

A NEW  
TAKE  
ON A  
TIMELESS

# PEARLS

We will always have our little black dresses and our favorite heels. But when it comes to that other classic symbol of elegance—a strand of pearls—there are an ocean of beautiful alternatives just waiting for you.

BY JANENE MASCARELLA ◊ PHOTOGRAPHS BY JERALD COUNCIL

**A MODERN EDGE: LAYERING** Take a basic strand and use it as the centerpiece in a dramatic trio of lengths, suggests stylist David Zyla, author of *Color Your Style*. Mixing pearls with your favorite metal is a great way to breathe new life into a traditional look.

*Honora cultured pearl multi-strand stainless steel bracelet, \$71, QVC; necklaces: opera length 36-inch Japanese Akoya cultured pearl necklace, \$6,188, American Pearl; Honora cultured pearl multi-strand steel twist necklace, \$54.76, QVC; cultured freshwater pearl necklace, \$570, American Pearl.*



IF THE THOUGHT OF wearing pearls seems a bit outdated (something, say, your mother would wear), now's the time to take a closer look at the colors, varieties and settings that can turn this lustrous gem into a striking fashion statement for the modern woman.

Don't let your pearls collect dust in your jewelry box while you wait for that next big occasion. Have a little fun with them, advises celebrity stylist Ali Levine. Whether you've just made your first purchase or discovered a strand tucked away in a keepsake box, pearls can be worn in fresh and trendy ways to match any outfit.

NATURE'S GEM

Of the many precious gems in the world, pearls bear the distinction of being the only one produced by a living organism, says Harris Botnick, president of Worthmore Jewelers in Atlanta. Whether natural or cultured, they're created when an irritant in the muscle of a mollusk such as an oyster or mussel prompts the production of nacre (a form of calcium carbonate). Pearls naturally occur in all colors—from golden to pink to soft green to black—depending on the type of mollusk that creates the gem and its location in the world.



**A MODERN EDGE** Mix a single-strand pearl bracelet you may have had forever with contrasting ones in different scales. Or combine various shades and pearl types, Zyla suggests.

*From the top: Honora cultured pearl ringed bronze status link bracelet, \$159.72, QVC; cranberry freshwater pearl bracelet, \$120, Premium Pearl; Honora cultured pearl coin multi-chain bronze bracelet, \$126, QVC; Honora cultured pearl ringed multi-strand bronze bracelet, \$97.56, QVC. Ring: Karen South Sea cultured pearl ring in 18K rose gold, \$1,050, American Pearl.*

A CLOSER LOOK

"One of the best investments a woman can make in her jewelry wardrobe is a pearl necklace," says pearl expert Libby Floyd, a Los Angeles-based jewelry professional certified by the Gemological Institute of America.

The most common pearl is the freshwater, found in ponds, lakes and rivers, and the vast majority of these come from China. "Freshwater pearls are more affordable than saltwater pearls because they are not as round as saltwater pearls, and they usually don't have the same sharp luster and shine as saltwater pearls," Floyd says.

Saltwater pearls include:

- **SOUTH SEA.** The most rare, they account for only 1 percent of the world's total cultured pearl production, says Harris Botnick, president of Worthmore Jewelers in Atlanta. They come in a variety of colors—white, silver, pink, gold or cream—depending on their host oyster.
- **TAHITIAN.** These naturally black pearls are the product of black lip oysters in French Polynesia.
- **AKOYA.** Cultured pearls from Akoya oysters are known for their luster.

SHARPS  
IRREGULAR



**A MODERN EDGE** Consider wearing coin pearls, which are flat and can be circular, square or diamond-shaped, says Maria Holmes of MyPacificPearls.com. These simple, unique pearls even add a touch of understated elegance to oversized parkas or casual fall coats. Or pair them with jeans and a floppy knit hat for a casual fall look.

