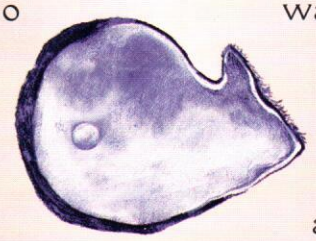
Pearly Whites

Pearls are formed naturally when a grain of sand or sediment lodges in an oyster. Gradually the oyster coats the grain with nacre, the silvery substance that lines the inside of the oyster's shell, building it up into a pearl. If nature were to run its course, about one oyster in 50,000 would contain a pearl and it would probably be a small odd-shaped one.



However, since the 1950s Australians have been using a method developed by the Japanese to cultivate pearls. An incision is made with a scalpel in the flesh of each oyster. Then, in a process called "seeding", a round, polished bead of mussel shell is inserted, together with a small piece of another oyster.

The oyster is kept under water at a pearl farm where, for the next two years, it is regularly cleaned and turned to ensure the pearl grows evenly. Between three and six months after seeding, most farms check their oysters with X-ray machines. Any oyster that has rejected the bead (and is not producing a pearl) is set aside for reseeding, or to be harvested for meat and shell.