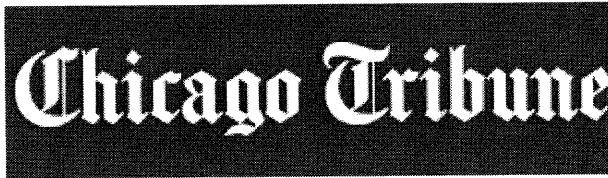


(Chicago, IL)



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Don't need no diamond ring

BY WENDY DONAHUE
Chicago Tribune

CHICAGO - The season of diamond-induced "oohs" and "aahs" picks up where "fa-la-la-las" leave off from the end of December, the most popular month for engagements, through February, the second most popular. "The ring is something that everyone is paying attention to," said Aida Sarvan, a 24-year-old marketing coordinator in Chicago who got engaged on New Year's Eve a year ago. "It's so competitive."

About 80 percent of brides get diamond engagement rings, according to the Diamond Information Center. And the carat weight for the upper crust keeps rising - "no less than 2 carats for the average successful New Yorker, whereas it used to be a carat or a carat and a half," said gem and jewelry expert Antoinette Matlins, a consumer advocate and frequent national media guest. Some couples, however, are rocking the world of engagement rings, choosing anything from nothing at all to Technicolor gemstones instead - with a key trend of more brides participating in the selection.

As in the past, cost might weigh into the decision. But nowadays, taste just as likely holds sway.

"MARRY-ME" TOURMALINE

Oohs and ahhs? Susanna Homan, 32, a public relations executive, had the blahs when she began shopping for rings with fiance Eric Sawitoski, 36. "He and I talked about becoming engaged and went the route of looking at traditional rings. My gut reaction was 'Blughhhh,' " said Homan, who lives in Chicago. "I told him I just don't see myself as a princess-cut-diamond-solitaire-in-a-platinum-setting girl." During a business trip to Los Angeles, Sawitoski e-mailed her a photo of a pink tourmaline stone and said, "I really like this for you." She replied, "I love it."

A few months after Homan got engaged in October 2004, so did "The Simple Life" star Nicole Richie (fleetingly), with a pink sapphire in a similar setting. "As soon as celebrities do it, it trickles down to the public," Homan said. "I think this is going to become more and more common, especially with women who are a little older - 30-plus - and have a strong sense of style."

HISTORY OF ENGAGEMENT STONES

Matlins, author of books that include "Engagement & Wedding Rings" (GemStone Press, \$18.95), sees Homan as part of a new trend. "Diamonds are still by far the No. 1 choice," said Matlins, who lives in Woodstock, Vt. "But there has been a fairly significant increase in the use of other colored gemstones and also natural pearls, going back to one of the earliest traditions." Because of their connotations of purity and the life form that creates them, natural pearls dominated in engagement rings until the early 20th century, when overfishing and polluted waters drove them to near extinction, Matlins said.

Then came De Beers' "a diamond is forever" campaign in the 1940s and the rise of an affluent middle class. That opened the door wider for the diamond - deservedly. "There is nothing that compares to it in terms of hardness, its ability to withstand heat, the way light travels through it," Matlins said.

Plus, it had a respectably long association to marriage. Perhaps the first recorded incidence of a diamond engagement ring dates to 1477, when the Habsburgs' Maximilian I gave one to Mary of Burgundy. Through the ages, colored stones also have held a place in matters of the heart, in particular blue sapphires as a symbol of spirituality (in the engagement ring of Princess Diana), emeralds for renewal (in Jacqueline Kennedy's) and rubies for passion (in Sarah "Fergie" Ferguson's).

But now, the diminishing supply of those three, the rising awareness of treated versus untreated stones and a move away from cookie-cutter designs has elevated not only heirloom rings and colored diamonds, remember Jennifer Lopez's pink one from Ben Affleck?_ but also lesser-known gemstones.

