

Pearl Academy  
by RAW PEARLS



Part 3:  
Types of Cultured Pearl

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# Types of Cultured Pearl

In Part 3 of Pearl Academy, we look at the two different types of cultured pearl: saltwater and freshwater.

We look at the three different types of saltwater cultured pearls.

We look at all four of these (the freshwater plus the three types of saltwater) and compare where they come from, what sizes they are typically cultured in and what natural colours you can expect to find them in.

So, lets take a step back.

- We have two types of cultured pearl.
- One is cultured in freshwater and one is cultured in sea or saltwater.
- The process for farming can vary a little between the two, but let's make a top level comparison first.



- Freshwater pearls are cultured in freshwater lakes or rivers.
- Saltwater pearls are cultured in saltwater in the sea.
- Freshwater pearls are cultured in mussels.
- Saltwater pearls are cultured in a variety of

oysters.

- Freshwater mussels can often produce a number of pearls at a time: up to 40 in one shell.
- Saltwater oysters can often only produce one pearl at a time.



# Top Level Comparisons

- Here, you start to see some of the pricing differentiation between the two, with culturing of saltwater pearls being far more labour intensive to produce just a single pearl.
- Freshwater pearls are often grafted with just a piece of mantle tissue from another mussel.
- Saltwater pearls are nucleated with both a piece of mantle tissue and a round bead nucleus.
- So, two different processes are at play here in the grafting, seeding and nucleation stage.
- You can imagine therefore, how much easier it is to produce a round pearl from a saltwater oyster than it is from a freshwater mussel, when you consider that the oyster is producing layers of nacre which, hopefully, are forming around an already present round bead.
- You can also see here why, historically, so much of the freshwater harvest was not round, and just how difficult to find a round shape it might be – this is a small part of the crop.
- What has changed in freshwater pearl farming is the introduction of this bead nucleation to create some pearls – presently in the larger sizes. Whilst this is a growing part of their process, there is still much of the freshwater pearl harvest that comes from an implantation of just a piece of mantle tissue.



A solid bead nucleus and a piece of mantle tissue is inserted into saltwater oysters

# Where are they Cultured?

Saltwater pearls are cultured in various locations in the world and there are three main types you'll come across:

These are the akoya cultured pearl, South Sea cultured pearl and Tahitian cultured pearl.

Lets compare those with the freshwater cultured pearl.

Here, we'll look at where each are cultured, and what sizes and natural colours you can expect to find them in.

- Here is what a freshwater mollusc looks like:



Freshwater: *Hyriopsis cumingii*

- And an Akoya oyster:



Akoya: *Pinctada fucata*

## Where are they Cultured?

- A South Sea oyster:



- And a Tahitian oyster:



# Where are they Cultured?

Let's take a look at where these are farmed:

- Freshwater pearls are cultured in a number of places in the world, but the vast majority come out of China
  - with many lakes and ponds found inland:



- Akoya pearl farming began and continues in Japan, and Mikimoto found fame by first commercialising these pearls. There is also large production of these oysters in China and Vietnam:



# Where are they Cultured?

- These are considered to be the ‘Grandfather’ of the cultured pearl – with many people using the term ‘cultured pearl’ generally to refer specifically to these.
- South Sea pearl farms can be found for the most part in Australia (in whites and silvers), and Indonesia and the Philippines (in golden colours):



- Tahitian pearl farms can mostly be found in the islands of French Polynesia and the Cook Islands:



# What Sizes are they Produced in?

Let's take a look now at the typical size ranges produced by the freshwater mussel, and the three saltwater oysters we're discussing here:

- Freshwater pearls are farmed in all sizes, from just 1mm right up to 20mm but anything over 10mm would be considered large:



- Akoya pearls are farmed from around 2mm through to around 11mm. Akoya pearls are rarely found above this size – for the customer looking for larger pearls, this particular type of pearl is not an option:

