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JEWELRY

Lab-Grown vs. Natural Diamonds: What Most Jewelers Won't Tell You

By Scott Tischler · July 28, 2026 · 9 min read

Let me tell you what I tell my own clients

I design fine jewelry for a living. My "Scott Ryan" line is built on ethically sourced, conflict-free stones, and my "Lotus Goddess" pieces in 18K gold use a rare enameling technique called plique-à-jour that almost no one does anymore. I call myself a diamond hunter, and I mean it — I've spent a lot of hours under a loupe and across a lot of negotiating tables.

So when someone sits down with me and asks, "Lab-grown or natural?" I don't reach for a script. I ask what they actually want the stone to do — for their budget, their values, and the person who's going to wear it. That's the conversation the retail floor often skips, because the floor has inventory to move.

This is the version I'd give a friend. No spin.

First, the physics: they are the same material

Here's the thing that trips people up. A lab-grown diamond is not a "fake." It is a real diamond. Chemically, it is carbon arranged in the same crystal structure as a mined stone. It has the same hardness, the same fire, the same brilliance. A trained gemologist cannot tell the difference by eye or with a standard loupe. It takes specialized equipment — measuring things like trace nitrogen, growth patterns, and fluorescence — to distinguish one from the other.

This matters, because "fake diamond" is a phrase that gets thrown around loosely. Cubic zirconia and moissanite are diamond **simulants** — different materials that imitate the look. A lab-grown diamond is not a simulant. It is a diamond that was grown in a controlled environment (typically over weeks) instead of formed in the earth over a very long geological timescale.

Two main methods produce them: HPHT (high pressure, high temperature) and CVD (chemical vapor deposition). You don't need to memorize that. You just need to know the output is the genuine article, atomically speaking.

The one difference that actually drives everything: origin and rarity

If they're the same material, why the price gap? Because you're not only paying for carbon. With a natural diamond, part of what you're buying is scarcity and provenance — a stone that formed in the earth and can't be manufactured on demand. With a lab-grown diamond, you're buying the material without that scarcity. Production can scale, and as it has scaled, prices have fallen.

That's the honest core of the whole debate. Everything else — resale, ethics, certification — flows downstream from that single fact.

What's really happening with price

Let me be careful here, because price is where a lot of articles start inventing numbers. I won't do that. Prices move, they vary by retailer and by stone, and anything I quote as a hard figure today could be wrong next quarter. So I'll give you the shape of it instead.

For most of the last several years, lab-grown diamonds have generally sold at a meaningful discount to comparable natural stones — and that discount has widened as production capacity has grown. It is not unusual to be able to buy a noticeably larger or higher-graded lab-grown stone for the same spend as a smaller natural one. That's the real appeal for a lot of buyers: more visible stone, or better cut and clarity, for the budget.

The flip side, and this is the part the sales floor rarely volunteers: because lab-grown production keeps scaling and getting cheaper, the lab-grown stone you buy today may cost less new a few years from now. That's great if you're a buyer. It's the crux of the resale problem if you ever want to sell.

Natural diamond prices are not immune to the market either — they soften and firm with demand like anything else. But they aren't subject to the same "manufacturing keeps getting cheaper" pressure.

Resale: the truth nobody puts on the tag

Here's what I want burned into your memory before you spend real money:

Almost no diamond, natural or lab-grown, is a good financial investment for a regular consumer.

When you buy at retail, you pay a retail markup. The moment you try to sell, you're selling into the wholesale or secondhand market, where you'll typically recover a fraction of what you paid. That's true of natural diamonds too. The "diamonds hold their value" idea is oversold for the average buyer who bought one ring at a jewelry store.

That said, there is a real difference in *degree*:

- **Natural diamonds** have a long-established secondhand market. You still won't get retail back, but there's a resale ecosystem, and higher-quality stones with strong certification tend to retain more of their relative value.
- **Lab-grown diamonds** currently have a much thinner resale market, and because new prices keep dropping, secondhand values have been under real pressure. Plan on lab-grown as something you buy to **own and enjoy**, not to resell.

So if part of your reasoning is "it'll hold value," be honest with yourself about which stone you're buying and why. For most people, the right frame isn't "investment." It's "beautiful thing I'll wear," and possibly "heirloom I'll pass down." Natural stones fit the heirloom frame more naturally; lab-grown fits the "maximum beauty per dollar, right now" frame.

The ethics conversation — and why it's not simple

People often assume lab-grown is automatically the "ethical" choice and natural is automatically the "problem." The real picture has more texture, and as someone whose whole brand is built on ethical sourcing, I won't hand you a slogan.

On the natural side: the industry of decades past earned real scrutiny — conflict financing and poor labor conditions were genuine issues. In response, there's the Kimberley Process, and increasingly, provenance tracking that lets a stone be traced. It's imperfect. But it's also true that natural diamond mining supports the livelihoods of a lot of people in producing countries; a blanket "mining is evil" stance ignores those communities. The right move as a buyer is to ask for traceable, responsibly sourced stones and to buy from people who can actually answer the question. That's exactly why my own line is built on conflict-free sourcing.

On the lab-grown side: no mining footprint in the traditional sense, which is a genuine plus. But "lab-grown" is not the same as "zero impact." Growing diamonds is energy-intensive, and the environmental profile depends heavily on how that energy is generated — a facility running on renewables is a very different story from one running on coal-heavy grid power. Some producers are transparent about this; many are not. So "eco-friendly" on a lab-grown tag is a claim to verify, not to assume.

