

PEEKING BEHIND THE JAPANESE PEARL CURTAIN

Jennifer Heebner

Japanese akoya pearl farmers have historically been tight-lipped when it comes to their farms and culturing methods. But in today's competitive pearl market and 24-hour, social media-loving world, the Japanese pearl industry is pushing itself to share more to attract new generations of collectors.

In the tradition-rich and respect-loving landscape of Japan, where Kokichi Mikimoto successfully cultured the first round akoya pearl in 1893, the business of Japanese akoya pearls blossomed into a world-renowned luxury category. Owning a strand of white akoya pearls? It's a rite of passage for many women, an unexpected statement piece among some young men, and a symbol of elegance, prestige, and understated splendor for all.

But as categories evolve, so, too, must an industry's practices if the products are to not only retain existing fans but also attract new ones. This is the crossroads in which the Japanese cultured akoya pearl industry finds itself today. Japanese pearl culturing techniques have been adopted by many other types of pearl farmers the world over (think South Sea pearls to Vietnamese akoyas to Chinese freshwaters), so how does Japan compete? By digging into its rich history of innovation and overcoming some of its secrecy and modesty to keep collectors hooked.



Jennifer Heebner, journalist, and Tetsuya Fujita, CEO, Sasebo Pearl Company and chairman of the Japan Pearl Society. (Photo credit: Jennifer Heebner)

The first step to making that happen was inviting media guests to Japan to learn, which the Japan Pearl Export Association (JPEA) did last year in collaboration with the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) and the Pearl Association of America (PAA, previously known as the Cultured Pearl Association of America).

TRIP FOUNDATIONS

The genesis of the author's trip with journalists and influencers to Japan to see farms and learn about farming, sorting, separating, and grading cultured Japanese pearls firsthand was an idea from Jeremy Shepherd, president of the PAA. Long an innovator with a passion for the pearl industry—Shepherd founded Pearl Paradise in 1996, taking it online in 2000 to sell pearls directly to the public—the

onetime flight attendant fell hard for their beauty and the mystique behind the industry during trips to Asia. He started buying and reselling them back home in the U.S., maintaining a voracious appetite for knowledge about pearls that has helped fuel his success and reputation in the international community.

Because of his history and track record of respect, the Japanese pearl producers and broader industry trusted Shepherd to help try to boost their profile and create a wider affinity for Japanese akoya pearls. Shepherd reached out to journalists, influencers, and bloggers with strong platforms and an interest in pearls with invitations to cover a 10-day tour of farms, processing facilities, and a pearl trade show. The author was among the guests to participate in a



Grafted oysters from Fukae Pearl Co., Ltd., ready to go in the water to grow pearls. (Photo credit: Jennifer Heebner)



Grafting operations at Fukae Pearl Co., Ltd. (Photo credit: Jennifer Heebner)

fall 2025 event due to her well-known love of pearls and past employment with the CPAA (including starting a pearl magazine for the group, among other tasks performed as its executive director from 2017-2024).

“We wanted to open the Japanese industry of the pearl, the manufacturing, and the farming, because these days we are not just selling the pearls,” explained George Kakuda, president of Kakuda Pearl Co. and of the JPEA, two months before the trip at a trade show in Hong Kong. “The people want the experience and environment behind it. The core value [of the trip] is all the procedures of making pearls—it’s all manual, no machines or artificial intelligence could be involved. It’s all handled by humans. The second thing is the farming site and the concept of *Satoumi*—if humans live by the seashore, those who do good for the nature, the nature itself will get richer. In Nagasaki, the groups will visit three farms and see that this jewelry is quite sustainable with a strong relation between nature and human.”

FARM TOURS

The first stop on the agenda was a visit to Kitamura Pearls Oyama Farm in Tsushima city on Tsushima Island in the Nagasaki Prefecture near Fukuoka. Getting there meant a

short plane ride followed by a bus to meet with Yasuhiro Oda, director of the Tsushima Pearl Association. The Oyama farm is one of the oldest in Japan, founded in 1901.

The group boarded a boat out to see the nursery—lines of oysters in the water. Baby oysters, or spat, grow in nearby hatcheries and once they are 5 mm (6-7 cm) in size they are placed into baskets to grow in the sea for up to three years. In the first year, only half of 3 million spat survive. On the day the group visited, more than 400,000 were ready for grafting. Once grafted, mollusks return to the bay to grow for up to two years. Care during their growth includes power washing and hand scraping, which happens by employees stationed in a nearby floating hut.

