

## A Pearl of the South Seas

For Kamoka Pearl Farm, the world truly is an oyster

**A**t first sight Kamoka Pearl Farm looks like a Disney World ride: too perfectly rustic and whimsical to be real. Josh Humbert, co-owner and second-generation pearl farmer, points my attention toward the main structure, perched above a calm sea and attached to the *motu* (island) of Kamoka by an arching, foot-wide dock made of wooden planks. The off-grid, much vaunted and rigorously eco-friendly harvester of Tahitian black pearls operates in an isolated corner of French Polynesia—an atoll called Ahe in the Tuamotu archipelago—one of the few mom-and-pop pearl farms left in the region.

I'd been hearing about the farm among my various circles over the years, its name whispered by sailors crossing the Pacific, by intrepid divers and surfers, by scholars and vagabonds who'd had the pleasure of spending time here, earning their keep by helping Josh out on the farm, which is what I'd be doing over the next few days.

I reached Ahe by atoll-hopping on an Air Tahiti prop plane from Papeete. From above, the islands look like necklaces dropped from the heavens and strewn across the blue. Josh received me in the tiny airport, barefoot, wearing sun-faded boardshorts with a sole black pearl necklace—the only outfit I'd see him wear throughout my stay.

Upon arriving, we hop into Josh's small boat, which at full throttle could cross the lagoon in about fifteen minutes, but Josh prefers to cruise at a







"People who come to the farm for the first time are pretty mesmerized by the Waterworld nature of Ahe," says Tevai Humbert of Kamoka Pearl Farm, located on the remote atoll of Ahe in French Polynesia (seen above). "Travel's not by car but by boat, and the seemingly infinite variety of colorful fish make the underwater world a spectacular sight." On the opening spread, Jeff Johnson (left), writer Beau Flemister (center) and Harrison Roach (right) freedive in Ahe's lagoon to move baskets of the oysters.

leisurely pace to decrease his carbon footprint, he says. I'll later come to learn that the health of the lagoon directly relates to the abundance of the harvest. As we moor to the dock and unload bags, I notice dozens of gray figures circling just beneath the surface. Blacktip reef sharks are everywhere.

Josh notices my alarm. "Ready to hop in?" he teases—or so I think. Patrick Humbert, Josh's 81-year-old father and founder of Kamoka Pearl Farm, walks over and greets us in a thick French accent, listening to a podcast via earbuds hidden somewhere under his helmet of thick, tied-back, curly white hair. A few backpacker-ish Westerners are working at different stations. Two women scrape barnacles and other critters off oysters while two men load body-sized baskets of oysters onto Josh's boat.

"No, really," Josh says, tossing me a mask, snorkel, fins and a pair of gloves. "We're getting in that water. The sharks are well fed, they won't mess with us." We

hop back on the boat and get to work. Josh explains that we're transferring oysters in the baskets from deeper waters, where few fish feed, to shallower waters, where plentiful and hungry reef fish will clean the "biofouling"—algae, barnacles and other accretions—from the oysters' shells.

"Can you swim this down and attach it to that line, please?" Josh says, tossing me a basketball-size buoy. I shrug a confident "Why not?" and attempt to manhandle the orb down with my body weight, feeling and probably looking a lot like a duck with its rear in the air.

Josh cracks a smile—he's having some fun at the newbie's expense—then hops in and shows me how to do it. With one hand he unties several baskets hanging on the line, hands a couple to me and signals me to swim them up. I kick desperately toward the light, my mask both fogging and leaking. When I burst to the surface, gasping for breath, a Tahitian man named Davy on the boat reaches out for the baskets with

a "You good?" look. Catching a breath, I dive back down to "assist" Josh. In my peripheral vision a large gray mass glides in the distant blue.

