere. His prices start at \$200 and rise into the stratosphere—the withholds the most valuable pearls (over 14 millimeters in diameter) for special buyers.
BLVD. POMARE,
PAPEETE
689/461-527
robertwan.com

TAHIA COLLINS

Collins's flagship store on the island of Moorea and she has outposts c Tahiti and Bora Bora, as well as on the cruise ship *Paul Gauguin*. Call and the shops will arrange transportation from your hotel. Collins has won awards for her original designs, which incorporate Tahitian pearls with 18 karat gold and pavé diamonds. Prices range from \$100 to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

TAHITI PEARL MARKET

Family-owned Tahiti Pearl Market has shops on Tahiti and Bora Bora and sells loose pearls as well as readymade settings. You can choose your pearls and have them set into one of the designs within hours. Prices start at \$100 and rise to the tens of thousands of dollars.
23 RUE DE COLETTE,
PAPEETE
tahitipearlmart.com

PEARLS BY CORRIER

The shop at Manihi Pearl Beach Resort sells loose pearls and original jewelry, using pearls from the farm in the atoll's lagoon that guests can visit. Prices range from \$80 into the thousands.
TURIPOAO, MANIHU
800/657-3275



Tahia Collins is in the new wave of Tahitian pearl jewelry.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHERS

Brooklynites Kathryn Hillier (far left) and Rebecca Veit graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2003. Their collaborations focus on still lifes that, Hillier says, "have an intrinsic history or a sense of place." Their "Never Wilting Flower Project" was exhibited at the Taylor DeCordoba Gallery in Los Angeles and at Gallery 10G in New York. Of their shoot for *Culture+Travel*, Veit says: "Working bags and bags of black Tahitian pearls was the most inspiring thing ever. But it was incredibly bizarre to make our funky still lives under the watchful eye of an armed guard, hired to protect the jewels."



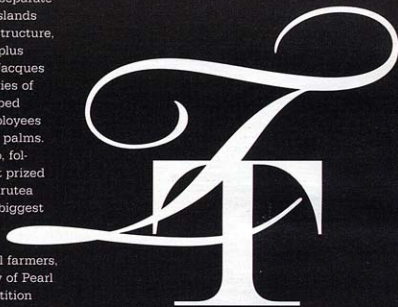
two brothers into going in on a Mangareva-pearl farm that had never actually produced a pearl. The 7th of 11 children, he was born in Tahiti to a Hakka Chinese couple for whom money was always a problem. Casting around for his niche, he sold cars, worked in the food business, and went to Japan seeking investors for a hotel project—just in time for the '70s oil crisis. Then, through a series of chance encounters, he met the grandson of Kokichi Mikimoto, the legendary founder of Japan's cultured-pearl business. Mikimoto had perfected the art of culturing pearls in the early 20th century, and it was he who made the pearl necklace an indispensable part of every well-off woman's wardrobe. Mikimoto's grandson knew about the '60s experiments in cultivating *pinctada margaritifera*, the black-lipped oyster. He told Wan that if he could produce good black pearls, he'd buy them. Wan went home and bought the farm.

"But—how to make good pearl?" Wan asked, casting a comically stricken look my way. "The pearl is the only gem from a live animal, and agriculture is a very risky business. Anything can happen. Bloom. Bacteria. Storm."

The average time from start to harvest on a pearl farm is five years—three years for the oysters to mature enough to be grafted, then up to two more for a pearl to form. But Wan and his brothers persevered, and, as promised, Mikimoto bought the first small harvest in 1977. By the time the three brothers went their separate ways in 1994, Wan had farms on eight remote islands on which he'd had to create the complete infrastructure, from plumbing to power to homes for workers, plus an airline (his first craft was the famed singer Jacques Brel's old private jet). He's endured all the vagaries of pearl farming, including a 1996 cyclone that wiped out his farm on Nengo Nengo—and that his employees survived only by lashing themselves to coconut palms. In 1995 Wan opened his first retail jewelry shop, followed by others as far afield as Dubai. His most prized pearls come from his pride and joy, the atoll Marutea Sud, which he bought in 1984. "I still make the biggest and the best," he says with a Sino-Gallic shrug. "For how long, I don't know."

