



Shop  
TALK

**“The Wonderbra for ears”**  
Blair’s name for a special earring back that makes those big juicy studs sit high and not droop in the lobe.

HARBOR SPRINGS, MI  
**ELIZABETH BLAIR FINE PEARLS**



← Elizabeth Blair initially opened the store to support her wholesale business.

**SUCH** is the stylized French look of her store, it’s easy to imagine that a small Coco Chanel was perched on Elizabeth Blair’s shoulder during the design process, telling her — in between drags on a long French cigarette — to choose blue and white drapes, *those* woven fabrics, to give her displays *plenty* of space, and — above all — to have the courage to follow her own tastes.

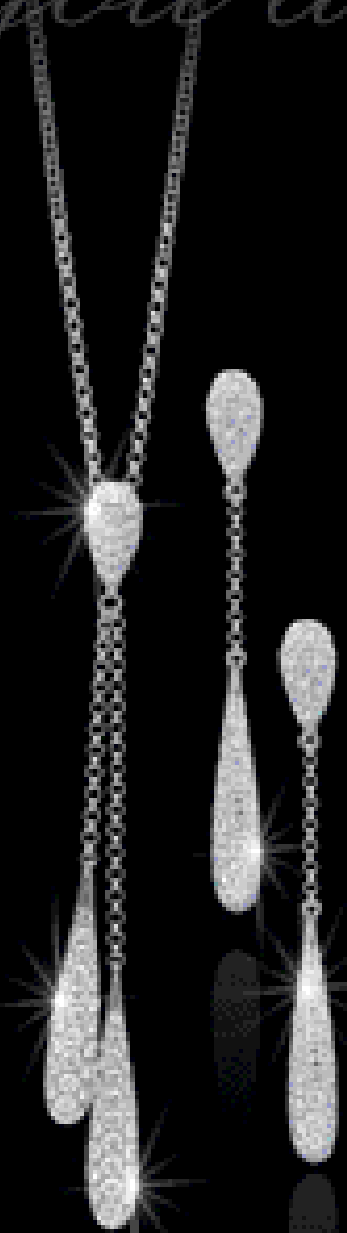
And that’s actually not too different from how it happened.

Blair, who cites the couture icon as one of her main inspirations, says Chanel was never far from her thoughts. “I was constantly asking myself, would Coco like this,” Blair says.

The result is a store — or perhaps more accurately a “salon” — that wouldn’t look out of place in Paris and that is more than a nice fit for the perfectly groomed resort town of Harbor Springs, MI. That Elizabeth Blair Fine Pearls sells almost nothing but pearls would have surely won Coco’s approval as well.

BY CHRIS BURSLEM

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5  
Cool  
THINGS



↑ The showcases are small pieces of art.

### A LOVE AFFAIR WITH PEARLS

**01** Blair traces her love affair with pearls back to the age of about 6, although it wasn't until she graduated from high school that she received her first set. The lustrous gems from the sea have been a central part of her life ever since. After graduating from UCLA with a theory of design degree she joined a San Francisco-based pearl trading company as an assistant designer and before long was creating her own collections for high-end retailers such as Neiman Marcus (which she still supplies). She opened the store in Harbor Springs in 2007 to support her wholesale business after she and her husband decided the area would be where they would retire. "My objective was to create an elegant French atelier that was welcoming and comfortable," says Blair, who designed every inch of Elizabeth Blair Fine Pearls, including the showcases. "The space encourages people to interact with the pearls and ultimately learn about them – why there are so many colors and where they come from."

Fun  
FACTS

**ELIZABETH BLAIR** shares more than just a love of pearls with her fashion inspiration, Coco Chanel, the two also have the same birth date (Aug. 19).

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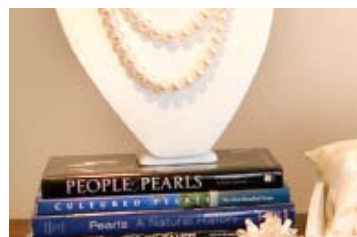
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Hear SAY

1. "Owning an Elizabeth Blair piece is on my bucket list."

2. "My sales lady has been looking for three years for a pistachio strand. I can't believe I found it in Harbor Springs."

