

A Quick Guide to Natural & Cultured Pearls **(Including Types & Value)**

Once upon a time, in a small village in Japan, there was a noodle vendor. Most things about him including his name, accomplishments, and favourite noodle brand have been lost to the winds of history. What is remembered, however, is that he had a son. A little lost Japanese boy who left school at the age of thirteen to sell vegetables.

This boy's name was Kokichi Mikimoto.

[Kokichi Mikimoto](#) changed everything for the pearl industry. After watching pearl divers unload their precious treasures on the beach, he developed a lifelong fascination with the sea gems that would lead to something previously thought impossible: farming pearl oysters in controlled conditions, allowing pearl jewelry to be accessible to women and men across the world.

Today, his passion and dedication can be seen in jewelry shops all over the globe, in films and television, on women of all walks of life. While there is still a place for wild pearls in the jewelry world, particularly among collectors in “the know”, most real pearls we see today are a result of these farming techniques. Let's look at some of the differences, the similarities, and how these two types of pearls are viewed in the industry.

How Is a Natural Pearl Created?

“Natural” is a word that gets misattributed to pearl jewelry quite often. Sometimes it's used out of dishonesty, but more often it's simply that the jewelry vendor doesn't understand its role in the pearl industry. You can think about natural and cultured pearls a little like natural and [lab grown diamonds](#); “natural” refers to pearls that formed in the wild, at the mercy of tempests and raging ecosystems without any intervention from human hands whatsoever. “Cultured” refers to very real pearls that, like lab grown diamonds, were formed intentionally in controlled, regulated environments.

Up until about the 1950s, the Arabian Gulf was the primary region where divers would go searching for pearls. Natural pearls are formed in oysters and mollusks when an external irritant, such as a bit of shell or organic matter, becomes caught in the oyster's soft membrane. The oyster begins building up layers of nacre — that's the shell-like substance that pearls are made of — around the irritant to isolate it.

Natural pearls were once some of the most sought-after gems and reserved only for the very elite, up to about the turn of the twentieth century when Mikimoto began exploring the possibility of controlled pearl farming. Now most of the natural pearls we see in the jewelry market will be vintage and estate pieces with major price tags. While collecting natural pearls has become unviable on a commercial level, there is a rise in pearl diving as a tourist attraction in places like [Bahrain](#).

How Is a Cultured Pearl Created?

Cultured pearls follow much the same formula as wild ones; an external irritant is introduced into the oyster or mollusk and the oyster is encouraged to begin growing nacre around the foreign matter — this is called the nucleus. In freshwater cultured pearls the nucleus is usually a piece of mollusk skin tissue, whereas in saltwater pearls a plastic or mother-of-pearl bead is more commonly used. Technicians monitor the temperature of the water and the environment to make sure the oyster has the ideal conditions to create the perfect pearl. The process is long and painstaking and, as with all farming, a bit of a gamble; it takes two to five years before pearls are ready to be harvested, and some oysters will die before that time is up.

Originally introduced to the fine jewelry market in [1921](#), cultured pearls have become the benchmark for pearl jewelry around the world. Even today pearl farmers are constantly looking for new ways to improve the quality of their pearls and we're seeing more and more exciting discoveries being made.

What Are the Types of Cultured Pearls?

Broadly speaking, cultured pearls fall into two categories: freshwater and saltwater. The most popular saltwater pearls are further divided into akoya pearls, South Sea pearls, and Tahitian pearls. Each of these has their own unique beauty and range of color, which you can read more about [here](#).