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From lab-grown diamonds to coloured stones, these 2023 trends are redefining engagement jewellery



Amanda Chai

“They aren’t real diamonds” was probably the biggest misconception about lab-grown diamonds in the past. These man-made stones are identical to natural ones in look, chemical composition and structure.

The 4Cs of cut, colour, clarity and carat weight used to evaluate diamonds apply here too.

Singapore jewellery chain Goldheart launched its lab-grown range Star Lab in March 2021, offering diamonds from 0.3- to 3-carat in varying shapes and cuts. Lab-grown pink diamonds, which the brand says it is the first in Singapore to launch, feature in its latest collection.

Ms Amanda Koo, a gemologist certified by the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) and founder of home-grown jewellery brand eClarity, uses the analogy of babies to explain the difference to customers.

“If natural diamonds are babies, lab-grown diamonds are IVF (in-vitro fertilisation) babies. They’re both real; it’s just that one is made in a lab,” she says.

“The next thing people ask is if you can tell the difference. So I will ask them – can you tell the difference between a (naturally conceived) baby and an IVF baby?” The 44-year-old mother of three boys, whose brand began in 2005 as a small shop peddling natural diamond rings and wedding bands at Shaw Centre, says her sales of lab-grown diamonds in 2022 surpassed those of natural diamonds.



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An off-the-shelf ring from the heritage luxury jewellery houses may have been a status symbol for older generations, but today's customers would rather create one-of-a-kind keepsakes.

Expect to see more unique designs in 2023. As an extension of the trend in 2022, custom rings that look handmade are all the rage at eClarity, says Ms Koo.

She has more than 300 retail-ready design prototypes and over 20,000 loose diamonds for customers to peruse, after which they can add on bespoke details such as lace, embossing or cuts on the sides to make the ring their own – or customise one from scratch. About 70 per cent of customers who buy engagement rings opt for this.



A selection of eClarity engagement rings. ST PHOTO: FELINE LIM

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They can also hand-engage initials themselves, to immortalise their handwriting.

“The last thing people want is for the girlfriend to go back to the office and realise everyone’s wearing the same ring, and the only thing you can do is compare size, which becomes very unsophisticated,” says Ms Koo. “The guys want to be seen as putting in effort.”



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FROM CI

Trends shaping engagement jewellery in 2023

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LAB-GROWN DIAMONDS

"They aren't real diamonds" was probably the biggest misconception about lab-grown diamonds in the past. These man-made stones are identical to natural ones in look, chemical composition and structure. The 4Cs (cut, colour, clarity and carat weight) used to evaluate diamonds apply here too.

Singapore jewellery chain Goldheart launched its lab-grown range Star Lab in March 2021, offering diamonds from 0.3 to 2-carat in varying shapes and cuts. Lab-grown pink diamonds, which the brand says it is the first in Singapore to launch, feature in its latest collection.

Ms Amanda Koo, a gemologist certified by the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) and founder of home-grown jewellery brand eClarity, uses the analogy of babies to explain the difference to customers. "If natural diamonds are babies, lab-grown diamonds are IVF (in-vitro fertilisation) babies. They're both real, it's just that one is made in a lab," she says.

"The next thing people ask is if you can tell the difference. So I will ask them - can you tell the difference between a naturally conceived baby and an IVF baby?"

The 44-year-old mother of three boys, whose brand began in 2005 as a small shop peddling natural diamond rings and wedding bands at Shaw Centre, says her sales of lab-grown diamonds in 2022 surpassed those of natural diamonds.

She launched a lab-grown diamond jewellery arm in 2019, after observing that "people were ready and education was there", adding that "some brides-to-be prefer it because it 'saves' the world".

Though lab-grown diamonds have long existed in the market, mainly in industrial use, retailers say the main reason behind the recent spike in their popularity is the relatively new introduction of certifications for such stones.

GIA and the International Gemological Institute (IGI) are recognised as the two biggest grading institutions of lab-grown diamonds, having begun grading them as real diamonds in 2020 and 2005 respectively.

While GIA is the world's leading grading laboratory for mined diamonds, industry experts say IGI-certified diamonds have become the standard for lab-grown diamonds due to the volume they certify.

"Most customers at Authica 'are not shy' about saying that the cost savings from lab-grown diamonds are the biggest draw," says Ms Sim, 33.

A customer who had been considering a 1.5-carat natural diamond elsewhere eventually bought a 2-carat lab-grown diamond at Authica, paying less than his original budget.

Ms Sim and her co-founders, Mr Devin Nathanael and Ms Iris Tan - all former colleagues at a traditional jeweller - saw so much potential in the market that they went into business together during the pandemic to sell only lab-grown diamonds. Founded in September 2020, Authica retails diamonds certified by IGI and GIA.

Each lab-grown diamond comes with a laser inscriptible identification number, which can be viewed only under a microscope.

About 80 per cent of Authica's business comes from lab-grown diamonds, and most 70 per cent of its customers are young millennials in their mid- to late-20s.

How does one spot a good lab-grown diamond? Beyond the 4Cs, Ms Sim pays attention to qualities like polish, symmetry and proportion.

In diamond reports, the top range of round lab-grown diamonds are graded "ideal, excellent and excellent" for cut, polish and symmetry respectively for IGI-graded diamonds and "triple excellent" for GIA-graded ones.

To keep within your budget, "it's a game of balancing the 4Cs", Ms Sim adds.

(From far left) Authica Jewellery co-founders Devin Nathanael, Iris Tan and Sharon Sim went into business together during the pandemic to sell lab-grown diamonds.

(Above) Goldheart's lab-grown pink diamond ring. PHOTO: GOLDHEART

(Left) Ms Amanda Koo, 44, founded jewellery label eClarity selling natural diamond rings and wedding bands in 2005. ST PHOTO: FELINE LIM



