

This self-taught pearl stringer's penchant for perfectionism has kept her at the forefront of Florida's jewelry market for almost 25 years.

jeannine chrest



At her husband's jewelry repair shop back in 1978, Jeannine Chrest heard customers complain of sub-par workmanship on necklaces sent out for restringing. So the mother of seven taught herself. Soon, she was the talk of Palm Beach.

Getting started: "My first big job came in an envelope filled with the beads of two broken necklaces. At home I saw it contained \$80,000 in loose pearls and diamonds. I almost had a heart attack. Had I known, I wouldn't have stopped at the grocery."

The key: "Consistency and a steady hand—to repeatedly, and with even tension, tie each knot as close to the pearl or stone as possible. If the tension is too tight, pearls will not lay straight."

Tools of the trade: Good lighting and a level work surface. Jeannine uses a 28- by 14-inch, grooved, blue suede-covered plywood stringing board that holds up to five strands of loose pearls. "Before moving my operation into the bedroom where I have a rolltop desk, I worked at our dining room table. Orders valued in excess of \$50,000 are generally done at the jewelry store—with a security guard."

Finding the real deal: "Rub the pearl across your teeth. If it feels gritty, it's real. If it feels smooth, it's coated plastic or glass. The best imitations are made with fish scales. A real pearl is white and shiny. A flat, white appearance means it was not in the oyster long enough for the hard shell coating to form completely." 🐚

BY JUDY ALEXANDRA
DIEDWARD

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