

Tahitian Black Pearls

Cultivating Royalty in a South Seas Paradise

Tahiti - the name alone evokes images of sun-drenched beaches and turquoise waters - a paradise we in Minnesota yearn to escape to come January! These tropical islands are home to one of nature's magnificent creations - the black pearl. This jewel of the sea has a reputation for exceptional value and rarity, enhanced by its use in jewelry of the world's royalty and nobility. It has even been nicknamed the "Queen of Pearls."

There are many ancient legends surrounding pearls. In China black pearls were considered so rare that they were guarded by dragon's teeth. In the Orient pearls were often associated with tears of the gods, and in Ceylonese legend the tears of Adam and Eve created a lake that gave birth to pearls. Eve's tears produced white pearls and Adam's tears produced black.

In the 1900s, divers were still collecting wild black-lipped oysters looking for pearls and stocks were being seriously depleted. In 1963 Jean Domard, the head of the government's Fisheries Department, experimented with seeding mollusks at Hikueru, an atoll in French Polynesia. Two years later the first farmed black pearls were harvested and a new industry was born! Today there are 14 large companies comprising about half of the total production, 50 small to medium size producers and a cooperative of 450 small family-run microenterprises.

The black-lipped pearl oyster produces spawn at certain times of the year which is fertilized and known as sprats. After being free-swimming for a month or so, the sprats eventually attach themselves to coral or to collectors that farmers hang in the lagoons. The farmers then transfer them to containers that are suspended about 20 feet deep where

they grow for over a year. The mollusks are then fastened to lines and suspended for at least another year while they grow large enough to be productive.

After about three years, the oyster is ready for grafting. Grafting is a process that stimulates the natural secretion of nacre. A piece of the mantle from another oyster is inserted into the reproductive organ of the host. If inserted alone, the result will be an irregular shaped pearl known in the trade as *keishi*. If the mantle is inserted with a round ball cut from shell, the result will be the round to oval shaped pearls we are familiar with. The process of coating the nucleus with nacre takes another 1-1/2 to 2 years. There are many times during cultivation that things can go wrong, but the grafting process is the most likely danger point. The mortality rate following grafting is anywhere from 10-40%. Or the oyster may simply spit out or reject the foreign nucleus.

Tahitian pearls are not dyed, yet the color ranges from white to silver-gray to brown to black with the nacre providing overtones of green, purple, red and blue. An unusual phenomenon that is more prevalent in Tahitian pearls than other varieties is the circle or ringed pearl. These pearls have grooves running symmetrically all the way around, perpendicular to the long axis. No one knows for sure what causes the grooves, but consumers love them for their natural look and bargain pricing!

Pictured top to bottom:

Tahitian Pearl and Sapphire in White Gold \$1350

Mokume Gane Clasp on 12-14mm Black Pearls \$5300

Tahitian Pearl in Rose and White Gold Ring \$2000

15.5mm Tahitian Pearl with 18KT Gold Bail \$1100