The next day, the group visited Sasebo Pearl Co., Ltd., a 60-year-old operation. There were lines of oysters in the water, and the group was permitted to both pull up lines for photo opportunities and harvest some akoya pearls back on the dock.

Next up on the trip was the Fukae Pearl Co., Ltd. to see its grafting operations—a light-filled space with about six grafters, each set up at his or her own station. Proper grafting

requires skill (donor mantle tissue is placed in an oyster along with a polished shell bead, and epithelial cells get the nacre process started) and patience while the pearl forms. Even the then-governor of the prefecture, Kengo Oishi, dropped by to meet with the group and try his hand at grafting.

Takeaways from the farms include the observation that pearl culturing and growth is a controlled process executed in harmony with nature. Abundant natural challenges like red tides and other illnesses or environmental changes kill oysters, and typhoons are unavoidable storms that can tear up lines of oysters in bays and scatter them for miles. Cleaning, monitoring, and care are required for every step of the akoya pearl process. It's a patience game where the payoff is a lustrous pearl.

SORTING, GRADING, AND MATCHING

After seeing the grafting and farming process, the group flew to Kobe—a hub for pearl processing and distribution—to witness the next step in the akoya pearl production chain: sorting, matching, and grading. While one could drill an akoya pearl fresh out of the water and string or set it for wear, those won't look like the ones that can be purchased in stores because akoya pearls endure an extensive after-harvest process to look their best.

White akoya pearls are the iconic look that Japan favors—though natural shades of silvery blue, cream, and pale pink can also be discovered at harvest—but few know how much effort goes into cleaning, sorting, and matching plain white pearls. It's much harder than most realize.

To learn about it, the group visited Otsuki Pearl Co., Ltd., in the city. Rather than witnessing the routine *maeshori* or bleaching process that many akoyas undergo, the group saw post-*maeshori* pearls. Pearls are then sorted and graded by shape, flaw, nacre covering, and luster, and there can be up to 35 differences within the categories that are reflected on their master grading cards.

"It's not an A through AAA sort of thing," explained Shepherd at Otsuki as he showed the company's grading cards.

No standardized pearl grading system exists, though many in the industry use an A-to-AAA breakdown, with A being the lowest and most commercial grade and AAA being the highest and most perfect or quintessential pearl with the least number of flaws and highest luster.

To bring one white akoya necklace to market, it can take up to seven years from growing the spat to completion of the strand.

ONTO THE JAPAN PEARL FAIR

After visiting farms and offices and a couple days of sight-seeing—which included Mikimoto Pearl Island and Museum in Toba Bay, the birthplace of cultured pearls, along with



The master grading cards at Otsuki Pearl Co. (Photo credit: Jennifer Heebner)



A worker at Otsuki Pearl Co. in Kobe sorting pearls to make strands. (Photo credit: Jennifer Heebner)

Nara Park to hand feed deer—the group then moved closer to where the Japan Pearl Fair was taking place in order to attend.

The fair is a newer venture—the one the group attended was its 7th edition—that takes place twice a year and is an incredible destination for true pearl lovers; one will see products there that can't be seen at any other trade show, even Hong Kong. Think natural, multicolor pearl strands in graduated sizes, studs with jackets of large sizes of akoya pearls, and a decent assortment of drop-shape South Sea pearls, which are hard to find, among other options. Speakers were on hand for visitors to learn from, too, including sessions on assessing the quality of pearls.



The media group with Japanese officials at the Japan Pearl Fair 07 in November 2025. (Photo credit: Jennifer Heebner)

This group of journalists and influencers also spoke later in the show about how to continue amplifying the akoya pearl messaging to keep them top of mind among collectors.

One of the pearl's biggest challenges? Competing with diamonds for market share considering that category is the only one in jewelry that invests heavily in category promotion. In 2025, the Natural Diamond Council had a budget of \$38 million. No other jewelry category comes close to that level of spending.

Still, this trip and its guests continue to drive home the points

of history, culture, innovation, and the beauty for which the Japanese cultured pearl industry is known. Japan just needs to keep fueling the storytelling efforts. ♦

About the Author: *Jennifer Heebner is seasoned jewelry journalist who specializes in pearls and is a PAA-certified pearl specialist. She's written for nearly every jewelry trade publication and organization in industry and loves to travel to shows and source countries for firsthand learning and more accurate reporting.*

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