Today there are just under 600 Tahitian pearl farmers, says Anne-Sandrine Talfer, chief of the Ministry of Pearl Culture. In an effort to stay ahead of the competition and improve quality, 11 government-sponsored labs are working on everything from increasing the rate of successful grafts to genetically speeding the formation of nacre and finding reliable methods for manipulating color. All farms must adhere to one absolute law: No

Tahitian cultured pearl can be exported with nacre less than 0.8 millimeters in thickness (although 1 millimeter is normal). Producers caught selling inferior pearls on the black market are fined. Talfer took me to the pearl X-ray room. X-rays are the only way to measure the thickness of the nacre, and workers inspect 30,000 to 80,000 pearls a day, turning them to make sure the nacre is even. Pearls that don't make the cut are destroyed, and the producers are given very little compensation. Many small producers chafe at this and consider the 0.8 millimeter law draconian (the Japanese Akoya pearls generally have much thinner nacre), and not everyone agrees that destroying low-grade pearls keeps the market for top-grade pearls high. But Wan and the other big producers have proved that quality control is key to maintaining the pearl's allure.



he next morning black clouds unfolded across the horizon, and Fakarava's lagoon, usually a tranquil stretch of limpid turquoise water, was dark and choppy. I was picked up at the main dock by a battered fishing boat piloted by Mote Teuira, the easygoing, barefoot foreman of Gilbert Wane's large pearl farm, Poe Mana, on neighboring Tuao. Wane is Wan's nephew (two of the brothers spell their names Wane: only Robert uses Wan). We were accompanied by Paul Sloan, an American about to start working for Wane, who was here for the first time.



Black magic: a strand from Gilbert Wane (\$21,420, left) and a Yohji Yamamoto Stormy Weather Mikimoto Black South Sea and Akoya earring (\$3,500).

BUYING A TAHITIAN PEARL

While no pearl with nacre (the substance that the oyster uses to coat the interior of its shell) under 0.8 millimeters may be exported from Tahiti, there are no regulations for pearls set in jewelry or those sold on the local market. Reputable jewelers provide certificates of authenticity. But many a bargain-hunting tourist has smugly returned home with that great craft market bargain only to find that within a year the nacre has worn away and all that's left is the nucleus. If it's cheap, it's cheap for a reason.

Tahitian pearls are much larger than the more familiar Japanese pearls, the Akoyas. Those come from a considerably smaller oyster, take half the time to harvest, and are more consistently round. Japanese pearls are now produced in China and only drilled and sold in Japan. They are routinely bleached, dyed, and polished. To detect a fake, examine the hole through a loupe for color concentration—pearls can be dyed only after drilling. Also, a "black" pearl smaller than 8 millimeters has probably been treated or dyed, and identical pearls are unlikely to be real—Tahitians are unique and hard to match. Finally, rub the pearl gently against your teeth. It should feel a bit rough.

Size:

Tahitian pearls are judged by size, shape, quality, and color and graded Top Gem, A, B, C, and D. A very large pearl (14 millimeters) rarely has much color and can take up to nine years to produce, since it's the result of repeated grafting. First-graft pearls range from 8 to 11 millimeters in diameter. Once an oyster has formed one of these, its gonad has stretched, and it can be

grafted again with a nucleus the size of the harvested pearl. Robert Wan, using secret techniques, has gone as high as four grafts.

Shape:

Round pearls, which are extremely rare, are the most expensive. Drop pearls and semi-round are next. Circled, semi-baroque, and baroque (uneven) shapes are also prized. Within each category, the pearls are graded.

Quality:

Quality has to do with the surface of the pearl. Orient refers to the nacre's inner glow, luster to its reflected light—you can see your reflection in a high-luster pearl. Since pearls are created by living organisms, surface flaws are inevitable. A Top Gem is flawless, however, with high luster.