*From the left: Honora ringed cultured pearl necklace, \$59, QVC; Honora cultured pearl coin multi-chain bronze necklace, \$372, QVC; Akoya pearl necklace, \$1,450, Premium Pearl; Honora cultured Keshi pearl chain link bronze necklace, \$312, QVC.*



WHAT TO BUY

While you can't go wrong with a classic white strand—"it's always traditional and timeless," Floyd says—if you're going to treat yourself and have the budget, consider the exotic black Tahitian, an Akoya strand or the rare and very expensive golden South Sea (depending on quality and size, South Sea pearls can run from \$2,000 to \$100,000 or more).

"Tahitians are also very sought after and can run in the same ballpark, whereas the Akoya is going to be more affordable," she says. "They can cost anywhere from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand dollars."

"A pearl strand is a great foundation piece," Floyd says. "From there, you can gradually add a pearl ring, bracelet and earrings. But I always advise women to really buy what they love and to consider it an heirloom piece that they can pass down through the generations."

If a strand of rare saltwater pearls doesn't fit in your budget, consider freshwater pearls. "(They) will fit most women's budgets, and still look fabulous," says Floyd.

REAL VS. FAUX

As an alternative, try a simulated or faux pearl, which can fool even the most astute connoisseur, says Floyd. Many costume jewelry companies are creating simulated pearls, which women are choosing because they're affordable and can look real.

"Faux pearl or simulated pearl pieces can run anywhere from \$10 to a few hundred dollars," depending on the brand and where you shop, Floyd says.

And "when it comes to jewelry there are no rules, so if you want to mix and match the real with the faux, why not?" Floyd advises.

BOLD  
COLORS



**A MODERN EDGE** Go for the gold—or silver or purple, suggests New York-based jewelry designer and image consultant Bess Heitner. "White is traditionally 'right' but there are many fabulous colored pearls, mixed with other stones, that give a dramatic new look to classic pearls."

*From the left, multicolor freshwater pearl necklace, \$340; cranberry freshwater pearl necklace, \$190; pink freshwater pearl necklace, \$140, all Premium Pearl.*

THINK  
OVER  
SIZED

**A MODERN EDGE** Oversized is the key word this fall, so show off super-sized clusters in a necklace, earrings or bracelet, Zyla says. "One oversized piece is a focal point, and you therefore need to make sure to keep the rest of your jewelry and accessories minimal."

*Golden South Sea cultured pearl earrings and necklace, \$750 and \$11,800, respectively, both American Pearl.*



WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The factors that affect the price of a pearl all relate back to rarity, says Botnick.

**SIZE:** Greatly affects price—once a pearl grows over 7mm in diameter the price increases approximately 20 percent every 1/4 mm.

**LUSTER:** Is the pearl chalky and dull or very luminous and mirror-like? Luster is a direct reflection of growth time, and the longer the growth time, the more rare.

**SURFACE QUALITY:** How smooth is the surface—are there blemishes or irregularities?

**SHAPE:** The rounder, the rarer.

**ORIGIN:** Freshwater varieties have come a long way and are often hard to differentiate from Japanese saltwater Akoya. The rarest are Tahitian and South Sea pearls.

**CONSISTENCY:** On traditional strands, how well the pearls match helps drive the price. One pearl may not be that expensive, but when you're matching 100 of them for a single strand, the sorter may have had to scrutinize hundreds in the process, and that can greatly affect price.

PROTECT YOUR  
INVESTMENT

Whether you spend \$200 or \$2,000, here's how to keep your pearls looking beautiful.

○ Wipe them off at the end of the evening with a soft cotton cloth and warm water. This will remove contaminants such as makeup and pollutants and help preserve their luster.

○ Put on your pearl jewelry after you apply makeup, perfume or hairspray—all three contain chemicals that may harm the pearl. As a rule, put pearls on last and take them off first.

○ When storing your pearls, keep them separate from your other jewelry so metals and harder stones don't scratch the nacre (also known as mother of pearl; it's what makes up the outer coating of pearls).

*All jewelry courtesy of: American Pearl, americanpearl.com; Premium Pearl, premiumpearl.com; and QVC, qvc.com. Pearls modeled by Emily Brown and Nicole L. Gill.*