



> **OPENING PAGE:** THE GOLDEN PEARL HAS BECOME A NATIONAL GEM IN THE PHILIPPINES. **BELOW:** THE WARM, FROTHY WATERS OF THE SOUTHERN SEAS FAVOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE *PINCTADA MAXIMA* OYSTERS THAT PRODUCE GOLDEN PEARLS.

> **EN OUVERTURE:** LA PERLE DORÉE A ÉTÉ ÉLEVÉE AU RANG DE GEMME NATIONALE AUX PHILIPPINES. **CI-DESSOUS:** LES EAUX TUMULTUEUSES ET CHAUDES DES MERS DU SUD SONT PROPICES AU DÉVELOPPEMENT DES HŪITRES *PINCTADA MAXIMA* QUI PRODUISENT LES PERLES DORÉES.

THE MAGIC OF THE GOLDEN PEARL

THE GOLDEN COLOR OF PEARLS FROM THE PHILIPPINES HAS CAPTIVATED JEWELERS AROUND THE WORLD. THE METALLIC HUE OWES MUCH OF ITS SUCCESS TO JACQUES BRANELLEC, AN ADVENTUROUS FRENCH ENTREPRENEUR WHO HAS BECOME THE PREMIER SUPPLIER OF GOLDEN PEARLS IN THE PHILIPPINES, AND THE THIRD LARGEST PRODUCER IN THE WORLD.

The oldest skyscraper in Makati, the business district of Manila, is a modest building that is neither ostentatious, glamorous nor luxurious. Yet, it is here that Jewelmer ("Sea jewel"), the most important producer of the famous golden pearls of the Philippines, decided to set up its headquarters. Jacques Branellec arrived in the Philippines 30 years ago from Brittany, France. He is a quiet, modest, and affable man who wears a pearl mounted on a mother-of-pearl plate around his neck, and he exudes the virile charm of an adventure-film hero. His parents were oyster farmers in the village of Saint-Pol-de-Léon, and like most Bretons, Jacques discovered his passion for sailing—and airplanes—at an early age, and decided that one day he would explore the world.

As soon as he was of legal age, he passed his pilot's license, and was quickly hired by Air Tahiti. "I just answered a job offer in the newspaper," he remembers. "One morning, someone from Air Tahiti called me

and set up a meeting in Paris for the end of the week. That afternoon, he called me back and asked me instead if I could come to Paris that evening, and leave for Tahiti the next day. I said yes, and was hired on the spot. The next day, I left for Papeete."

It wasn't long before he discovered the beauty of black pearls. He started working in pearl production ▶



alongside his job as an airline pilot, and grafted the oysters himself. He created his own pearl farm with an associate, but soon after, the two went their separate ways. As a result, Branellec decided to travel around the world, and not just for sightseeing. At the forefront of his mind was the desire to find the perfect place to farm pearls. By the end of the 1970s, he would settle on the Philippines after meeting Manuel Cojuangco, whose family-owned islands in the region of Palawan. "I was only just beginning to get interested in pearl farming," says Cojuangco. "One of my friends had tried, but without much success. Then Jacques arrived." It was the start of a loyal friendship—and of Jewelmer. "Pearls are definitely not business as usual," says Branellec. "It's a constant adventure. When we set up the first farm, the region of Palawan was virtually empty. There was lots of pristine landscape, and no pollution. We lived in direct contact with nature. I remember swimming for years in a place that was infested with crocodiles—but we didn't know it at the time. We found out when the corpses of a water buffalo and a local farmer's dog washed up on the river bank! Thinking about it now, I realize that there was something crazy about what we were doing. It all seems so easy now."