Color:

Americans go for teal "peacock" pearls, while Germans love blues and purples. The darker colors are more valued and more expensive. Be warned: A new chocolate color that's popping up is the result of postharvest heat manipulation.

Care:

Never put your pearls in water (even seawater). Clean them with a soft cotton cloth; you can use almond oil to bring out the luster. If you must wash them, never use tap water (which is chlorinated), which is distilled. Never let alcohol near them—including perfume, hairspray, or deodorant. Don't leave pearls in a safe or a box for too long—if you're not wearing them, put them near a source of moisture. Even a nearby glass of water will do. Pearls are living things; if they're left too long, they'll desiccate, crack, and die. —L.D.

ERE SHOP

es beyond uth Pacific.

ARI 35-4274 .com

CARTIER
800/227-8437
cartier.com

DE GRISOGONO
212/439-4220
degrisogono.com

GILBERT WANE
880/355-5569
gilbertwane.com

LINDA LEE JOHNSON
BARNEYS NEW YORK
212/826-8900
barneys.com

MARCO BICEGO
888/424-2346
marcobicego.com

MICHAEL SCHMIDT
KREILING & DODD
213/884-8950

MIKIMOTO
800/701-2023
mikimotoamerica.com

ROBERT WAN
H.LORENZO
310/659-1432

UTOPIA
SAKS FIFTH AVENUE
877/551-7257
saksfifthavenue.com

> as the centerpiece. They're impressive, but perhaps more impressive is the James Turrell "sky space" in the adjacent room. His sky spaces are experiential artworks in which you look at the sky through an edgeless opening in the ceiling of a specially designed room. Sounds simple, but it's shockingly effective. Essentially the sky becomes a moving painting on the ceiling. Uniquely, this sky space includes a 45-minute light program, during which the white-walled interior of the room is slowly illuminated by hidden lights. As we settle in, colors start to rise and fade, creating hypnotic optical effects against the changing sky, like a kinetic Turrell rambling across the spectrum. At times the ceiling hazes over and the hole momentarily disappears, only to rematerialize in new light. At the end everyone files out, strangely relaxed.

Which is a perfect preparation for the Jacuzzi. The *Cultural Melting Bath* is the third such artwork by Cai Guo-Qiang, the expatriate Chinese artist who will create a major work for the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics. Cai chose the site for its "energy flow"—he's a feng shui adherent—and for the view, which includes the bridge to Shikoku, a much larger island, and the port of its capital city, Takamatsu. Framed by trees, a perfect triangle of a small island emerges from the water in the middle of the bay.

Following the printed guidelines dutifully provided by Yoriyuki, we soak in contemplation. "The Monet makes sense here," Marina says after some silence. "Monet was the first to paint light. Or rather to not paint light by leaving certain places empty." If Japanese artists understood the power of the brush-stroke you don't make, and the water you don't see, so did Monet. "He also understood light in all conditions. That's what the Rheims cathedral and other series are about. The Zen gardeners and Turrell, too. They're all concerned with how light affects perception."

By now, our light is changing. The overcast sky dims and turns toward rain. We can see the weather coming in across the water, a wall of advancing drizzle. Contours soften. Slowly, inevitably, we watch the coming clouds overtake the bay. First the bridge fades away. Then Shikoku starts to disappear. Finally, Takamatsu and the port are gone. It's as if a scene from one of those ink scrolls has materialized before our eyes. All that's left is that perfect triangle of an island, framed by trees now darkened with rain. The scene is misty, tranquil, a natural gesture. "You know," Marina says, "this Jacuzzi really works." ■

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Fakarava and Tuao are 2 of the 76 atolls (and one limestone island) in French Polynesia's vast Tuamotu archipelago, which is an area covering 20,000 square kilometers. All but a few of Tahiti's pearl farms are here in the rich, aquarium-like lagoons of the atolls, which are inside rings of coral reefs that are topped by chains of flat, sandy islets called *motus*. From the air the *motus* look like necklaces tossed carelessly onto the sea.

