

PEARLESCENCE

All About Pearls

www.pearlscence.co.uk

All About Pearls

A – AAA Grading system

Essence pearls are exceptional pearls, selected for highly metallic lustre, clean surface and shape, in that order. Usually only found by selecting in person. Probably under 1% of pearls will show the mirror metallic lustre we look for.

AAA: The highest-quality pearl, virtually flawless. The surface will have a very high lustre, not necessarily metallic, and at least 95% of the surface of each pearl is free of flaws. Any flaws are very small and hardly noticeable.

AA+ Nearly as good as AAA but perhaps slightly off round when rolled and a few more flaws although these will still only be visible on close inspection.

AA Average to good lustre, off round, blemishing to 20% of surface

A: This is the lowest jewellery-grade pearl, with a lower lustre and/or more than 25% of the surface showing defects. Probably a round pearl will be egg shaped, even from a distance

Any website or other seller which talks about AAAA+++ grade pearls is talking rubbish and this should be queried.

Tahitian pearls have a distinct and separate system, established by GIE Perles de Tahiti, and the Ministère de la Perliculture of Tahiti which grades from A (finest) to D (poor) but to avoid confusion Pearlescence uses only the A-AAA gradings throughout the website.

Abalone blue pearls



Just being developed in New Zealand. The abalone produces a distinctive and stunningly iridescent blue pearl but is very hard to nucleate as its blood does not clot, so any damage will kill it.

Akoya

A pearl from the akoya oyster (*Pinctada Fucata Martensii*). This is a salt water mollusc.



Most cultured sea pearls are akoya pearls which are made with a bead nucleus, so that they usually have a good round shape. Big irregularities tend to be tails while less than perfect pearls have nacre with pits or convolutions. Good akoya pearls have a sharply reflective metallic lustre.



Smaller (under 8mm) akoya pearls tend to come from China (although chinese production has dropped with the recession) while Japanese akoya pearl farmers are concentrating on producing larger high quality pearls (made-up necklaces marked Made In Japan may have been made with Chinese pearls if under 8mm) akoya pearls are harvested after only 9-16 months.

The problem is in obtaining pearls with sufficient nacre. Pearls with very thin nacre may even 'blink' which means that when rolled the nacre blinks to show patches where there is no nacre and you can see the nucleus. Below is a very bad example – the cream colour is nacre and the white is nucleus. Even when the nacre appears solid it can be very thin: peer closely and you can just about make out the thin line of the black nacre on the akoya pearl on the left (which split in half) The nacre on the pearl on the right is so thin the pearl is said to be blinking – if you roll it around it appears to blink, with sight of the nucleus.



Baroque

Baroque pearls are strictly all non-round pearls but the term is usually applied to pearls which are not round but which nevertheless have a good rounded surface all over. Freshwater pearls are most commonly baroque as freshwater pearls are mantle-tissue nucleated instead of bead nucleated. So round pearls are the exception, although more are being produced as techniques improve.



The most valuable baroque pearls are South Sea and Tahitian pearls which are produced by Black-lipped and White-lipped oysters (*Pinctada margaritifera*, and the *Pinctada maxima*). Commercial baroque pearls tend to be bigger pearls – there is a balancing act for the pearl farmer between leaving the pearl in the mollusc with the chance of a big round pearl and the likelihood that the pearl will go out of round and become baroque and therefore less valuable

Bead Nucleation

All sea pearls are grown around a bead. It used to be that beads were not used in the production of most freshwater pearls (exceptions include coin pearls for example) However the last couple of years have seen the development of bead nucleation in freshwater pearls, producing second or third graft round pearls of stunning colour, lustre and shape. High quality bead nuked pearls are still exceptional and unusual and therefore very expensive, but can be up to 14mm.

These freshwater pearls have been bead nucleated, and you can see the thick layer of nacre surrounding the nucleus

Biwa

Or sometimes biwa-A freshwater pearl grown in lake Biwa in Japan. Not in the present as the pearl farms were closed due to pollution. Now often applied to any stick pearl

Bleaching

White pearls are colour treated by bleaching. This applies to both Akoya and Freshwater pearls.

