



Pearl Points: Varieties, Characteristics, and How to Sell Them

[Pearls](#)—cultured and natural—are experiencing a renaissance in fine jewelry! Thanks to fashion designers who've been affixing them to runway creations, jewelry designers who see their creative potential, and consumers who crave uncommon and one-of-a-kind masterpieces with decadent luster, pearls are in a prime position to continue gaining more significance. To that end, consider this primer of key facts to better educate buyers and sell cultured pearls in store.

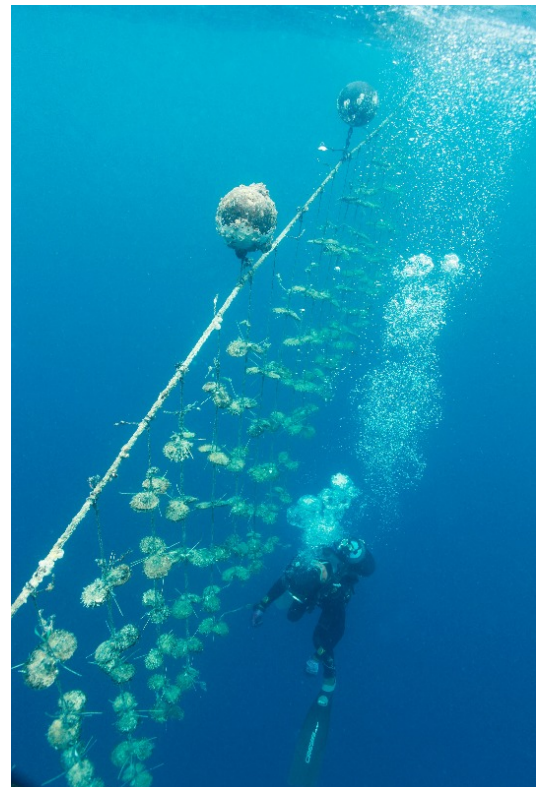
Pearl Types

The most widely known and available categories of cultured pearls (those grown with man's help versus ones grown unassisted in the wild) are freshwater, akoya, and South Sea, which include Tahitian, golden, white, and silver pearls. (Cultured pearls represent the bulk of all pearls widely sold in the U.S.)

[Freshwater pearls](#) are the most colorful and affordable of all cultured pearls. The color of the lips of freshwater pearl mussels vary widely, from white to pink to lavender, peach, and more. Meanwhile, costs to grow freshwater pearls are less than akoya and South Sea because freshwater mussels are more abundant, and their pearls require less time and maintenance

to grow. Freshwater pearls are an ideal entrée item to collecting fine pearl jewelry.

[Akoya pearls](#) are known as the Cadillac of pearls for their supreme luster. Slick, high-polish surfaces are the calling card of the akoya pearl, which is grown in the colder waters off the coast of Japan and in some parts of China and Vietnam. Akoya colors—based on the lip color of the oyster in which they grow—are white, off white, pale gray, light blue, and cream with overtones of pink, silver, and green. Akoya pearls are often viewed as a classic choice, though jewelry designers are now taking advantage of the wide range of akoya types on the market.



Finally, [South Sea pearls](#) are among the toniest of all of these lustrous gems. South Sea pearls only grow in warmer waters found in French Polynesia (think Tahitian pearls), Australia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. (A variety of black-lipped pearl called the Sea of Cortez also grows in Mexico.) Colors range from black to green to peacock, white, golden, champagne, gray, and more, while growing a single South Sea pearl takes up to two years. Not surprisingly, these

pearls tend to cost more than others, depending on quality and size.

Pearl Qualities



Overall, characteristics of pearls are shape, size, color, surface, nacre quality, and luster. In general, the larger and rounder the pearl, the more valuable—with the exception of some larger and unusual baroque pearls. Some colors are rarer than others, too, such as true peacock and golden hues among South Sea pearls and natural colors of pink, lavender, and peach freshwaters, which increases their worth. Smooth, clean surfaces are the ideal in all pearls, though sometimes rare colors can command a premium even if the pearl surface isn't perfect. Nacre quality refers to thickness—more is considered better—and luster; the more intense the luster, the more valuable the pearl.

Freshwater pearls largely have the lowest luster, though metallic surfaces do occur and are more valuable. Akoyas are known for their luster, while their sizes typically don't exceed 10 mm, though baby akoya pearls have grown popular in recent years and offer another type of entrée product for their smaller sizes, abundance (several can grow in one oyster), and because they require less growing time. South Sea pearls are known for their thick nacre (because they grow faster in warmer waters), luxurious luster, and large

sizes—some exceeding 20 mm!



White and Golden South Sea Pearls. Photo by Ted Morrison

How to Sell Pearls

It's easy to sell pearls when you fall for their backstory. Pearls are organic gems—they grow inside living creatures! Akoya pearls are a tradition in Japan—the father of the cultured pearl, Kokichi Mikimoto, was from Japan—while South Sea varieties grow in stunning, remote locations around the world. Water quality must be pristine in order for pearls to grow; a pearl farmer's reward for good oyster care and clean aquatic conditions is a beautiful pearl. Pearl farming provides countless jobs in far-flung destinations, while all pearl production requires patience and nurturing, just like relationships. No other category offers such a meaningful and parallel experience, from adversity to triumph, to those who wear the product.

And thanks to brilliant design minds, pearl jewelry is as diverse as individual personalities. Pearls can be interpreted into every trend in the market—from station, Y, and layering necklaces to stacking rings and uncommon stud varieties—as

well as ones that have yet to debut. And the complex colors of pearls with their body and overtones are as intoxicating as love itself. Understanding the journey of the pearl, from implanted bead or happenstance irritant to a nacreous object of beauty, brings you closer to appreciating their specialness while their thumbprint-like uniqueness is impossible to ignore. The surface beauty of pearls may intrigue you, but the story of their origins and creation is generally what turns passive admirers into full-blown devotees.

To learn more about pearls, take the Pearls As One course from the Cultured Pearl Association of America for free! Use the coupon code Stuller at pearlsasone.org.