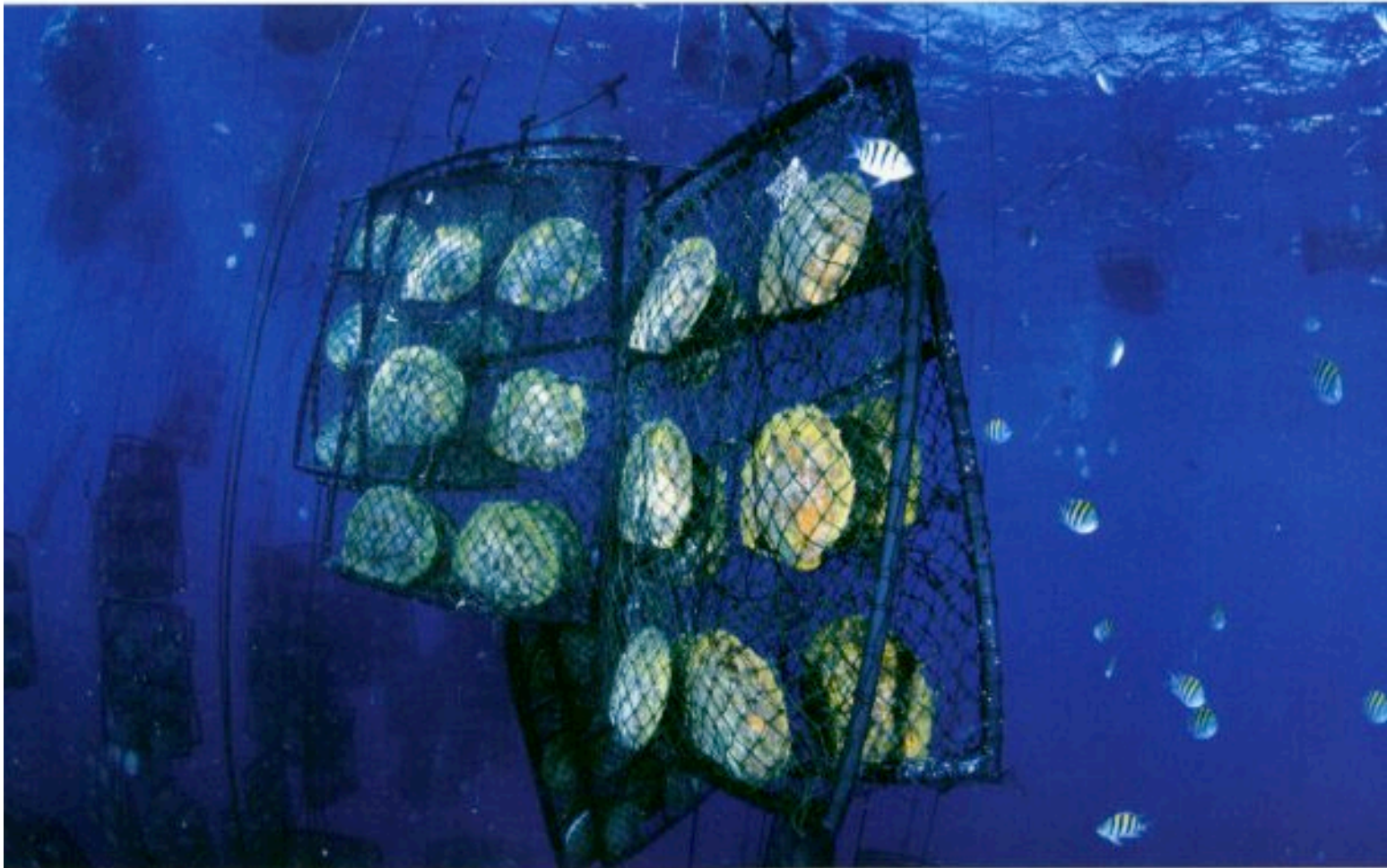
For the first ten years, Jacques and Manuel bought 50,000 to 100,000 *pinctada maxima* oysters, and dug through mountains of research on their feeding habits and development.





> GRAFTED OYSTERS ARE LINED UP IN THE BASKETS THAT WILL BE RETURNED TO THE SEA.