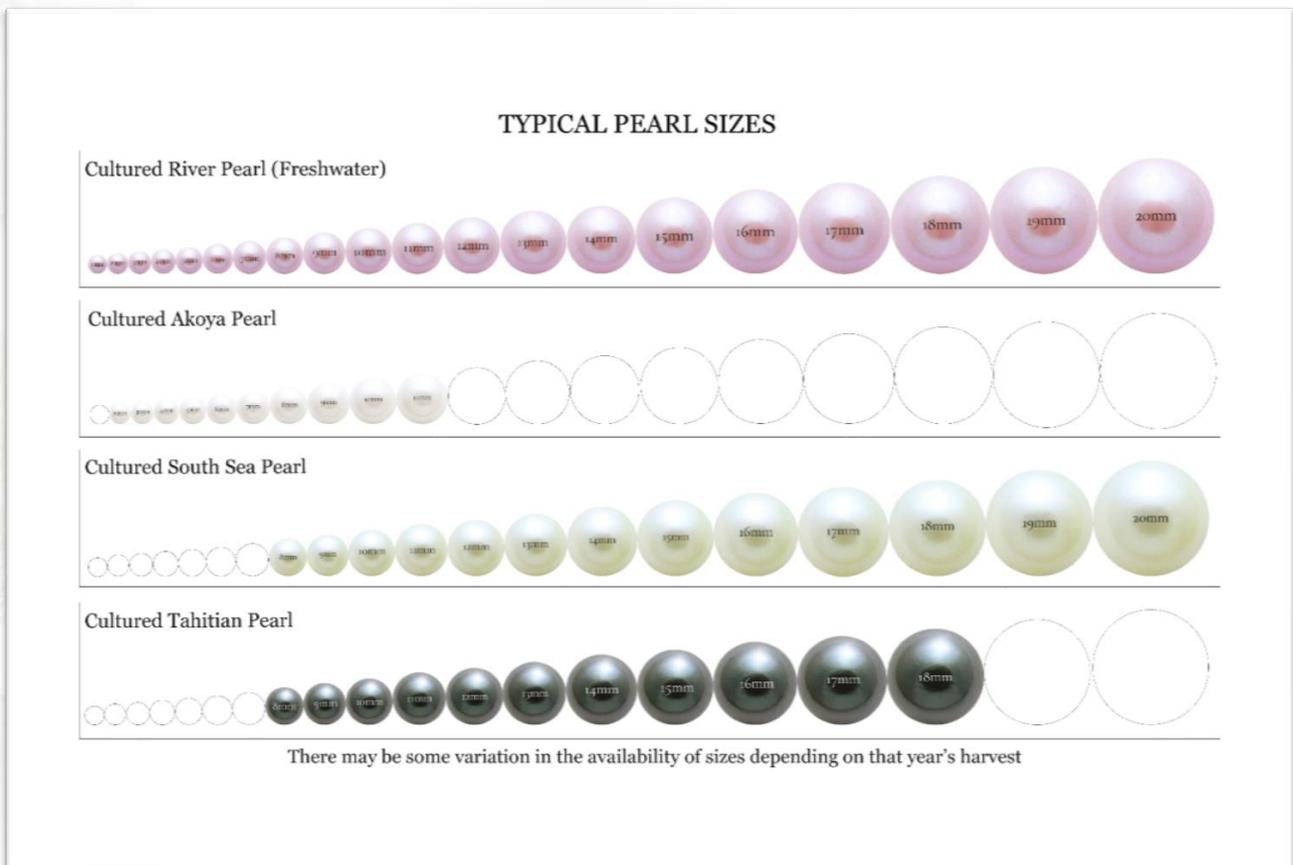


# What Sizes are they Produced in?

- South Sea pearls are produced generally in larger sizes between 8mm and 20mm:



- And Tahitian pearls are produced in similar sizes, perhaps a little smaller – from around 8mm to 18mm:



# What Natural Colours are they Produced in?

So, what natural colours do these molluscs produce?

- Well, looking at the freshwater mussel first, freshwater pearls come in natural colours of creams, pinks, peaches and lilacs:



And looking at the saltwater oyster:

- Akoya pearls are produced in whites and creams:



# What Natural Colours are they Produced in?

- South Sea pearls in whites, silvers, and golden colours:



- And Tahitian pearls in the darker colours – blacks, greys & browns:



# Summary

- What you'll note here therefore, is that pearls being sold in colours besides these will likely be dyed or treated.

- A pearl's colour is influenced by the colour of the mollusc's shell. For example, the Tahitian pearl will have the darker tones of it's mother oyster.



- Farmers can also try to influence the final colour through the piece of mantle tissue inserted in the grafting process.
- But the final pearl colour to some extent, always remains an unknown until the pearl has grown.

We are now at the end of this chapter and you should now be aware that there are both cultured freshwater and cultured saltwater pearls.

You should be familiar with the three types of saltwater pearl you come across.

And for both the freshwater and saltwater types you should be aware of where they'd likely come from, in what sizes, and in what natural colours you'd expect to see them.



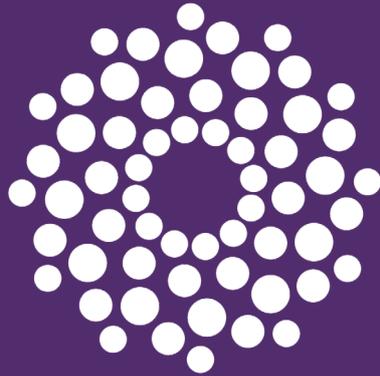
**Freshwater:** China. 1-20mm.  
Cream, Pink, Peach, Lilac.

**Akoya:** Japan, China, Vietnam.  
2-11mm. White, Cream.

**South Sea:** Australia, Indonesia, Philippines. 8-20mm. White, Silver, Golden.

**Tahitian:** French Polynesia, Cook Islands. 8-18mm. Black, Grey, Brown.

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