



Spheres of joy

Japanese jeweller Tasaki revolutionised the production of pearls – now it is revitalising and uplifting the designs graced by these precious orbs

WORDS CHARLOTTE MCMANUS PHOTOGRAPHY HIROAKI HORIGUCHI

Left to right: Oyster shells, the cradles of the pearl; aquaculture at the Tasaki oyster farm combines modern methods with traditional know-how handed down over centuries; Tasaki was founded in the scenic Kujukushima archipelago, Nagasaki, one of Japan's most stunning ocean locations, situated within the Saikai National Park

With its shimmering radiance and precious allure, the pearl has captivated jewellery lovers for thousands of years. From humble beginnings in the depths of the ocean, growing slowly and secretly within the protective confines of an oyster shell, each pearl is a remarkable feat of nature, time and chance, as the artisans at Tasaki know better than most. The Japanese jeweller has been a leader in the world of fine pearl jewellery since its establishment in 1954. By the start of the 20th century, global demand had reached such heights that natural pearl-bearing oyster beds had been hunted almost to extinction, making pearls, already rare, almost impossible to source.

In Japan, this engendered the start of research into pearl farming, changing the face of the industry forever. This development went one stage further post-WWII, when Japan's newly

implemented free-trade measures saw the nation – with an economy still recovering from the effects of war – struggle to keep up with hefty export pressure, including that for pearls.

As a result, Tasaki was founded in the scenic islands of Kujukushima, Nagasaki, conducting intensive studies into pearl farming from its own research facility to help restore Japan's pearl production to its former glory. Combining their modern-day findings with traditional, time-honoured methods handed down by generations of pearl farmers, the Tasaki team began to grow the precious orbs – even becoming the first in the world to successfully cultivate the all-but-extinct brown-lipped pearl oyster in 1970. Not only did this mark a new chapter in Japanese pearling, it also put Tasaki's pearls on the world stage.

To this day, all of the pearls used in Tasaki jewellery are carefully cultivated on the farm, meaning the brand is involved with the individual journey of each and every



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one, from inaugural growth to the finished piece. Such a process necessitates an intuitive knowledge of nature as well as unparalleled craftsmanship – after all, unlike other precious gems, pearls come from living organisms.

“Pearls are living. The sea is also living. Everything has to be very well balanced,” says senior farmer and advisor Masato Yamashita. “If the oysters are grown in a comfortable environment, we say that they ‘smile’ – and good pearls are born.”

Tasaki’s specialists meticulously cultivate the conditions needed to create the perfect environment for pearls to thrive, from stable temperatures through to coastal waters rich in nutrients. The process begins as soon as baby oysters are born. Each is manually fitted with a nucleus to assist the artificial seeding process – over a million new oysters receive nuclei each year in the period between February and November – before being incubated for three months.

At this stage the crop is placed in the sea to live for a further 11 months or so. In fact, oysters can be nurtured for as long as 24 months, after which they become ‘mother oysters’, ready to bear their precious, perfectly shaped fruit.

“Humans are only minimally involved in the production of a pearl – about 10%,” says Masayuki Kondo, pearl farmer and master craftsman. “For the rest of the time, pearls are produced by the sea and by the oyster itself.”

The pearl harvest takes place in December, when cooler winter waters allow for easier shucking. Following the time-honoured traditions of their forebears, during this time farmers start each morning with prayers for a prosperous crop at a nearby Shinto oyster shrine, with further prayers and celebrations taking place come nightfall after the day’s work is done.

Once harvested, every pearl is carefully examined by hand to ensure it meets the high standard of quality employed by Tasaki. Naturally, only the finest will do, meaning each has to tick six integral boxes to pass muster. As well as size, shape, blemish and colour, lustre – a combination of surface gloss with internal brilliance – is also taken

into consideration. Most important is nacre, a quality closely entwined with lustre and colour. The thicker the nacre layer, the more superior the pearl.

“When I came to the pearl farm for the first time, one thing that struck me was how much it reminded me of a couture house,” says Prabal Gurung, acclaimed fashion designer and Tasaki’s creative director. “Everything was meticulous, thoughtful.” The process of growing pearls, he says, is “very time-consuming, but it needs to be precise – the environment has to be just right. Nature plays such an important role.”

Pearls don’t need to be polished or cut, as they develop their perfect shape and form within the oyster shell. Selected pearls are transported to Tasaki’s jewellery manufacturing studio in the city of Kobe, where first-class artisans transform the raw materials into exquisite jewellery pieces.

“Pearls often seen like an heirloom jewel, but I want to modernise them,” says Gurung. “Each season there are new inspirations which come together to make very contemporary jewellery. Because there is so much history to a pearl, I mix them with different shapes, metals, diamonds and coloured stones.”

This cutting-edge approach shines through in Gurung’s latest collection, Atelier Season 4. Inspired by the many forms of the ocean, aquatic silhouettes flow, ebb and undulate, each exquisitely rendered in pearl, diamond and precious metals. There are seven styles to choose from, including Buoy, Nacreous and Illimitable. Other highlights include Waterfall earrings, dramatic cascades of gems that can be shaped and transformed to create different looks, as well as Swirl pendants, reminiscent of tidal currents with spiralling lines of sparkling stones. Surge rings create movement with the delicate balancing of pearls on dynamic ‘sprays’ of organic curves, while the mesmerising interplay between sun and sea comes together in the colour-graded Aurora necklaces, where white diamonds ripple into sapphires in the same way that rays of light shine into the depths.

“It’s a designer’s dream to work with pieces of the highest quality and to see the expertise and dedication of the artisans,” says Gurung. “We create jewels, statement pieces, to bring joy to women. As I tell my team, ‘Diamonds are a girl’s best friend, but pearls are a girl’s soulmate.’”
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Above: The inspired designs of Prabal Gurung, Tasaki’s creative director, result in contemporary pieces that mix pearls with different precious metals and gemstones, to exquisite effect. Gurung’s most recent collection is themed around the many forms of the ocean