TREATED VS. UNTREATED STONES

Most rubies, sapphires and emeralds and many gemstones these days are routinely treated, by heat or other methods, to enhance their natural color or clarity, Matlins said. But, aside from cutting and polishing, some gemstones usually aren't treated, such as red spinel, blue iolite and tsavorite (a deep green garnet that can be more durable than emeralds). That appeals to some couples. "I'm seeing interest in gems that offer the symbolism of color and natural quality at a price that's more affordable," Matlins said. But price isn't necessarily the object. Certain gemstones, such as paraibas_blue tourmalines discovered in 1987_ can be rarer and more expensive than diamonds or sapphires.

SHE REALLY DOESN'T WANT A DIAMOND, REALLY!

It's often the man who's wedded to the diamond ideal. "Guys internalize a lot of the pressure-what are people going to think?" said Doug Gordon, 31-year-old author of "The Engaged Groom" (Collins, \$14.95), who lives in New York. "This ring my grandmother gave me (about a 2-carat diamond for his wife), there's no way I would have been able to afford that on my own."

Indeed, Chicagoan Debra Heberling's fiance, Brian O'Connor, would hardly take no for an answer. Not to his proposal, she happily accepted in May 2000, but to the diamond ring part. "Brian knew I would want to have input into the ring," said Heberling, who was 42 when they wed, her first marriage. "But he thought for the longest time that I really needed and wanted a diamond and wasn't telling him."

She went ringless until she and O'Connor found an Alex Sepkus brushed-gold band in a Washington, D.C., jewelry shop. Embedded in it are tiny white, yellow and cognac diamonds. She knew it was the one. "Brian said, 'Don't you want to keep looking?' 'No.' 'Are you sure?' 'I'm sure,'" Heberling, a Container Store manager, recounted. It serves as her engagement ring/wedding band. "I love it. I love my ring," she said.

SIZE MATTERS ... LESS?

A new Bridal Guide survey says brides-to-be care more about the style of their engagement ring than the size of it. "Today's brides and consumers in general are a lot more savvy and interested in researching products before they buy them," said Amy Elliott, senior editor and columnist for Bridal Guide. That might mean they choose a 1.5-carat diamond over a 1.65-carat diamond of lesser clarity.Or it might mean no diamond. "Some girls don't like diamonds, they say it's white, sparkly and sort of boring," said Elliott, who has a cousin with an emerald engagement ring and an acquaintance with a spessartite garnet one.

AQUAMARINE, 10 YEARS LATER

For those who would cite aforementioned celebrities' breakups as proof that only a diamond endures, the 10th wedding anniversary of jeweler Kathy Frey, 33, who lives in Chicago with husband Daniel Frey, 35, offers some evidence to the contrary.

At a bus stop while she was still in college, he had just finished art school, they somehow decided to marry the next summer. She already owned an aquamarine ring in a setting she didn't like. She and Daniel, now a production manager at a publishing company, gave another jewelry designer its band plus \$20 to have the stone reset as her engagement/wedding ring and to make a wedding band for him with a garnet. "Cost was an issue," Frey said, "but, aside from that, (the rings) still wouldn't have been diamond. I have a lot of friends with diamond rings and they're beautiful. I just feel like it's more interesting if people are buying rings that are an expression of who they are. For us, the diamond doesn't symbolize all of that."

Engagement & Wedding Rings: The Definitive Buying Guide for People in Love, 3rd Edition (6" x 9" 320 pp., 16 pages of new color photos, 400+ illustrations & photographs, Quality Paperback, ISBN 0-943763-41-X, \$18.95) is available in libraries and from retail bookstores including Barnes & Noble, Borders and Crown, or directly from GemStone Press, P.O. Box 237, Woodstock, VT 05091. Tel (802) 457-4000, Fax (802) 457-4004. www.gemstonepress.com. For credit card orders, call (800) 962-4544. Add \$3.95 shipping and handling for the first book, \$2.00 each additional book.