> LES HUITRES GREFFÉES SONT DISPOSÉES EN LIGNE DANS DES PANIERS QUI SONT REPLACÉS DANS L'OcéAN.



Today, the oysters are born in Jewelmer's "nurseries," and number several million. "It wasn't easy in the beginning," Branellec admits. "But we never thought about giving up, even if it was tempting at times.

You learn to go with the flow. One day, a cyclone destroyed 5,000 oysters. Another time, two piers were destroyed in Farm No. 6. You tend to adopt a zen attitude over the years. Otherwise, you would die of anxiety."

Several dozen pearls are laid out on a velvet tray on the table. "Manuel and I were the only ones to sort through the pearls in the beginning," Branellec says, as he flicks a pearl across the velvet cloth to examine it. "If it rolls straight, then it means it is perfectly round. And if the surface quality and golden color density are excellent, then perhaps it's the perfect pearl."

In fact, Jacques and Manuel are always looking for the perfect pearl. "We only remember about two or three, out of the 20 million that have passed through our hands. But those were truly unique."

There is one in particular that they remember: an exceptional Baroque pearl with an unusual story. "A Japanese friend who helped us out a lot in the beginning absolutely wanted to have it, so we offered an obscene price: 100,000 dollars. And he bought it! When he died, his son asked us if we wanted to buy it back for the same price—and we did. End of story. But later, one of

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1. JACQUES BRANELLEC AND HIS FILIPINO ASSOCIATE, MANUEL COJUANGCO. 2. GRAFTED OYSTERS WAITING FOR A TECHNICIAN TO REMOVE THE PEARLS. 3. AN ARMY OF THE OYSTERS EVERYDAY.

1. JACQUES BRANELLEC ET SON ASSOCIÉ PHILIPPIN MANUEL COJUANGCO. 2. LES HUITRES GREFFÉES ATTENDENT QU'UN TECHNICIEN RETIRE LA PERLE. 3. UNE ARMADA D'OUVRIERS S'OCCUPE CHAQUE JOUR DES HUITRES.



our Russian clients saw it and wanted to buy it too. This time, we outlined a whole list of conditions, but he accepted them all. Hence, we ended up selling it again.” Golden pearls are born in the province of Palawan, 500 kilometers from Manila, in one of the Jeweler’s seven farms, which are only accessible by boat. The landscape is idyllic, the sea translucent, and the fish plentiful and colorful. Hundreds of buoys mark the location of the oyster nets, and several workmen are busy in their boats cleaning the oyster lines. Sea life is so abundant that hundreds of microorganisms attach themselves to the lines, which can sink from the weight. Farm No. 7 looks like a small, tightly knit community. Most employees have worked on the farm for many years, and only see their families during holidays. They are all catholic, and grace is given before every meal. And they all share the same passion: pearls. A technician, sitting at a small table, carefully picks up an oyster from the basket next to him. It has been in the waters of the Sulu Sea for three years, pampered each week by an army of divers and workers. First, the oyster is sent through an X-ray machine to make sure that it contains a pearl of at least 8-17 mm in diameter. Otherwise, the oyster is returned to sea for several more months. The technician cracks open the oyster, and removes the pearl with precise and delicate movements. The pearl reflects a golden color with dark honey tones. It is quickly examined before being placed on a tray. Then, the technician reaches for another oyster. The next pearl might be even more beautiful. It is a never-ending quest. ■

ODILE HABEL





Avec leur couleur dorée, les perles des Philippines sont en train de conquérir les joailliers. Derrière cette réussite, il y a le Français Jacques Branellac.

