

Fiji's Unique Pearls



Courtesy J. Hunter Pearls

The skill and knowledge required for pearl production can be - and has been - compared to the production of fine wines. Much in the way of crop preparation, nourishment and harvest is similar. As with the finest vineyards, the local environment where the stock is grown is crucial to the final product. Fiji provides some of the finest natural environment for the production of rare and unusual pearls in the world.



Courtesy: Civa Pearls



Courtesy: J. Hunter Pearls



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While pearls are known to have been used as jewelry for over 6000 years, it was only in 1893 that Kokichi Mikimoto discovered the process, still in use, to produce cultured pearls and made the organic gem available to an expanded market of pearl enthusiasts. By 1905 he was able to employ his process with the Akoya oyster in Japan to create a perfectly spherical cultured pearl.



Mr. Tokino, Dr. Wada and Mr. Rosenthal
Courtesy Tokino Pearls

Fiji's pearling industry has drawn on the rich history of the pearl, and is older than one might first assume.

In 1963 Yasuharu Tokito arrived in Fiji from Japan via Hong Kong bringing with him several years of pearling experience. In partnership with Dr. Koji Wada, who had worked in Australia's pearl industry, they joined forces in Ovalau to experiment with black-lipped oysters, and established what would be Fiji's first pearl farm.

Dr. Wada later moved to Tahiti and helped to initiate that country's first commercial pearl farm with a son of the Rosenthal diamond dynasty in 1966. Staying on in Fiji, Mr. Tokito presented his first commercial pearls in 1968 and in 1987 he produced a stunning sized pearl 18.5mm in diameter – at that time a world record. In 1998, Fiji's Fisheries Department developed an experimental farm at Savusavu Bay on the island of Vanua Levu. The bulk of Fiji's pearl farming activity is centered there to this day.



Courtesy: j. Hunter Pearls



Courtesy Civa Pearls

There are currently 4 active farmers in Fiji producing pearls for export (J. Hunter Pears Fiji, Valili Pearls, Civa Pearls, and Tokino Pearls), plus another three at different levels of production, although at one time there have been almost a dozen farmers operating. Apart from the traditional Round, Teardrop (symmetrical but not round), Baroque (irregular and non-symmetrical) and other black pearls commonly seen, Fiji's palette expands to rarer hues of gold, champagne, green, cranberry, chocolate, peacock, lilac, turquoise, dusty rose and deep sapphire – an almost endless variety.



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These are, of course, totally natural colors derived from - and unique to - the Fijian environment; they are not dyed or enhanced in any way. The distinctive traits of Fijian pearls are due to the specific qualities of the natural environment and the oysters chosen, as well as innovative farming techniques.

Formation of a pearl occurs when an irritant is lodged in an oyster's mantle tissue and the animal's defense mechanism creates a "pearl sac" around it, which in turn begins coating it with layers of a calcareous concretion called 'nacre'. Nacre consists of over 85% aragonite (a variety of calcium carbonate formed in hexagonal platelets), about 10% conchiolin (an organic agent that binds the aragonite platelets together), and less than 5% water. There are a variety of different animals (both fresh and saltwater mollusks) that produce pearls, including oysters, mussels, abalone and even some snails. A "true" pearl must be made with an outer nacre layer; only pearls from mollusks with a nacreous mother of pearl lining are considered "true" pearls. A series of alternating layers of nacre creates a stunning pearly luster or iridescence, also referred to as 'orient'. Because the thickness of the aragonite platelets is nearly the same as the wavelength of visible light, separate wavelengths of light create interference with one another that cause different viewing angles to showcase various colors. This makes the pearls appear iridescent.