Black-lipped Oyster

Pinctada margaritifera This oyster produces the Tahitian black pearl

Blinking

Term to describe poor quality bead nucleated pearls where the nacre does not even fully cover the nucleus. When the strand is rolled the pearls look as if they are blinking.

Blister

A pearl that is attached to the inner surface of a mollusc shell

Button

Often rounded on one side and flat on the other. Sometimes also called a fastener pearl . Most often used to make stud earrings, because in larger sizes round pearls can be too proud of the earlobe.

Carat

Classic term to identify the amount of gold in metal. Different metals are added to gold to harden it and make it more durable. Expressed as a fraction of 24 parts so that 24ct is fine gold or pure gold, down to the lowest standard which is 9ct in the UK, usually 14ct elsewhere.

Circle pearls

No one knows exactly why some pearls develop circles. These can be bands of colour or grooves, as if the pearl has gently spun on its axis in the pearl sac. While circle pearls tend not to be the most expensive they are not as yet imitated and have stunning variety



Colour.

Natural freshwater pearls tend to be shades of white through to pale pinks and peaches and golds. The intensity of the colour depends on the species and strain of host mollusc plus the farm water and food.

Tahitian and South sea pearls are not usually dyed.

Colour Treatments

Many pearls are coloured treated as part of the processing between farm and retailer. There is however, now a trend towards completely natural colour untreated pearls.

Silver nitrate and gamma radiation are two treatments. (see separate entries) and white bleached akoya pearls are often 'pinked' - delicate tinted to a faint pink overtone which softens the colour and is supposedly more flattering and desirable.

Coin

Usually a round flat pearl shaped like a coin, also used to describe fancy hearts, squares, lozenge and other shaped pearls

Conch Pearls

Rarest of the natural pearls, conch pearls look a bit like jelly beans. They are not nacreous but have a distinctive flame pattern on the surface. The colours range from orange, through yellow to pink



Cook Island Pearls

Specific group of south sea islands which produce their own distinctive pearls from *Pinctada Margaritifera*. The pearls show the same colours as Tahitian pearls but are softer looking in shades



Cortez Pearls

Very rare pearls produced by one farm in the Sea of Cortez, Mexico, from *Concha Nácar*, *Pteria sterna*, the rainbow lipped oyster. These pearls fluoresce red under UV light.



Cross

Cross can be diagonal or crucifix. Some cross pearls which also have nacre between the limbs have been sold as butterfly pearls

Cristaria plicata

The cockscomb pearl mussel was the mollusc originally used by the Chinese when they started to culture freshwater pearls. The pearls produced are known as rice crispie pearls because of their resemblance to the cereal

Cultured

A pearl formed after a human puts a bead nucleus or mantle tissue into a mollusc. Any farmed pearl is cultured. Any real pearl feels faintly gritty when rubbed gently on your teeth and the drill hole tends to be very small (usually 0.7mm)(because pearls are still often sold by weight)

Culturing Freshwater Pearls



In freshwater mussels, insertion of only mantle tissue is enough to trigger the making of a pearl sac and therefore pearl production. It used to be that beads were not used. However the last couple of years have seen the development of bead nucleation in freshwater pearls, producing second or third graft round pearls of stunning colour, lustre and shape. High quality bead nuked pearls are still exceptional and unusual and therefore very expensive, but can be up to 14mm. Even larger pearls are being produced with pearls nucleated with a lump of mud (!) these pearls, third graft, are of stunning lustre and a rather keishi appearance so far. When drilled the mud is drained away so that the pearl is hollow and light in weight. However most freshwater cultured pearls are still solid pearl nacre, even pearls up to 15mm. This means that they are arguably more durable but the chances of non-perfect round shapes are higher



Since so many good quality white fake pearls are now available the trend is for natural colour pearls to remain untreated. Usually white freshwater pearls have to be bleached.

