Raspberry Rhodochrosite

Feminine and varied; rhodo as it's nicknamed, gives us plenty of options

By Diana Jarrett
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What gives a jeweler that something extra—drawing in customers who eventually become lifelong, loyal friends? While traits like trustworthiness and delivering value top the short list, there's something to be said for offering out-of-the-ordinary gemstones. These often convert consumers into bonafide collectors—for life.

This month, we're spotlighting that rosy rhodochrosite. It could very well become the signature stone for many jewelry fans. Its name is a mashup of two Greek terms: rhodos—meaning rose, and chrosite—for coloring. Fortunately for jewelers, it also has many story-telling ops, which hold your client captive.

Universal Adoration

To add further intrigue, the stone appears in many incarnations—from opaque, often with white bands, all the way to gorgeous transparent raspberry tints. It's found around the world, like Peru and also Argentina—hailed as their national gemstone. Discovered in Colorado, it was designated their state mineral. In the late 20th century, large deposits were found in South Africa—today it is largely mined out there.

The opaque to slightly translucent banded variety is instantly recognized because nothing in the natural world looks quite like it, except maybe for food. "It's the bacon stone," exclaims diamond authority, Elizabeth Austin. The distinctive banding is a huge draw for the cognoscenti. "Rhodochrosite always has such interesting patterns; mother nature at her most beautiful," says gemologist-appraiser Charles Carmona, president of Guild Labs. "And it has no treatments; people are always surprised to learn that the slices are

Large slab of banded rhodochrosite; Courtesy Javier Conles
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Gemologist-writer Renee Newman includes rhodochrosite in her popular gemstone guide, *Exotic Gems Volume 1*. In it, she reports, “Argentina is the world’s most important source of banded rhodochrosite. The concentric patterns are due to massive stalactitic growths in the mines. Some of the stalactites are up to 4 feet long.”

**Clearly Gorgeous**
The cheery transparent variety of rhodochrosite has a bit of a cult following owing to its extraordinarily saturated hues. Brett Kosnar, founder of Kosnar Gem Co., explains, “This is one of the most vividly colored minerals in faceted form. The manganese content of rhodochrosite not only causes the famous pink/red hue, but the color is ambient because of its content—by that I mean that the color glows in hand like Paraiba tourmaline.” Kosnar claims this special trait becomes even more apparent when you place other pink gems next to a rhodochrosite. “You immediately see the vibrancy of this material; particularly with Colorado stones from Sweet Home mine, considered to be the world’s best rhodochrosite, mainly for faceting.” South Africa
also produced excellent deep red-orange rough, Kosnar points out, but, “it lacks the glow you see in the Colorado material.”

**Careful Cutting**
Kosnar, an expert cutter, shares his insight into cutting the various forms of rhodochrosite. “The banded material specifically from Argentina, is a treat to cut and polish in comparison to the gem-grade material,” he finds. The banded material has inclusions making it more structurally sound. It can be traditionally sawed, which would shatter gem-grade material.” But with banded rough, Kosnar says, “these inclusions stabilize the cleavage which is the most difficult part of fine grade material.” Partial cleavage separation in gem-grade material can cause it to expand during the cutting process, he explains. “A small cleavage inclusion can spread through a perfectly clean stone, causing it to split in half,” he reveals. Its cleavage works similarly to wood grain ing, according to Kosnar. “To properly polish a rhodochrosite, you have to polish it in the appropriate direction. Otherwise, the surface of its faces can shatter, chip or even shred.” Kosnar is admired by his peers for his award winning 24.26-ct. round Portuguese cut rhodochrosite gem. The 2017 AGTA Spectrum Awards winner earned 1st Place -- All Other Faceted category.

Aficionados of rhodochrosite are familiar with Sweet Home mine near Alma, CO. Originally founded in 1873 as a silver mine, it’s celebrated for spectacular rhodochrosite specimens unearthed there. In the early years, silver miners chucked out all kinds of gem minerals while on the hunt for silver. A few of ‘the pretties’ as they were called, were kept in pocket and traded for drinks back at the camp site. Sweet Home produced the Alma King, the largest known rhodo crystal (14 x 16.5 cm), regarded as the finest specimen of its kind in the world. The football-sized candy red rhodochrosite, nestled on a bed of snowy white quartz can be viewed at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science.

The mine’s closing did nothing to diminish the glory of the legendary rhodochrosite found there. Gem faceter Boyd Fox, co-owner of Red Carpet Gem Market says, “The Colorado material is much harder to source then other locations because the mine has been closed. So, any material from Colorado is old stock. But they are working to re-open the mine soon.” Fox shares his insight on cutting these stones. “Good clean gem material suitable for faceting is at a premium. Larger stones, from 5 to 15-ct range are available in clean material. Color is key as with all colored gemstones.”

“Faceting rhodochrosite is not for the beginner. It has 1,3 cleavage planes as a rhombohedral,” Fox points out. Cutters will get this. For the rest of us, we’ll take his word. There are other considerations, Fox cautions. “It is very soft comparably, with a hardness of 3.5 to 4 on the Mohs scale. A cutter needs a light touch and experience to work the material correctly,” Fox says.
Inexperienced cutters, he warns, will have many issues to work through which can greatly impact the final yield. “The main issue with cutting rhodo is the polish because of its hardness,” he tells cutters.

**Destined for the Big Time**

Designer Erica Courtney has made a career out of pairing spectacular gemstones with uber-luxe collections that ooze glamour. Her loyal following expects uncommon gemstones in everything she creates, and she delivers. “I love the beautiful bright salmon-y-pink tones of rhodochrosite,” Courtney confides. “It’s an unusual color unmatched by any other gemstone.” In her case, the lack of top-quality rhodochrosite is not a deal breaker. “There’s so little fine rhodochrosite material available that I don’t have as much in my collection as I’d like,” she reveals. “I’m blessed that my brand is known for its one-of-a-kind pieces, so I can create a unique rhodochrosite design whenever I do find a gorgeous specimen,” Courtney says.

Once jewelry fans get a taste for rhodochrosite, they’ll find plenty of variations to satisfy their longing for it. The banded (bacon-y) variety is infinitely appealing. The peachy-pink semi-opaque varieties deliver a grownup solution to women’s preference for feminine pinks. And the cherry to raspberry tinted transparent versions are not only exquisite but offer designers a decidedly sophisticated stone that encourages an outpouring of creativity. ▼