

US pearl buyers in the Cook Islands

By Noeline Browne

THE PRESIDENT of one of the largest distributors of pearls in the United States is in the country to buy Cook Islands black pearls.

President of Imperial Pearls, Peter Bazar and his pearl expert, Marc Alves has spent the past few days based at the Cook Islands Pearl Authority office where they have been inspecting the harvests from pearl farmers on the island of Manihiki.

Peter says this is a return trip following on from his visit in March this year when he purchased 'three trial lots of pearls' which received a 'very positive response' from his US clients. He says that the Cook Islands black pearls are 'very nice and very popular' and have their own uniqueness compared to Tahitian black pearls.

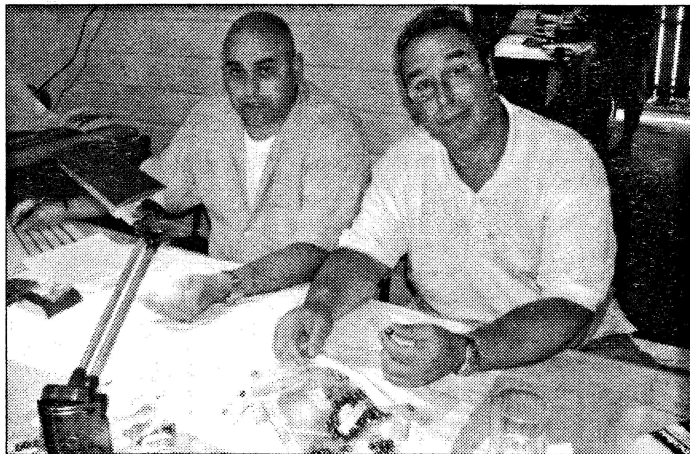
When asked to describe the differences, Peter likened it to describing fine wines which have their own characteristics depending on which region they were grown and even from vineyard to vine-

yard and so it is with Cook Islands black pearls which have their own special qualities. He added that there is also the local advantage of not charging export tax unlike the Tahitian product.

The buyers say they are looking for a 'certain quality of pearl' and this trip is not just about buying pearls but also to have discussions with farmers to ensure they realize the standard that needs to be met in order to market their pearls in the US which he says has different needs and wants from the Japanese buyers.

Apparently, one of the main differences is that his company then sell the product direct to the retailers, whereas Japanese buyers sell their products to wholesalers who then on-sell to the retail market. The company wholesales their jewellery to every major retailer in the US including Zales, Sterling better known as Kay Jewellers, J C Penney and Koles as well as independent jewelers.

So how did Imperial Pearls



Marc Alves and Peter Bazar at the Cook Islands Pearl Authority office

find out about Cook Islands black pearls? Peter said he is a regular internet user and had seen some information about Cook Islands pearls on various websites on the internet and this piqued his interest. In addition, the company has dealings with a New Zealand company called Iris Blue Pearls which cultivates pearls in the paua and with their help, he was introduced to George Ellis and the Cook Islands Pearl Authority.

Peter says his company has

been in the business for a very long time and would like to establish long term relationships with the farmers and that his purchases are not being made at the expense of the farmers. It is also about marketing the pearls of what he describes as a 'fundamentally fantastic product' in innovative ways, suggesting perhaps combining pearl marketing with all tourism promotion instead of having stand alone campaigns to get the message out there.