There are many natural colours of freshwater pearls; pink, peach, purple, yellow, white, grey, brown, champagne and black. Only freshwater pearls are ever pink, peach and purple.. Black pearls are created by black oysters. The darker the colour is, the more valuable the pearl and black pearls with a little bit of green are the most precious.



Other colours are created artificially by dyeing or irradiating the pearls, or treating chemically. It is quite hard to tell with some colours whether or not a pearl has been treated (although a deep blue or hot pink pearl is never natural). Irradiated pearls are often silver/grey, blue, green, or gold to brown. Most dyed pearls are colourfast, and irradiated pearls won't lose their colour, and are not radioactive.



While Salt water oysters will only manage to make one pearl each (which keeps up their scarcity and value) freshwater mussels are more obliging and will make 20 or more each. Some farms are developing their own strains of mussel, selecting for quality, while other farms will buy in their mussels ready nucleated. This careful breeding is producing more strongly coloured natural colour pearls.



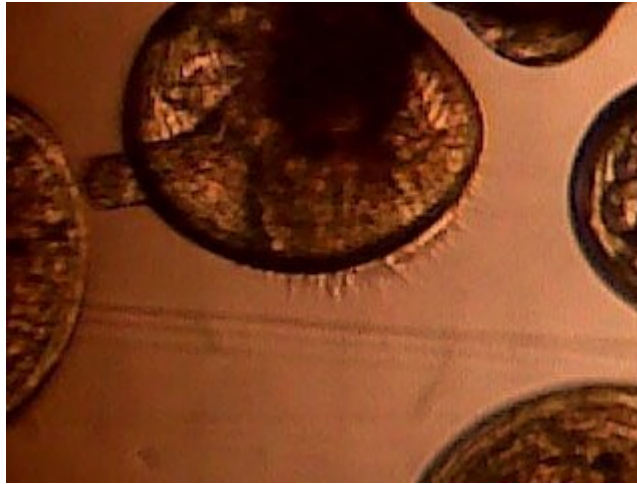
After harvest in China pearls go from individual farms to pearl factories where they are bleached to be white pearls, or otherwise coloured or processed, drilled and sorted, and assembled into strands.

Culturing Saltwater Pearls

Several distinct types of pearls grow in salt waters. Farming methods are pretty much the same for all of them

The process of growing sea pearls in oysters was discovered (or re-discovered as there are arguments about this) by Mikimoto in 1893.

All pearls which grow in salt water start with baby oysters which are either artificially bred in a hatchery or spawn naturally



then are collected by placing various lures in the water to attract the spats as they are called.



The baby oysters are grown on for two or more years until they are big enough to manage to accept a grafted bead nucleus.

With all sea pearls the pearl is grown around a nucleus – a starter bead plus a tiny fragment of mantle tissue which grows to form a pearl sac around the bead. As the mantle tissue is tissue for making nacre/shell it carries on doing this, secreting nacre on the inside of the sac and onto the bead. Mantle tissue makes the pearl sac because its job normally is to secrete the mother of pearl to make the smooth and lustrous lining of the oyster's shell.



Early in the morning of the day an oyster will receive a nucleus, it is taken out of the water and then left for about half an hour, by which time it should have opened its shell a little. The shells are wedged open. Any unopen shells go back into the water to be left for another attempt in a few days

Nucleating oysters is a skilled task – even opening the shell too far can kill the delicate creature. The bead-plus-mantle tissue scrap is inserted into an incision into the body of the oyster, either at its gonad or by the connective tissue. Remarkably having a bead stuck into its sex organ seems to make the oyster more active sexually rather than less!

A nucleus is a (usually) round bead made from shell and cut and polished into a smooth round -usually about 8mm in diameter for first grafting

The oyster is secured in a clamping device in front of the operator and either the wooden wedge is left in place or a retractor which allows the shells to be forced further apart is inserted. If the oyster



is opened too far it will die. The aim is for this process to take under a minute and it is reckoned that it takes a month at least for the oyster to recover.

