

diamond dilemma

HANDMADE NECKLACE
BY MARILYN HEIKEN,
AZIZI JEWELRY

BUY YOUR BABY AN ETHICAL VALENTINE'S BAUBLE

by camilla mortensen

On Valentine's Day, a couple of years back, my then-boyfriend got down on his knees at dawn and presented me with a lovely engagement ring. He'd had it locally made from U.S.-mined sapphire. In case the sapphire ring didn't meet my standards, he had a back-up — his grandmother's antique diamond engagement ring.

Too bad the whole actually-getting-married part didn't work out, because the engagement part was both terribly romantic and very politically correct.

Not everyone has a dead grandmother whose diamond was mined in the days before war and exploitation labeled some gems "blood diamonds." Somehow it takes all the romance out of your ornament when you discover someone in Africa was horribly exploited or murdered so you could get a multi-carat rock.

So how do you propose to your bride, gift a lover, a partner or even a friend-with-expensive-benefits with a necklace, earrings or a toe ring — sex scholars say the feet are the number one kink for the fetish-inclined — in a way that says: "I totally adore you, but not enough to hurt people and exploit the planet?"

Local jewelers like Charles Beaudet of Beaudet Jewelry and Rick Beckett of Skeie's Jewelers say, when it comes to diamonds, they are passionate about making sure the jewels are ethically mined. Beaudet says, "ethical has other meanings beyond human rights," like conditions, pay, conservation and dignity. He says he tries to buy his diamonds from countries "that have made great strides in the industry," such as Botswana, and he has the diamonds cut by people he knows and trusts as ethical in Antwerp.

Beaudet says the Kimberley Process, a U.N. mandated system, ensures that 99 percent of diamonds making their way to stores in America are conflict-free. Though some blood diamonds get into the U.S. through tourists who buy them rough-cut on the Ivory Coast, he says, "no cutter in the U.S. will touch them."

Some jewelers also will buy their diamonds from Canada, one of the sources for Skeie's Jewelers, to guarantee they are conflict-free. But as local jewelry maker Marilyn Heiken points out, gemstone and precious metals mining, even in Canada, can have human and environmental consequences.

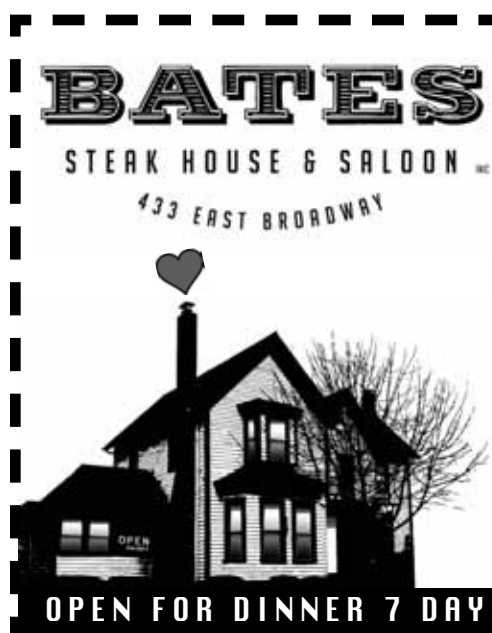
"Gold mining raises the same human rights concerns and also causes significant environmental damage," Heiken says. She adds that it's "difficult and expensive to obtain ethical gold."

Recycled silver, on the other hand, falls on the ethical side of the jewelry scale. Heiken says, "Last year, the total 'scrap' or recycled silver was 5,649 (metric) tonnes out of a total of 26,241 tonnes of new silver. Every dark cloud has a silver lining."

She says that for her locally made creations, she doesn't buy natural rubies, which also have ethical mining issues, or diamonds. "Problem solved! I do purchase lab-grown and treated stones, and semi-precious stones of all types. Rubies are beautiful, but so is pink tourmaline."

Heiken sells her jewelry on www.Etsy.com as Azizi Jewelry. You can find other local jewelry makers there as well. When you buy locally made jewelry not only can you check the ethics, Heiken says, you are also "infusing the local economy and supporting local artists."

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