FROM CUSTOMERS



Strong PROMO

**PEARL POWER:** Elizabeth Blair's advertising underscores the niche position of her store.

WHERE THE WORLD'S YOUR OYSTER

**02** Elizabeth Blair Fine Pearls stocks almost every type of pearl in the world within its 330 square feet at price points from \$200 to more than \$140,000. And with her 25 years' experience as a buyer Blair has the contacts to source just about any pearls she doesn't have on hand. Some of her favorite customer tales involve people who have searched all over America, even dived in Tahiti, only to find what they were looking for in her "little salon" in the Midwest.

"It isn't going to be a white pearl for everyone. These are not your grandmother's pearls," says Blair, adding that her gift for matching pearl to the person was nurtured in San Francisco where the "color me beautiful" book movement was flourishing in her post-college years. "I teach the customer to see which colors really pop and enhance them."

HAMPTONS OF THE MIDWEST

**03** Harbor Springs on the shores of Lake Michigan has been hosting affluent families during summer since the time of Henry Ford. "We have the shortest selling season in America, Memorial Day through Labor Day, when the town swells from 1,500 residents to 25,000 'resorters' and we treat it like Christmas," Blair says. The seasonal nature of the business has helped support one of Blair's main marketing strategies: Pearls as a rite of passage for young women. "We promote what is becoming a tradition each summer — mothers or grandmothers bringing in their young girls for their first pearl earrings or pearl strand while learning pearl care."

Education runs through many of Blair's other marketing programs as well and includes themed events to celebrate a pearl's country of origin, be it Mexico, Tahiti or Indonesia, and private pearl parties. "The education produces an 'aha' moment for clientele, who leave with a new appreciation and relationship with pearls," she says. It has also helped foster relationships with a client base — a who's who of middle America — who can afford to shop anywhere in the world.

WHAT THE *Judges* SAY

**SUZY LANDA:** Elizabeth Blair Fine Pearls fills a very specific niche, and the store's interior, packaging and printed materials so perfectly reflect what it sells. The clean, crisp, white and blue understated environment makes buying even the priciest pearls a casual, non-fussy experience.

**TERRY CHANDLER:** The pearl is one of the most emotionally charged gems known to man; at once lustrous, intriguing, and beautiful. This is a wonderful statement that a jeweler can succeed by bringing her love of one precious gemstone to her customers in an exceptional and creative way.

**DON MULLER:** I was very struck by the concept of

making pearls the focus of this store. Very unique, very feminine, warm and inviting!

**RUTH MELLERGAARD:** The visual merchandising in this store is excellent. The window display with the pumpkins, which are changed to suit every season, is such a good idea. Although this store is tiny, it makes a strong visual statement — color and materials, fixtures and visual merchandising.

**GEORGE WHALIN:** In just 330 square feet, Blair has created a store that shows off pearls in ways larger, more expansive stores simply cannot. This store should be a destination for anyone interested in this type of jewelry.

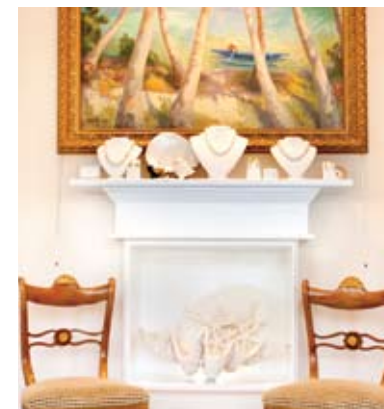
**Score CARD**

STORY → 67.8  
 INTERIOR → 68.2  
 EXTERIOR → 66.6  
 MARKETING → 72.2  
 WEBSITE → 65.0  
 INDIVIDUALITY → 79.4

**71.0%**  
 OVERALL SCORE

CUSTOM SHOWCASES

**04** If she hadn't been so besotted with pearls, Blair could have probably owned a successful interior design business. Her window creations, which she changes four times a year in line with the seasons, win the local Chamber of Commerce's holiday decorating contest each year. Her interior designs, featuring Venetian mirrors, Swedish and French art deco furniture and accented by a fine Tahitian painting of Moorea and giant clamshells, regularly win admiring looks. "We recently caught a local architect peering into the store with clients to show them architectural ideas," she says. The main purpose wasn't just to look smart, but to enhance the sales process. "The space works to make clientele feel natural about buying fine jewelry in their shorts and sandals," Blair says.



SUPPORT STAFF

**05** Any store is only as cool as its staff, and Blair is quick to credit the contribution of her staff of two: Andrew Brey, a GIA-certified gemologist, "passionate pearl guy" and in-house deejay, and pearl stringer Chris Satula, who Blair says owes her "extreme talent" at matching pearls to her training in a dentist's office matching crowns.

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