The actual process is that the grafter, working through the tiny opening between the two halves of the shell, makes an incision of about a centimeter into the oyster's gonad or into its connective tissue then places the mantle tissue and nucleus (dipped in water and held by a suction tool) into this slit. The two insertions must be touching, or a pearl sac will not form. Then the oyster is put back into the sea. There are various ways it is held but they all work to allow the oyster to feed happily and grow.



No-one knows exactly why some grafts become great pearls and others don't. It is probably a mixture and combination of genetics, grafting skill, and growing conditions. Many farms keep a record to see who is the best grafter (!)

The implanted tissue forms a pearl sac around the nucleus and starts to secrete nacre. It will take between two and four years for the pearls to form. The tissue implant is only about 1mm square. It will form the pearl, which has no genetic relationship with the host mollusc.

Nacre is mostly carbonated calcium. As long as the irritant is present the mollusc continues to add layers of nacre until a smooth lustrous pearl is formed.

Only one pearl per oyster can be produced. Sometimes oysters can be re-nucleated after harvesting to produce a bigger pearl with a bigger nucleating bead, or, if no bead is used a keishi pearl can be produced (think of the inside of an inflated then deflated balloon)

Oysters are fairly fussy about their conditions and if forced to open too much they will die, as they will if they are out of the water too long, get too hot or too cold, if the water in which they live becomes too saline or not saline enough (this happens when a river floods and any oysters living in the estuary may well die because of the temporary dilution of salinity).



It takes about 18 months to two years to grow tahitian and south sea pearls. Tahitian pearls are required by local law to be x-rayed and have a minimum nacre depth of 0.8mm all round. South sea pearls tend to have much thicker nacre than this

There is some controversy about how long akoya pearls need to stay in the water. Some are harvested after only six months but these pearls can have gaps in their nacre so the bead is visible (they are said to 'blink' when rolled) and they will wear out quickly. But they will, of course, be very much cheaper.

The pearls are cosseted. They will be cleaned several times to remove algae, vegetable growths and barnacles, and the farmer must keep an eye on the weather conditions – some akoya farms now monitor temperature and salinity and move the oysters if conditions are not ideal.

Dye

Freshwater pearls especially are often dyed. Any very bright colour or deep colour is certainly dyed – there are no natural green, blue, red, purple etc freshwater pearls, at least so far. There is a wide choice of organic and inorganic dyes available and they are all permanent. Gold south sea pearls can also be dyed to deepen their colour (and value)

Edison Pearls

This is the brand name given to a range of large bead nucleated freshwater pearls from



one leading Chinese supplier. One strand of these pearls achieved £1/2m at auction. The pearls come from a *Hyriopsis* hybrid between *Hyriopsis cumingi* and *Hyriopsis schlegeli*.

Farm

Nearly every pearl available anywhere in the world is farmed – cultured. Pearl farms tend to be stunningly beautiful places.





Faux Pearl

Fake. A false pearl bead manufactured by coating the inside of a hollow glass sphere or the outside of a solid glass or plastic sphere with a pearlescent coating which is sometimes pearl powder. Faux is a fancy word for fake. Also called shell pearls. They are of course perfectly round in shape, with great lustre and even colour. White shell pearls are very white, which is a give-away. All fake pearls feel smooth when rubbed on the teeth and the drill holes tend to be larger.

Fiji

There is a young but growing pearl industry in Fiji, and the pearls produced have a



huge and stunning range of colours.

Freshwater

A pearl grown in a freshwater river, lake or pond margaritifera mollusc. Often more irregular in shape and more varied in colour than salt water pearls freshwater molluscs are nucleated by creating a small incision in the fleshy mantle tissue and inserting a piece of mantle tissue from

another oyster. This process may be completed 25 times on either side of the mantle, producing up to 50 pearls at a time. The molluscs are then returned to their freshwater environment where they are tended for 2-6 years. The resulting pearls are of solid nacre, but without a bead nucleus to guide the growth process, the pearls are rarely round.

