

ARIZONA'S FIERY GEM AGATE

Exotic foreign locales probably spring to mind when you think of gem sources. But North America produces its own share of gems, as seen in this ninth in a series of reports by Western Editor Robert Weldon.

The very colors of fire agate seem to describe the arid, hot desert landscapes in Arizona, California and northern Mexico from which they come. Orangy-brown body color, iridescent rainbows and unusual rounded internal textures and grape-like forms – called botryoidal forms – provide the fireworks that give this gem special appeal.

One fire agate is never just like another, to the delight of one-of-a-kind gemstone fanciers and chalcedony lovers. But this one-of-a-kind allure makes fire agates hard to price, say dealers, and dollar figures fluctuate widely. At the Tucson gem and mineral shows each year, for example, buyers may rummage through parcels of fire agates wholesale priced anywhere from \$1 to \$200 per carat. Dealers often command even higher prices for very brilliant, color-saturated and larger gems.

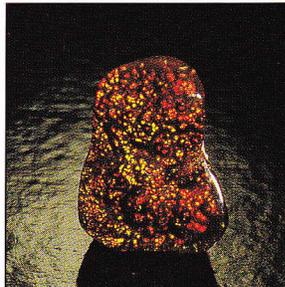
Fire agate cabochon from Deer Creek, Ariz., measures about 2mm x 1.5mm. Photo by Robert Weldon, courtesy of the Gemological Institute of America.

“Determining the price of fire agate can be compared to trying to establish a painting’s price by the amount of oil it has on the canvas,” says Si Frazier of El Cerrito, Cal., a quartz and agate specialist and fancier. “Overall, people look for a larger surface of good color – and the brilliance of the color – to justify the prices.”

Recognition of and appreciation for fire agates is growing. Long favorites among rock hounds and specialized cutters, they’re no longer confined to curiosity and souvenir shops. Specialty and one-of-a-kind jewelry stores carry them now, and designers are taking another look.

“It has largely been seen in Native American or ethnic jewelry,” says Wade Wiley, jewelry designer at Crystal Reflections, San Anselmo, Cal. “Now it’s showing up more and more in non-mainstream jewelry because customers are looking for the unusual item.”

Discovery: Fire agate was discovered in the mid-1940s (or perhaps earlier), but rock hounds kept the source secret for many years. The original location isn’t known to the public, but Wiley Well, Cal., near the Arizona bor-



Free-form cabochon, cut to best display the bubble or grape-like botryoidal structure. Photo by Robert Weldon.