

A Crafty Lady



Naoko Tanaka's lesson plans look a lot like necklaces. She flits around her studio to give advice as students work diligently on their crafts: some string together tiny beads while others grasp and twist wires with special pliers. A woman across the room sculpts real silver into a beautiful flower pendant. Naoko is the only licensed seller in Southeast Asia of the silver clay, and after her student is finished, she will fire it in an oven to evaporate the binding and water and bring out the shine of the precious metal.

Each day Naoko toils in her quiet little nest on the second floor of Tudor Court, above the traffic, energy and noise of city life. She moved to Singapore from Japan 11 years ago. "My children have grown into adults," she says. "Now I am very free to open my shop and enjoy life."

In the entryway to her shop the finished products on display include necklaces, bracelets, rings, belts, candleholders and napkin rolls – anything you could imagine made of beads. In the supply room, Swarovski crystals in every shape, size and colour are stacked from floor to ceiling. Naoko imports much of her stock from Japan but gets specialty items from around the world.

My fellow classmates sidle into the chairs around the table. Coffee percolates in the corner and subtle instrumentals filter into the background.

First, we each choose two bead colours. I'm desperate for something to match lime green without being too, well, lime. I quickly find a dark but iridescent green among the boxes of crystals, then search longingly for a complementary colour. Naoko comes by and suggests a pale yellow.

We bend and snip and cut; I briefly consider hacking off my fingernails but learn to work around them. Our teacher's voice is patient and lyrical; it floats into our ears as we concentrate on our hands. This is your design, she assures us, or maybe just me, since I'm making most of the mistakes. She's careful not to over-explain or do anything for us; instead she picks



up her own piece and shapes it to guide us through the process.

Naoko doesn't cater only to us humble beginners; she also holds advanced creative classes. One of her students, Mandy Pan, slowly threads tiny purple beads alongside us. She says she's done a lot of beadwork on her own, but comes into the studio for certain projects. "I quickly figured out you can't learn this from a book," she says, indicating an elaborate picture of her current project. "But when I'm stuck, she's on hand to guide me."

"Once you know the basics," says Naoko, "you can go on to do anything."

Before we know it, the lesson is over and I'm boasting my own handmade jewellery, a necklace that fits perfectly to my neck and my outfit. The sparkling beads interrupt tiny pewter-coloured chain links and in the centre, more beads highlight various twists and loops in unique symmetry. On the way out of the shop, Naoko's assistant points to a necklace that was made using the same techniques we learned that day. "Look," she says, turning over the price tag. "Already you can make a necklace worth \$47.40!"

Nope, I think, smiling and fingering the delicate handiwork around my neck. This one is priceless.

**N' Craft Room is at Tudor Court Gallery,
131-E Tanglin Road. Call 6737 9045.**

**by Erika
Kelsey**