Gamma Radiation

Gamma irradiation turns the nacre of freshwater pearls very dark, and often also imbues a metallic lustre with rainbow orient. Strangely, it has no effect on salt water nacre but will turn the nucleus dark which shows through the layer of nacre, making the pearl look grey or blueish. There is no danger of radiation contamination from irradiated pearls.

Granulated

or popcorn pearls have a knobby surface which resembles..popcorn. This granulation is often mixed with patches of high lustre surface. When the Chinese freshwater pearl business was starting up most of the pearls were, at least to some degree, popcornish and oval in shape. They were called Rice Krispie pearls.

Gold Leaf Pearls

This is the name we give to the extremely beautiful lustrous gold pearls which are natural pearls with a layer of aragonite with an incredible lustre – so it does indeed look as if a layer of gold leaf has been applied to the pearls.



Gold-lip oyster

A large oyster (variety of *Pinctada maxima*) used in some countries to produce South Sea cultured



pearls; it produces a yellowish nacre, and pearls that typically range from off-white to rich, deep gold in colour.

Goniochromism

An optical phenomenon which causes the hue of the pearl to change colours depending upon the angle from which the pearl is viewed

Half-drilled

A pearl which has only been partly drilled, as for rings or stud earrings. These sell for more than those which are fully drilled. The best have a flawless domed side.

Hallmark

The term hallmark is often confused with branding, but it is not a branding. Hallmarking is a specific process of assaying precious metals and marking them as having passed a required standard. It is a guarantee of quality of content. Hallmarking dates, in England, from 1300 when Edward 1 brought in a requirement for standardisation of silver for coin and wrought pieces, which were to be marked with the leopard's head mark to show they had passed assay.



Variations on the leopard's head are still used today for sterling silver pieces marked at the London assay office, run by the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths.

Different marks are used to denote fine silver, and the various grades of gold, plus platinum and palladium. A mark will show when and in which office the item was assayed, plus what metal and who made the item. The mark is either struck to the metal (the origin of 'making one's mark' as the maker can optionally still strike their own sponsor's mark before assay or the mark can be struck by laser.

All Pearlescence precious metals over the required minimum weight carries the London Assay office hallmark of owner Wendy Graham (Initials wmg in an oval cartouche).

Hyriopsis cumingi

The triangle shell is the shell used to culture most freshwater pearls in China

Irradiation

Irradiation has differing effects from freshwater to salt water cultured pearls. The gamma rays do not affect the nacre layers of a salt water cultured pearl, but in fact darken the nucleus of the pearl. An irradiated salt water pearl appears to be grey or blue. The nacre of freshwater irradiated pearls, on the other hand, if affected by the gamma rays and can become very dark. Some of these freshwater treated pearls will also have an intense metallic sheen and iridescent orient over their surface.

Kasumi

These are a sub-species of freshwater pearls grown only in Lake Kasumi-ga-Ura, some 40 miles northeast of Tokyo, Japan. They have a distinctive surface, like wrinkled satin.



Kasumi like pearls are now being produced in China

Keishi or Keshi

Japanese word meaning "something as tiny as you can imagine", such as a grain of sand; used originally for very tiny gems that resulted by accident as part of the culturing process; now used to refer to all-nacre baroque pearls produced when something goes wrong in the process of culturing so that the seeding nucleus is ejected from the half formed pearl.



South Sea keshi pearls can be very large; Japanese keshi pearls can be minuscule. The shape ranges from resembling a cornflake (so they are also called cornflake pearls) to something more like a slightly deflated balloon. They tend to have fabulous lustre

Knots

Knots in the silk between pearls is a sign of quality in pearls. If there are no knots or the pearls are on beading wire and look stiff and without movement then they are not being assembled to show their best.