On our way back to the farm, Josh detours through the atoll's only pass to the open ocean to catch dinner. He won't fish near farming waters in the lagoon, he says, to keep the ecosystem healthy. Kamoka's gone so far as to treat the entire lagoon like a marine sanctuary. He grabs a speargun, dives off the boat, and before I've even gotten my fins and mask on, he returns with a *to'au* (snapper) and a *paihere* (trevally), which I'm pretty sure he shot on a single breath.

Back at the farm, Patrick prepares the catch along with some bread, olive oil and an appetizer of dried oyster. A young family crossing the Pacific comes over from their boat anchored nearby with some wine and another fish to join the feast. An hour later I find an empty hammock with an unspeakably glorious view of the cosmos and fall



A handful of the bounty at Kamoka Pearl Farm. Tahitian black pearls like these aren't accidents of nature; they're carefully cultivated through grafting and take a year to develop.

asleep to the sound of water lapping against the dock posts.

**Tahitian black pearls** don't just grow from a grain of sand, as the popular myth goes—they're cultured, which is what Josh and Davy are up to when I find them the following morning seated at small desks—grafting stations—carefully culturing oysters they've pried open and clamped in place. Beneath them, through the cracks in the plywood, the colorful reef shimmers through the water; sharks float by while cool trade winds blow through the windows behind them. Not a bad cubicle.

"Similar to a human skin graft, you're basically taking cells from one part of the oyster and introducing them into the body of another oyster," Josh explains, manipulating what looks like a dentist's scalpel. "And if all goes well, those cells will secrete pearl."

When a Tahitian black-lipped pearl oyster (*Pinctada margaritifera*) reaches three years old, it's ready to be grafted. A six- to eight-millimeter nucleus of recycled oyster shell is inserted into the oysters, which are then returned to the ocean in baskets, protected from predators. During this time the nucleus is slowly encased in nacre (mother of pearl). A year later the oysters are pulled back out and the pearls ready to be harvested.

The two perform the minor surgery, simultaneously dropping high-quality pearls in one ceramic coffee cup and irregular, low-grade misfits in another, the *ka-chink* echoing through the small room every couple of minutes. Josh inserts a nucleus and gives the clamped oyster's black lips a farewell kiss.

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"In order to have top-quality pearls, you have to care for your environment," says Kamoka Pearl Farm co-owner Josh Humbert. "There are far more fish in the area now than when we started thirty years ago because of how we treat the environment around the pearls." Above, Tahitian Davy Hanere meticulously grafts an oyster.

**Kamoka Pearl Farm began with an adventure.** Patrick, a wild Frenchman who'd moved to California, had a Gauguin-inspired dream to sail to French Polynesia. Innovative and amazingly handy, he built a ferrocement-hull sailboat on his own and sailed with his wife and two sons across the Pacific to the Marquesas in 1973. Josh was barely two years old at the time; his brother, Loïc, was a couple years older.

"My parents were adventurers," says Josh. "They were just like, 'Yeah, we could pull it off.'"

From the Marquesas they sailed south to Ahe, where Patrick and his wife fell in love with the Paumotu (people of Tuamotu) community, even learning Tahitian. Patrick saw how the monthly

supply boats had the remote population in a chokehold as far as buying and selling goods coming in from Tahiti, so he gutted the boat he built and turned the hull into a virtual walk-in freezer. This kept the locals' fresh-caught fish frozen to sell directly in the markets of Papeete. He made a few runs to the capital before crashing the boat onto dry reef one night on a return trip. His boat was finished, but Patrick eyed a piece of land on one of Ahe's motu—Kamoka—asking a family to sell it to him when they were ready.

There were a few small pearl farms operating through the '80s on Ahe, among others across French Polynesia, so Patrick decided to try his hand in the trade in 1990. He built the farm, docks

and other structures largely on his own. Loïc helped with the initial build while Josh was at a university in California studying marine biology. Patrick still needed help, and Josh jumped at the chance to move back and build the business. "I'd found my calling," he says. "From my earliest days being a baby on that boat, I was always on the water. I don't have the DNA to sit in a classroom surrounded by four walls, so when I saw the opportunity to study what I wanted to—and in the *wild*—it just made me feel so alive moving back. To this day I just love what I do."