Le plus ancien gratte-ciel de Makati, le quartier des affaires de Manille. Un bâtiment presque anonyme. Rien de glamour, ni de luxueux. C'est là pourtant que se trouve le siège de Jewelmex, le plus important producteur de perles dorées des Philippines. Le Breton Jacques Branellac est arrivé dans le pays il y a plus de trente ans. L'homme a des allures d'aventurier. Il porte autour du cou une perle montée sur une plaque en nacre. Souriant, modeste et économe en paroles, il a tout du héros au charme ténébreux. Fils d'ostréiculteurs, il se passionne très vite pour la mer, la voile, les avions, et surtout pour l'autre bout du monde.

Il passe sa licence de pilote et part travailler à Tahiti. D'un jour à l'autre. C'est là qu'il découvre les perles noires et se lance dans la production, effectuant lui-même les greffes des huîtres. Il crée ensuite sa ferme perlière avec un associé dont il se sépare. Il entame alors un tour du monde. En arrière-pensée: la recherche d'un lieu idéal pour la culture perlière. Ce seront les Philippines, à la fin des années 70, et la rencontre avec Manuel Cojuangco, dont la famille possède des îles dans la région de Palawan.

C'est le début d'une amitié indéfectible et de Jewelmex. «Les perles ne sont pas un business normal, mais une aventure de tous les moments, précise Jacques. Quand nous avons installé la première ferme, Palawan était quasiment désert. On vivait en contact direct avec la nature. Il y avait quelque chose d'un peu fou dans tout ça. Aujourd'hui, c'est presque facile!»

Pendant les dix premières années, Jacques et Manuel ont acheté de 50 000 à 100 000 huîtres *Pinctada maxima*, tout en menant des recherches sur leur développement et leur alimentation. Maintenant, les huîtres au nombre de plusieurs millions naissent dans les nurseries de Jewelmex. «Tout n'a pas toujours été facile, reconnaît volontiers Jacques, mais l'idée de renoncer ne nous a jamais

effleurée, même si nous avons parfois douté. On apprend à vivre sur le mouvant. Avec les années, on devient plus zen, sinon on meurt d'anxiété.»

Plusieurs dizaines de perles sont posées sur un plateau tendu de velours. «Pendant longtemps, c'est Manuel et moi qui faisons le tri des perles, dit-il en faisant rouler une perle. Si elle roule droit, c'est qu'elle est tout à fait ronde.» Si la qualité de sa surface et la densité de sa couleur dorée

sont excellentes, c'est peut-être la perle parfaite. Celle que Jacques et Manuel cherchent depuis des années. «Sur 20 millions de perles, on se souvient de deux ou trois, mais alors elles sont vraiment uniques.»

LA MAGIE DE LA PERLE DORÉE

C'est à Palawan, à 500 km de Manille, que naissent les perles dorées, dans les sept fermes de Jewelmex auxquelles on accède par bateau. La mer est transparente, les poissons multicolores et des centaines de flotteurs marquent l'emplacement des paniers d'huîtres immergés. Au loin, des ouvriers sur des bateaux remontent les lignes d'huîtres pour les nettoyer. La microfaune est si riche que des centaines d'organismes s'y fixent, risquant de les faire couler. La ferme N° 7 ressemble à une petite communauté soudée. La plupart des employés travaillent dans les fermes depuis des années, ne voyant leur famille qu'à l'occasion des vacances.

Assis à une table, un technicien saisit une huître posée dans le panier à côté de lui. Comme toutes les autres, elle est restée trois ans dans les eaux transparentes de la mer de Sulu, chouchoutée chaque semaine par une armée de plongeurs et d'ouvriers. L'huître est légèrement ouverte. Elle attend que le technicien retire la perle. Auparavant, elle a été passée aux rayons X afin de s'assurer qu'elle contient bien une perle et que sa taille est dans la moyenne, entre 8 et 17 mm. Sinon l'huître retourne dans la mer pour quelques mois supplémentaires.

Avec des gestes précis, l'homme retire la perle. Elle est dorée, avec des reflets plus foncés de miel. Le technicien l'inspecte, la dépose sur un plateau et saisit l'huître suivante. La prochaine perle sera peut-être encore plus belle.