The knots serve two purposes. Firstly the chances of losing all the pearls is minimised, only one or two maximum can be lost

(Pearlscence always gets really annoyed at the scene in 'Murder is Announced' where the pearl necklace breaks and all the pearls shower onto the floor. Good for Miss Marple but very bad for pearls).

Secondly each knot acts as a hinge allowing the necklace or bracelet to flex. They stop the individual pearls packing closely.



The picture shows a two strand necklace where the upper strand has been strung unknotted onto silk and the lower has been knotted.

Never get strung pearls wet – this is not because the pearls will be harmed, it is very unlikely that just getting wet with water (either salt, fresh or swimming pool) will damage pearls after all, but the silk on which they are strung will rot in time especially the silk inside each pearl which is trapped and therefore takes much longer to dry. Please do wear your pearls all the time. Pearls need light oils to look their best and the oil in human skin is perfect. If you absolutely must wear your pearls in water then please let us know and we can re-string them on nylon.

Play between the pearl and the knots. This is a sign that the silk may be stretching and it might be time to start thinking about getting them re-strung. We are happy to re-string pearls and will re-string our own pearls at a reduced rate.

Lustre

The radiance of a pearl. The greater the lustre the greater the value. The highest lustre gives almost mirror-like or metallic reflections.



Mabe

A blister pearl which has been hollowed out and filled with a substance and backing. Mabe pearls are often made into earrings. A mabe is a hemispherically shaped pearl which is grown against the inside of the oyster's shell, rather than within its tissue. Blister pearls are worked by cutting the pearl out of the shell with a circle-bit drill. The nucleus is then removed and replaced with a resin. The back of the pearl is capped with a piece of mother-of-pearl to complete the mabe pearl.

Maeshori

This is a Japanese term which means before (mae) treatment (shori). It encompasses treatments used on all akoya, freshwater and some South Sea pearls. Maeshori treatments vary from factory to factory. The processes tighten the nacre and pull moisture out to enhance the lustre. This has a side effect of tending to make the nacre more brittle, so that freshwater pearls that have been over-treated will turn chalky very quickly.

Maeshori processing on South Sea pearls is very common in Japan. It makes the pearls whiter, brighter, and more saleable.

One basic maeshori process is tumbling in chips of walnut shell which cleans and burnishes.

Majorica or Majorcan pearl

A high-quality fake pearl manufactured in Spain by Majorica, S.A. These nuclei are dipped in high quality *essence d'orient* (varnish made up of the scales from bleak, shad, herring and salmon. 2,000 fish make one litre of essence, which is an organic substance similar to uric acid.)

Mantle tissue

The special tissue inside certain molluscs which secretes nacre.

Metallic Lustre

A pearl has a metallic lustre when the lustre is so shiny that it resembles polished metal. Metallic lustre is not a criterion in the usual grading system.

Momme

A momme is a unit of weight, used for silk or pearls, and you will still sometimes see pearl prices quoted as per momme – with the price given against quality.

One momme is 3.75 grams and one Kan is 1000 momme.

Nacre

is composed of layers of calcium carbonate (in a crystalline form) and conchiolin (an organic protein substance which provides bonding). The specific lustre, iridescence, and colouring of nacre -- and, therefore, of any pearl which it forms -- depends on the number and thickness of the various layers, as well as on whether or not the layers overlap one another.

A freshwater pearl is made up of many layers of nacre and no bead. You can see the structure in this pearl which split open:



Natural

A pearl which is 'wild' ie one which has grown without any human activity or intervention is called a natural pearl. Natural pearls are very rare these days and so command high prices. Scotland holds much of the world's remaining population of freshwater mussels *Margaritifera margaritifera*, and they are protected by law under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Selling a Scottish natural pearl needs a licence. These molluscs can live for over 100 years. The earliest reference in Britain to freshwater mussels is by Julius Caesar's biographer, Suetonius, who stated that Caesar's admiration of pearls was a reason for the first Roman invasion in 55BC.