Gilbert Wane is avidly maintaining Tuao's pristine lagoon, which is part of the Unesco biosphere, and the island is unoccupied except for the pearl farm and accommodations for workers. As we bored slowly out of Fakarava's lagoon, we could see a thin, deliquescent strip of green in the distance. After an hour we were inside Tuao's lagoon, and the green clarified into crowns of coconut palms, their fronds waving irately at the storm. Even under dark skies, a liminal band of frothy aqua water framed the *motus*. By the time we reached the far side of the lagoon, the skies had turned milky, and hazy sunshine hit the shallow water over white sand, popping an intense turquoise. We pulled into a small marina protected by limestone quays. Small houses painted lagoon-blue spread out around an open-sided warehouse. Off to one side was a small two-story house with a satellite dish. "That's Gilbert's," Sloan explained. "So he can watch Bloomberg TV." The farm, he added, operates year-round, and Wane grafts his oysters at age two rather than the customary three.

Inside the warehouse it was clear this was a big operation. Several men in bathing trunks and rubber boots stood around a long table under a shower of seawater, hand-cleaning oysters, then inserting a piece of plastic into each oyster's mouth to keep it slightly ajar. At the next table workers were painstakingly cutting tiny rectangles of flesh from the mantles of donor oysters. Behind them, grafters were seated in cubicles with their backs to the light and what looked like dental tools before them. Each grafter peered into the oyster's narrow mouth, gauged the size of its gonad, selected the proper size of nucleus (a bead made from Mississippi River mussels), then expertly inserted it and the piece of mantle flesh into the gonad. Grafting is an art, and each farm has its own closely held techniques. These workers were all trained by Maeva Wane, Gilbert's wife, who was herself trained by Gilbert's father, Francois, who founded the farm in 1994 after he and his brothers broke apart. Another group of workers then tied the grafted oysters, 100 each, onto lines several yards long. The lines

were inserted into plastic mesh cages (to protect the oysters from predators), carried to the end of the pier, and dropped into the water, where they stayed until they could be moved back out into the lagoon. There they would remain for 18 months to two years, starting out at 12 meters below the surface, then moving on to varying depths that would affect the color and luster, according to a closely guarded formula. Light was more important than water temperature, Teura said. And you could ballpark the color of the oyster according to the nacre of the donor oyster. The next harvest, he said, would be around 60,000 pearls.

Suddenly Teura broke out of his customary amble. The grafters were calling for more oysters. He herded us into a flat-bottomed motorboat, and we skimmed out into deep lagoon. A diver topped off the boat nonchalantly, not even bothering to tether his oxygen tank to himself. We followed his bubbles, and suddenly buoys exploded from the water. Teura, the diver, and another worker began pulling the cages, still weighted with seawater, into the boat. Tiny blue fish with yellow tails slipped out and flopped helplessly about. Sloan and I reflexively began tossing them back into the lagoon, much to everyone's amusement. Teura mentioned that three tiger sharks had been hanging around, but no one seemed concerned.

It was clear that pearl farming is backbreaking drudgework—notwithstanding the Gauguin-inspired mythology of childlike, indolent natives who rouse themselves only to pluck fruit from trees and to perform the kind of dance that gave the London Missionary Society the vapors. As a rule of thumb, 10 percent of grafted oysters die from the operation, another 10 percent die in the first year, and 30 percent reject the nucleus. Out of every 1,000 grafted pearls, 43 percent at best will be commercial grade, and only 2 percent of those will be top quality. This is why there are no bargains to be had in pearls. But while so many gems are associated with war and slave labor, the Tahitian pearl is all but unique—one luxury item whose purchase can actually help preserve its environment. And a Tahitian pearl is a luxury.

"These days the buyers want the bigger pearls, because they're so rare," says Cedrik Lo, chief of the pearl ministry's research department. "The big pearls have to do with the talent of the grafters. But the surface, the quality of the nacre, the luster—that all has to do with the environment, with the nutrition. So we must carefully maintain the lagoons. The pearl stays a long time in the water. It's not gold, eh? It's a living thing." ■