

As Seen In

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SHOPPER

Multicultural Pearls

Janna Conner
Designs "Mileta"
earrings, \$78 at
jannaconner.com.

Below: Shelley
King 18-karat
clasp and Mabe
pearl belt,
\$2,000 at Mia
Gemma, 2007
Mount Vernon
Ave., Alexandria.

All June babies know pearl is their birthstone. Perhaps not as glamorous as emerald (May) or as mysterious as citrine (November), the pearl is a classic gem that conjures up Chanel suits and little Lacoste alligators. But pearls can let loose too, and channel a little Sandra Dee — at the end of "Grease," with all that big hair and those leather pants.

"Pearls have been transformed today since freshwater pearls in particular are being cultured into different shapes, sizes and colors that were not available when our mothers were young," says Irene Barbieri, owner of Mia Gemma, a jewelry boutique in Alexandria's Del Ray neighborhood. "These nontraditional pearls are equally as beautiful as their more traditional cousins." It's not just their unusual hues (mauve, pink, apricot, lavender) or build (pear, button, coin, cornflake) that make them contemporary but their pairings too: mixed with 18-karat gold, faceted ruby or plastic neon coils.

Robert Cepek, a certified gemologist, loves the iconic pearl — strands, studs, pendants — "but when people see the variety of selection they're quite surprised how different a pearl fashion piece can be from what they had originally perceived pearl jewelry to look like."

Cepek, president of Iridesse, Tiffany & Co.'s pearl retailer, says the refreshed opalescent is still paying homage to its predecessors while "sending a different design message."

— Janelle Erichman Diamond