Orient

Orient comes from the thin-film interference and light diffraction caused when light passes through the nacre of a pearl. The iridescence, or lack thereof, is caused by the size of the aragonite platelets on the surface of the pearl

Parure

A matched set of jewellery, which might include earrings, a necklace, brooches, rings, and other pieces.

Peanut

A peanut pearl is formed when two nuclei in a seeded pearl stick and then grow together to make something which resembles the shell of a peanut.

Pearlescence

Resembling pearl or mother-of-pearl in iridescence and lustre (or, of course, an excellent source of all things pearl)

Pick a Pearl

A marketing ploy used in some tourist shops whereby the customer selects a shell which has been pre-seeded with a pearl of some sort, and lo – there is their pearl. Look closely and the mollusc is preserved in chemicals and long dead and the pearls usually freshwater. Pearlescence heard of one operation in the UK where someone got a dyed green potato pearl and was told it was green because the oyster was sick.

Pearlescence knows where to buy these seeded molluscs for under \$1 a time in China. But wouldn't.

Pinctada maculata

This is possibly the smallest of the oceanic pearl producing oysters and possibly the direct ancestor of all of them. It produces bright, lustrous deep golden pearls but is too small to be farmed on a realistic commercial basis

Pinctada margaritifera

This mollusc produces the black Tahitian pearl in French Polynesia, the Cook Islands and Australia

Pinking

A very common to routine treatment especially for akoya pearls whereby the pearl, after bleaching, is dyed so that it shows a tinge of pink.

Pondslime

Pondslime is the name given to pearls which show an unusual golden to brown coating to their natural colour nacre. These pearls used to be either discarded as junk or dyed dark colours to disguise what was seen as a failure in cultivation but now such natural effects are valued and desirable. The effect ranges from a dull nicotine brown to dazzling gold as if the pearl has a layer of gold leaf

Popcorn

Pearls are pearls of any shape on which the surface nacre has a granulated appearance so that they look like fresh popcorn. We call them granulated pearls. Also called rosebud or strawberry pearls and in China, mao-jyue or hairy pearls.



Potato

Any mis-shapen pearl is a potato pearl because it resembles a potato. Also called irregular pearls or nugget pearls.



Pteria sterna

The rainbow lipped oyster which produces the pearls of the Sea of Cortez, Mexico

These pearls fluoresce red under ultra-violet light.

Rice

Oval shaped pearls



Rice Crispie Pearls

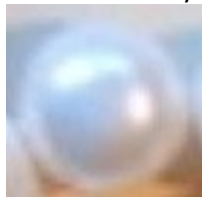
Chinese freshwater pearls were originally grown in the *Cristaria plicata* (cockscomb pearl mussel) and resembled rice crispies.

Rosebud

see popcorn

Round

The more perfectly round a pearl is, the more valuable. A good quick way to assess roundness is to gently roll a strand of pearls. Irregularities will show easily to the eye



Scottish River Pearls

Highly prized and very rare wild natural pearls. So protected by law that a licence is needed to sell them. The species is *Margaritifera margaritifera*. They are believed to live for 250 years! It is said that one reason for the Roman invasion of Britain was to gain access to the pearls.





Sea of Cortez

One farm is producing mostly greys and blue shades in Mexico, re-starting a pearl history which was thriving when the Spanish invaded

Second Graft

What it says – a second graft happens when a mollusc is returned to the water after harvest. Its pearl sac is either re-filled, with a bead equal to the size of the pearl removed (so that the second pearl grown will be larger when that is harvested) or a keisi pearl will grow.

Seed pearls

Tiny naturals weighing under 1/4 grain, usually 3mm or less.

Shape

The rounder the pearl the more valuable it is.

Silver nitrate

This chemical, the same as used in photography, darkens the appearance of pearls. The chemical penetrates the layers of nacre and has a chemical reaction with light and hydrogen sulphide gas to create a rich black colour.