Josh learned grafting from two Japanese grafters who were staying on neighboring pearl farms. He'd take the men out fishing and diving—a welcome



Josh Humbert (left) with his father, Patrick Humbert, co-owners of Kamoka Pearl Farm. The enterprising Patrick built the farm after sailing to the Tuamotu Islands on a vessel he constructed himself.

break from their work—and they'd divulge their secrets along the way.

The 1990s were the pearl industry's heyday, and Kamoka began producing world-renowned, high-quality pearls with some particularly lucrative harvests. At one point the farm had eighteen employees. Fashion houses bought their pearls and celebrities wore them. But by the turn of the millennium, the market was flooded, and the price of pearls plummeted through the decade. By the early 2010s, Kamoka could no longer afford to pay employees and could barely keep the operation afloat.

Then, five years ago, some of Josh's friends from Maui visited and experienced Kamoka's magic. The couple helped the farm get back up and running, doing most of the tasks I'd witnessed some visitors doing now, while Josh and Davy seeded a new generation of oysters. Their next harvest was phenomenal, and then Josh's son Tevai began posting videos on TikTok and YouTube. His vignettes of life on a pearl farm in paradise went viral, attracting hundreds of thousands of followers who wanted a look at what it was like to truly "work remote." The videos also portrayed the ethical, sustainable ways Kamoka operates.

"We've been farming as sustainably as we can since the very beginning."

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"We're about as disconnected from the modern world as you can get, and our days and nights are dictated by wind patterns and the phases of the moon," says Celeste Brash, Josh Humbert's spouse. "I think that hits deep into the human soul. It's not a thing lots of people have experienced, so when they come here and do, it feels like magic."

says Celeste Brash, Josh's wife. "People used to be confused as to why we were going through so much work to have fish clean our oysters, for example. But nowadays green is cool, and we've never had to 'greenwash' because we've cared about the environment more than anything ever since we began."

Kamoka is not connected to a grid of any kind, save for some patchy Wi-Fi connectivity, and living sustainably is merely a fact of life. Solar generates their electricity, the septic system biodegrades waste, fresh water comes from catchment and most of the food comes from the sea, with greens grown in a garden on the motu. Josh, though

wary of using the "S-word," takes pride in the way their farming techniques have increased the lagoon's fish population, an outcome that scientists have studied and National Public Radio has covered.

They've also forgone pressure-washing the oysters to clean them, an environmentally unfriendly practice used by many pearl farmers too lazy to move the oysters around the lagoon and let the fish do the cleaning. Josh persuaded others to stop the practice, unifying neighboring pearl farms in support of the cause. "Because of the diversity of the things that grow on the oysters, there's food for all the different species of fish that live on the

reef," explained Josh. "So, basically, all these different species are getting fed and getting stronger and reproducing more. It all just leads to a much healthier reef."

"I began pearl farming because I guess I was a jack-of-all-trades, so it was appropriate for my skills," says Patrick. "But I also just loved diving and being around the sea. After some years I realized that pearl farming is one of the few businesses that actually creates wealth for the lagoon. What I mean by that is, right here on this coral head where I built the farm, there is now over ten times the amount of marine life than when we started, from species of fish to



sharks to even lobsters now sharing this space with us."

**My few days on the farm** have come and gone in what feels like a blink. The crew on Kamoka waves us adieu as we slowly motor back across the lagoon to Ahe's tiny airport. I look back and see perhaps what Patrick first saw after so many days at sea, approaching from the Marquesas: a portrait of paradise. Some ineffable feeling of promise. A faraway place where one dares to grow a pearl.

It would take only fifteen minutes to cross the lagoon if we gunned it, but now I know it'll take closer to an hour—and why. **hh**



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