

Vail Daily



- Kristin Anderson/kanderson@vaildaily.com

Pearls: Still the gem queen in Vail

From tea-party goer to T-shirt wearer, expert Koji Kawamoto will teach people how to match the perfect pearl for the girl this weekend at Karats in Vail

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VAIL, Colorado — Pearls have enchanted women for centuries. The gemstone's attraction — and suspected powers — lie within its iridescent depth, a soft glow that radiates in many colors, as if the pearl was lit from the inside.

A symbol of affluence and power, pearls were worn by Persian princesses as long ago as 6,000 years. Royalty of the Roman Empire cloaked themselves head to toe in matching pearls. For ancient Greeks, pearls played an important role in love and marriage. An ideal wedding gift, pearls represent purity and innocence. In Japanese culture, women consider pearls amulets. Everyone has a strand and wears it for good luck and protection.

But above all the myths and legends, the pearl is most strongly linked to femininity. Pearls are thought to stimulate a woman's femininity and steer her toward self acceptance. Like the garnet, pearls are highly recommended for working girls, as they give confidence to the wearer and sense of pride in being a woman.

No wonder why Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi is often seen wearing pearls. She wore golden South Sea pearls during her swearing in ceremony. Throughout President Obama's campaign and election, Michelle Obama wore bold, Gobstopper-size pearls, no doubt communicating that she's a force to be reckoned with.

A soft and sexy side

Let's not forget the soft and sexy side of femininity that pearls evoke. Jackie Onassis popularized the classy three-strand pearl necklace. And one can't forget the provocative photo of Marilyn Monroe taken by Bert Stern. Marilyn's lying flat on her back, presumably in the nude, laughing with mischief in her eyes, and there's a long pearl necklace draped around her neck. More recently, Carrie Bradshaw, the fashion diva from "Sex and the City," brought pearls out of ballrooms and into everyday wear, pairing them with anything from T-shirts to hot pink mini skirts.

Pearls are no longer reserved exclusively for the noble and very rich, nor are they constrained to tea parties and galas. With the arrival of cultured pearls in the early 1900s — a fashion gift from the father of pearl cultivation Kokichi Mikimoto — pearls are more available and more affordable. Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel embraced cultured pearls, using the gems in her casual designs without sacrificing an ounce of the pearls' natural glamour.

By the 1950s, pearls were an essential accessory. Part-time Vail Valley resident Deana Stempler remembers that almost every girl in her college sorority photo wore a single strand of white pearls.

"You grow up with pearls," Stempler said. "From the little girls who play in their mother's jewelry box and find a long strand of pearls, to when you are older and pearls are a little more serious, more of an investment."

Four to five times a week Stempler wears her favorite necklace strung with larger pearls that she bought at Karats in Vail Village. She wears those pearls with just about anything, she said, from jeans to a tailored suit to an evening gown.

"Pearls make me feel special. I enjoy wearing them tremendously," Stempler said.

As a red head, Stempler said she doesn't look good in a gray-blue pearl. This particular necklace has an intense luster and fire in it, she says, radiating more pinkish hues.

"As a red head, I like a lot of life in things," Stempler said.

Matching the pearl with the girl

According to Koji Kawamoto, a pearl expert visiting Karats this weekend for a trunk show, what's more important than coordinating pearls with an outfit is matching the pearl with the girl.

"Choosing the right strand for the woman is an art," said Dan Telleen, owner of Karats. "And Koji considers himself a matchmaker."

Kawamoto brings with him all types of pearls in different shades, from the black, green and purple Tahitian pearls to the traditional lustrous white Akoya pearls to the feminine-hued South Sea pearls and the asymmetrical baroque pearls. But not every pearl looks good on every woman, Kawamoto says. You have to consider skin tone, color of teeth, color of eyes, whites of eyes, hair color and even the personality of a woman.

"If you have blond hair and fair skin and green eyes, I don't recommend a pinkish white pearl. White is OK, but instead of pink, you need a pearl with a green or light green overtone. That color is better for blondes," Kawamoto said.

For darker complexion, Kawamoto suggests a golden color pearl, like peach or apricot. Strawberry blondes look great in a pistachio-toned Tahitian pearl. Produced in the black lipped oyster, Tahitian pearls can display a variety of overtones, from "peacock" to "eggplant" and "seafoam."

These are just rules of thumb. For Kawamoto to really make a match, he likes to meet the person, because personality plays a big role in pearl picking, too. Strong personalities, he said, usually don't want the same strand of white Akoya pearls like everyone else. These rebels gravitate toward the unique baroque strand or a multi-colored pearl strand, for which Kawamoto has become famous.

"If the right person is wearing the right pearls, the pearls will say 'thank you very much. I am so happy, you are making me really beautiful,'" Kawamoto said. "Pearls and the woman complement each other. Pearls can make the person more attractive and the person can make the pearls more beautiful."

Cassie Pence is a freelance writer based in Vail.

Meet the matchmaker

What: Trunk show with pearl expert Koji Kawamoto

When: Today through Monday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Where: Karats in Vail Village

Information: Koji Kawamoto will be on hand to help pick out the right pearls for the person. Call 970-476-4760

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