Size

Generally, the bigger the pearl the more valuable, however a smaller more perfectly formed round pearl will be more valuable than a big baroque one

Souffle Pearls

Very large freshwater pearls are being produced with pearls nucleated with a lump of mud (!) these pearls, third graft, can have stunning lustre and a rather keishi appearance so far. When drilled the mud is drained away so that the pearl is hollow and light in weight. However most freshwater cultured pearls are still solid pearl nacre, even pearls up to 15mm. This means that they are arguably more durable but the chances of non-perfect round shapes are higher.

South Sea pearls

Large South Sea cultured pearls (up to 16 mm), farmed in Australia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, range in colour from white to gold and to black. They can have a perfectly round to slightly

asymmetrical shape and medium to high lustre Price varies depending on lustre. South Sea pearls are harvested after at least 2 years. They have a unique, satiny lustre that comes from the rapidly deposited nacre and warm waters of the South Seas. South Sea pearls also have a subtle array of colours, typically white, silver, and golden, Gold south sea pearls come mainly from Thailand and white south sea pearls mainly from Australia,

Spat



baby oysters which are either artificially bred in a hatchery or spawn naturally and are attracted to collection points are called spat. They will be grown on until big enough to be implanted

Sterling Silver

Sterling silver is a mix of 92.5% by mass of silver and 7.5% by mass of other metals, usually copper. The copper is added to make the metal harder. All Pearlescence Sterling silver over the required minimum weight carries the London Assay office hallmark of owner Wendy Graham (Initials wmg in an oval cartouche). All silver from Pearlescence is nickel-free.

Stick

Any long thin and stick or twig like pearl, They can be drilled at the top or middle and through the wider or narrower faces to produce different looks.



Surface.

The smoother and more perfect the surface of a pearl, the higher the value

Tahitian

Pearls are produced by the black-lipped oyster (*Pinctada margaritifera*). They have been produced for almost exactly 50 years now in French Polynesia, in the lagoons of remote coral atolls and islands – everywhere except on Tahiti Itself! Black Lip Oysters are now also being farmed in a small way in Australia.

The oyster itself is quite large -- sometimes up to 12 inches across and weighing as much as 10 pounds -- which often results in much larger-than-average pearls. The pearls are unique because of their natural dark colours. Most "black" Tahitian pearls are not actually black, but are instead grey, silver, charcoal, or similar shades. Truly black pearls are extremely rare.

For reasons which are not known the black-lipped oyster produces circle pearls, which are usually drop shaped and look as though the pearl has spun around in the pearl sac, so that there are banding patterns around the pearl in both colour and surface. Some prefer circle pearls because they are clearly real and not imitation.



Tahitian pearls go through x-ray inspection before legal export (ask to see their export certificate and confuse most jewellers!) and have a different grading system A-D where A grade are the best pearls

Third graft

Sometimes molluscs yield pearls of such quality that farmers put them back in the water for a third time. Third graft pearls will be very large indeed, and the mollusc could be ten years old.

Top drilled

Asymmetrically drilled pearls, often oval. If strung un-knotted they tend to move around against each other on the silk and then are called dancing pearls

Vermeil

Vermeil is a plating of gold onto sterling silver. It is hallmarkable and a response to the high present cost of gold. All Pearlescence vermeil is nickel-free. Vermeil will be marked as sterling silver with metal.

the gold must be at least 10ct (42%) and be at least 2.5micrometres thick. Nb American Vermeil often has a layer of nickel.

Wearing pearls

Do not put any hairspray, make-up, perfume or any other such substances where they could contact and be absorbed by the pearls. Pearls are a natural biological substance and are porous, so avoid anything which could be absorbed by them. We have reeled back in horror when opening envelopes for some pearls returned for re-stringing where they seem soaked in perfume.

Wish Pearls

see **pick a pearl**

Thanks

With much thanks to Josh Bazar of Imperial Deltah, America for many of the photos, Also Josh Humbert of Kamoka Pearl Farm, Ahe Atoll, and Douglas Maclaurin of Cortez Pearls, Mexico