

Pearls (long version)

Pearls have been an integral and much-valued part of local history and culture in the Ise-Shima National Park area for centuries. The National Park has become known today as the “home of the cultured pearl.” Developments in pearl cultivation in Ise-Shima during the last century created a vibrant industry. Today, the quality of Ise-Shima pearls is recognized all over the world.

In pre-modern Japan, pearls were used as an ingredient in medicine. Their powder was believed to help cure a variety of ailments, from eye diseases to fevers. At that time, female divers known as *ama* harvested pearl oysters along with other seafood. However, natural pearls are formed by accident. They were a relatively expensive ingredient due to their rarity, and prized as “mermaid’s tears.”

Mikimoto Kokichi (1858–1954), sometimes known as the “Pearl King,” was born the son of a restaurant owner in Toba. He originally started trying to farm pearls on Shinmeiura Inlet in Ago Bay in 1888. Two years later, he began farming on Toba’s Ojima Island. In 1892, an over-profusion of algae in Ago Bay caused a red tide, a phenomenon caused by algal blooms. This killed most of Mikimoto’s pearl oysters. He was left with his smaller stock on Ojima Island. On restarting oyster farming at Ojima the following year, he discovered that he had managed to produce five pearls attached to their shells. These hemispherical pearls were the first successfully cultivated pearls in the world, representing a big step for pearl cultivation techniques.

The efforts of two other researchers, Mise Tatsuhei (1880–1924) and Nishikawa Tokichi (1874–1909), resulted in the first successful production of perfectly spherical cultivated pearls. Subsequent to these developments, Mikimoto began to produce spherical pearls on Ojima, expanding his business.

Having deep respect and love for this beautiful landscape, Mikimoto supported initiatives to get the Ise-Shima area designated as National Park. Before World War II, and together with local leaders and organizations, he lobbied the Japanese government. His dreams came true in 1946.

In the early days of pearl cultivation, it was the *ama* divers’ job to find mother pearl oysters and then return the irritant-inserted oysters back to the seabed so that pearls could develop. Subsequently, pearl-farming rafts were invented. Cages housing oysters are attached to the raft. This invention made the pearl farmer’s work of caring for the shells easier. Today, the sight of pearl-farming rafts floating on Ago Bay is considered a symbol of Ise-Shima.

There are workshops where visitors can try their hand at extracting cultured pearls from oysters in Ise-Shima. There are also demonstrations of how irritants are inserted into oysters, and opportunities to learn more about pearl cultivation history in Ise-Shima. The natural beauty of pearl necklaces and many other items made using local pearls can be appreciated in Ise-Shima's specialist pearl shops.

Irritants are placed inside mother pearl oyster shells to make pearls. The oysters secrete nacre (pearl-forming liquid) around the irritants. Cultivated pearls typically take around one to two years to grow from irritant insertion to harvest.

Pearls are difficult to cultivate because they require particular conditions. Ise-Shima's bays meet these specific requirements. Pearl oysters need a steady current, but protection from strong winds. They also require plankton for nutrition. Pearl farmers must also pay attention to the status of each oyster. If, for example, water temperatures drop, they must move the oysters to a southern bay.

The sheltered inlets of Ago and Gokasho Bay, along with other places in Ise-Shima, allow pearl oysters to thrive. Shima's New Satoumi Community program helps to preserve these rich natural environments for future generations.