



DOUGLAS MCLAURIN

Rainbow-lipped oysters are a passion for this pearl farmer.

Though it may sound like a fairy tale, bringing back Mexico's legendary rainbow-lipped pearl oyster from the brink of extinction was more about persistence than magic for Douglas McLaurin and his partners at Perlas del Mar de Cortez. Worn by kings and queens, the black Cortez pearls produced by the oysters almost had been forgotten when the three decided to cultivate the fickle mollusk in the early 1990s. The painstaking process begins with passive collection. "Only the baby oysters that want to come to us do," says McLaurin. The healthiest ones are placed in cages and, after two years, are seeded: grafted with a shell bead around which the pearl will grow. Then two years later, the pearls are harvested. A perfect orb isn't a given. According to McLaurin, "Less than 5 percent come out perfectly round—only about 175 pearls out of 3,500." Glowing with shades of purple, green, gold and blue, however, each pearl becomes "something special when combined with the metal, inspiration and the hands of our designers," he says.

—DIANE SELKIRK



- ▶ **All pearl oysters** start off as males, but some will morph into females after two years. By three years of age, 90 percent of pearl oysters are female.
- ▶ **The largest pearl** on record was found by a fisherman in a clam off the coast of the Philippines. It weighs 75 pounds—and is worth almost \$100 million.
- ▶ **Of the tons** of cultured pearls harvested each year worldwide, Cortez pearls account for less than 3 kilograms.

PRECIOUS PEARLS

These wonders from the water can be found in surprising places.



1 Long used in Chinese medicine, pearls now are found in products like Moon Juice's **Beauty Dust**, meant to help you "glow from within."



2 Mussels from the mighty Mississippi produce the pearls harvested by Wisconsin's **Mississippi River Pearl Jewelry Co.**



3 Florida artist **Ted Lincoln** works with mother-of-pearl to bring to life his recreations of scenes from *Star Wars* and *Godzilla*.