Courtesy J. Hunter Pearls

Cultured pearls have induced irritants consisting of a bead of mother of pearl shell and a small piece of mantle lobe tissue (from another mollusk –often the Pigtoe mussel from the Mississippi River) placed into a pearl producing mollusk – the process called nucleation. The oysters are often raised in a tank



Courtesy J. Hunter Pearls

where they attach to fibers and are then allowed to mature in cages suspended from rafts in salt water for an additional two to three years where they feed on plankton. Only the healthiest specimens are selected for nucleation, which are first pried open and the bead inserted along with the foreign mantle tissue. Once returned to their underwater cages, they are monitored and protected until harvesting. This commercial production technique, known as the Mise-Nishikawa method, bears mature pearls in about two to three and a half years. Commonly the yield is only about 5% high quality pearls (with a total marketability rate of

only about 28% of the harvest). Up to 17 % of the harvest is unmarketable (either substandard or uncoated nuclei) and around half of the induced oysters may die. Oysters may be nucleated up to four times. Pearls are appraised based on their qualities such as size, shape, surface characteristics and color.

Only 1-2% of all pearls are Gem and Grade A quality. While there is no standardized grading system for pearls, there are two widely accepted systems which are fairly interchangeable.

Grading System A-D (Tahitian Grading) / AAA-A Grading	
Top Gem / Gem Grade	Flawless pearl with excellent luster, no inclusions or imperfections prior to setting or drilling
A / AAA	Flawless on at least 90% of the pearls surface with very high luster. Slight, concentrated imperfections. Only a single deep inclusion allowable. Should drill or set clean to nearly clean.
A-B / AA+	Flawless on 80% of surface with high to very high luster. Slight, concentrated imperfections and only 1-2 deep inclusions. Should drill or set clean to nearly clean.
B / AA	Flawless on at least 70%, with high to very high luster. Slight, concentrated imperfections and only 1-2 deep inclusions. Should drill or set clean to nearly clean.
C / A+	Flawless on at least 40%, with medium to very high luster. Up to 60% of the surface may exhibit slight, concentrated imperfections, and deep inclusions are limited to 10% of the surface area.
D / A	At least 60% of the surface will exhibit flaws. Deep inclusions and/or white spots within inclusions can occur on up to 20% of the surface, and luster is poor to very high.



Round



Semi - Round



Keshi



Baroque



Circle

Unfortunately grading is rarely absolute, and can vary between dealers. However, when comparing pearls from reputable sources a reasonable basis for comparison does exist.



Courtesy J. Hunter Pearls

Justin Hunter of J. Hunter Pearls Fiji has been the most prolific entrepreneur and is the best known. After establishing his operation at Savusavu Bay in 2000, Justin has lead Fiji's pearl industry with innovative farming techniques and has been devoted to the ultimate goal of growing the perfect pearl. Along the way he has created magnificent pearls with unique characteristics sought the world over. J. Hunter pearls nacre thickness averages 1.6mm, well above the .8mm required by Tahiti's pearling industry. They also produce some of the largest black pearls in the world, averaging 11mm. But it hasn't always been easy. "When we first took our pearls to Japan in 2003, we could not, for the life of us, get anyone to purchase our Pastel/Fiji light pearls. Now we get a premium price for our pastel pearls."

Of the other three pearl farmers, Ratu Jone Maivalili of Valili Pearls (also located in Savusavu Bay) began his operation in 2001 and Claude Prevost of Civa Pearls (located in



Courtesy J. Hunter Pearls

Wailoa Lagoon in Taveuni) started in 2007. Both of these operations are at more of a family level than J. Hunter, though they also produce exquisite pearls. J. Hunter Pearls also operates Fiji's only oyster hatchery.



Courtesy Civa Pearls

Tokino Pearls is located near Rakiraki at Nanuyakoto Island, and is a continuation of the venture begun by Yasuharu Tokito in 1963 (who still directs the endeavor and supervises his young farmers). Tours are offered at J. Hunter, Tokino and Civa Pearls, so guests lucky enough to be staying near Savusavu, Rakiraki or on Taveuni can visit those enterprises, see the actual farming operations and meet the owners and staff.