The honest takeaway: both paths can be responsible, and both can be sketchy. Ethics live in the specific sourcing and the specific producer, not in the category label. Ask harder questions than the marketing wants you to ask.

Certification: do not skip this, whichever you choose

This is where I get emphatic, because it protects you regardless of which stone you pick.

Buy a diamond that comes with a report from a respected independent laboratory — GIA and IGI are the names you'll encounter most. A credible lab report tells you the stone's actual grades rather than the seller's optimistic description, and reputable labs grade and disclose lab-grown stones as well. Reputable lab-grown diamonds are also typically laser-inscribed on the girdle noting their origin, so there's no ambiguity about what you own.

A few rules I'd stake my name on:

- **Insist on independent certification.** An in-house "appraisal" is not the same as a report from an independent lab.
- **Make sure lab-grown is clearly disclosed** as lab-grown, in writing, on the report and the receipt. Non-disclosure is the real fraud in this market — not the stones themselves.
- **Compare like with like.** A lab-grown and a natural stone should be compared on the same certified grades, from comparable labs, before you judge the price gap.

The 4Cs still run the show

Whichever origin you choose, the thing sitting on your finger is still governed by the 4Cs, and I'd argue their order of importance for most buyers is:

1. **Cut** — the most important and the most underrated. Cut is what makes a diamond come alive. A well-cut stone of modest specs will outshine a poorly cut stone with better numbers on paper. This is where I'd never compromise.
2. **Color** — how close to colorless (or how warm) the stone is. Where you want to sit depends on the metal and your taste; a slightly warmer stone can look gorgeous in yellow gold.
3. **Clarity** — most inclusions are invisible without magnification. "Eye-clean" matters far more than chasing a flawless grade you'll never see.
4. **Carat** — weight, not size, and it's where emotion inflates budgets fastest.

Here's the practical move: because lab-grown gives you more stone for the money, a lot of buyers use that headroom to **upgrade cut** rather than just chase carat weight. That's the smart play. Buy the best cut you can, at a size that's eye-clean, in the color that flatters your setting. That advice holds for both origins.

So — when should you buy which?

A lab-grown diamond is the smart buy when: - You want the biggest, brightest, best-cut stone your budget allows and you're buying it to wear and love, not to resell. - You're doing fashion or everyday pieces — studs, a right-hand ring, a pendant — where maximizing beauty-per-dollar is the whole point.

- You'd rather put the savings toward a better setting, a honeymoon, or literally anything else. - You've verified the producer's sourcing and, if the environment matters to you, their energy story.

A natural diamond makes sense when: - The provenance and the "formed in the earth" story genuinely mean something to you — for some people it does, and that's completely valid. - You care about relative value retention and a real secondhand market, and you're buying a high-quality, well-certified stone. - You're creating a deliberate heirloom meant to be passed down with its origin story intact.

There's no universally "right" answer. There's only the right answer **for you**, and anyone who tells you otherwise is selling from their inventory, not advising from your interests.

The bottom line from my bench

The most freeing thing I can tell you is this: a lab-grown diamond is a real diamond, a natural diamond carries a rarity you can't manufacture, and neither one is a reliable financial investment for a normal buyer. Once you internalize that, the pressure evaporates. You stop trying to make a "correct" choice and start making an informed one.

Buy certified. Buy the best cut. Ask real questions about sourcing. And buy the stone that means something to the person wearing it. Do that, and I promise you'll get the part that actually lasts — not the resale value, but the way it looks across a dinner table ten years from now.

That's the piece no tag can grade.

Key takeaways

- ② Lab-grown diamonds are real diamonds — same material, hardness, and sparkle — not simulants like cubic zirconia or moissanite; the difference is origin and rarity, not authenticity.
- ② Lab-grown stones generally cost meaningfully less than comparable natural ones and have been getting cheaper as production scales; natural stones command a premium for scarcity and provenance.
- ② Neither is a good investment for the average buyer; natural diamonds have a stronger resale market, while lab-grown has thin resale and falling new prices — buy lab-grown to enjoy, not to flip.
- ② Ethics depend on the specific producer, not the category: mined stones need traceable, responsible sourcing, and lab-grown's environmental footprint hinges on how the energy is generated.
- ② Always insist on independent certification (GIA/IGI), written disclosure of lab-grown origin, and compare stones on the same certified grades.

- 2 Prioritize cut above all in the 4Cs; use lab-grown's savings to upgrade cut and setting rather than just chasing carat weight.

Frequently asked questions

Can a jeweler tell the difference between a lab-grown and a natural diamond?

Not by eye or with a standard loupe — they're the same material with the same optical properties. Distinguishing them requires specialized lab equipment that reads trace elements and growth patterns, which is exactly why independent certification and written disclosure matter so much.

Do lab-grown diamonds hold their value?

Generally not well, and it's the honest weak point of the category. Because production keeps scaling and new prices keep falling, secondhand lab-grown values have been under real pressure. Buy one to own and enjoy, not as an investment — and understand that even natural diamonds rarely return their retail price on resale.

Is a lab-grown diamond automatically the more ethical choice?

Not automatically. It avoids traditional mining, which is a genuine plus, but growing diamonds is energy-intensive and the environmental impact depends on the power source. Meanwhile, responsibly sourced natural diamonds support mining communities and can be traced through provenance programs. Ethics live in the specific producer's practices, so ask direct questions either way.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of Alrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express, MetLife, and UBS — and executive study at Wharton, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.