Yasuharu Tokito
Courtesy Tokino Pearls

The three northern producers (Justin Hunter, Jone Maivalili and Claude Prevost) have recently formed The Northern Alliance and forged an agreement regarding the high quality grading system covering all pearls destined for export. In a joint statement they say "This groundbreaking agreement is a world first in pearl farming. The agreement covers many areas such as environmentally friendly farm practices, rural community development, staff training and empowering, quality control systems, research data sharing, technology exchange, and a very high quality pearl production system control for export." "This system will ensure that only high quality pearls will be exported from these three farms. It will also help maintain and increase the actual solid reputation of the Fijian pearls in international markets."

After cyclone Tomas' devastating effect on the pearl harvest in 2010, this agreement establishes a voluntary common standard that sends an international signal ensuring high quality, sustainability and eco-friendly practices. Although business competitors, they also work in concert to uplift the pearling industry in Fiji, even sharing the same Japanese technicians.



Courtesy Civa Pearls

Ratu Jone, who made his first pearl harvest in 2003, said "It will ensure better profitability for my farm in the long run and better support in developing my exporter skills... Quality is the way forward for me. Making great

pearls is my best protection against failure." Jone has traveled to Europe and Japan to sell his pearls at the wholesale level, but now will be distributing in conjunction with the Northern Alliance.

Justin said "Quality is the only way for us to maintain our profitability. Our buyers will not only buy a quality pearl, they will buy sustainability, rural community development and environment-friendly farm practices". J. Hunter Pearls was the 2005 winner of the Fiji Islands Trade and Investment Bureau's Unique Exporter of the Year Award. Fiji companies export around 150kg (330 pounds) of pearls each year and this is forecast to rise steadily.



Images courtesy J. Hunter Pearls

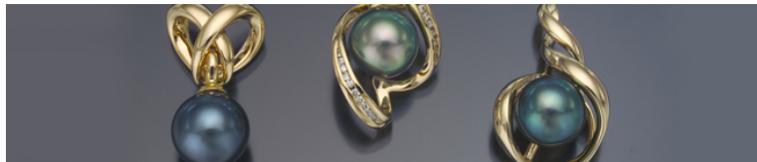


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Phyllis Dobrin, a Gemological Institute of America certified gemologist (and long time Sea Fiji Travel client), is familiar with both Fiji's and Tahiti's pearling industry. She says of J. Hunter that "the difference and one of the reasons the Fijian Pearls are superior is the type of oyster and Justin's revolutionary techniques." Justin focuses on quality rather than quantity. "Justin has stated he does not want to leave a footprint in the ocean or on land from his farming techniques. He has literally villages helping him to achieve the success of J. Hunter Pearls. When one looks at his magnificent pearls, one has to think about how many hard working people it took to create just one pearl."

Phyllis is looking forward to her next visit to Fiji, and hopes that it coincides with the pearl harvest, so that she can sit alongside Leanne Hunter during the grading process. She says that "Justin sells his (wholesale) lots of pearls only to the German jeweler Gellner. So the only other place one may buy them is Fiji."

One reason that Fiji's pearls will continue to hold their value (and appreciate in the future) is the relative rarity of the pearls themselves. Fiji will never produce massive quantities due to a lack of suitable farm sites – while Tahiti is a country of atolls, Fiji has very few and protected farm sites are rare. Finding the perfect location with protection from storms, free from sedimentation and with the appropriate nutrition levels is not easy, but when those, and other factors come together, the magnificent results are readily apparent!



Courtesy J. Hunter Pearls

Fiji pearls and pearl jewelry are available at many resort boutiques throughout Fiji, as well as Prouds department stores and Duty Free Stores in the Nadi International Airport (both arrival and departure areas). Feel free to contact Sea Fiji Travel for additional information.

www.seafiji.com

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Images courtesy J. Hunter Pearls

Sources:

J. Hunter Pearls; Jone Maivalili/Valili Pearls; Claude Prevost/Civa Pearls; Tokino Pearls; Jill Banfield/Dept. of Earth & Planetary Science, UC Berkeley; Mikimoto; Fiji Sun; PearlGuide.com; Increasing Agricultural Commodity Trade (IACT) Project Special thanks to Dick MacLeod for the contribution of his editing skills.