



# The Perfect Pearl

**An Interview with Mitsuhiro Mitsui, President and Chief Executive Officer, Mikimoto (America) Co. Ltd., New York**

**EDITORS' NOTE** After graduating from Waseda University (Japan) with a degree in law, Mitsuhiro Mitsui joined K. Mikimoto & Co. in 1975, and spent the next 29 years serving in procurement, merchandising, planning, marketing, and public-relations roles at the company's Tokyo headquarters. He assumed his current position in September 2004.



Mitsuhiro Mitsui

**COMPANY BRIEF** Based in New York, Mikimoto (America) Co., Ltd. is the U.S. subsidiary of K. Mikimoto & Co., Ltd., the world-renowned Japanese cultivated-pearl producer founded in 1893. The legendary Kokichi Mikimoto was the first to develop a technique for the cultivation of pearls, and the family-run business remains the world leader in superior-quality Akoya and South Sea cultured pearls. Internationally recognized for its innovative product design, superior crafting techniques, and strict quality control, Mikimoto (America) distributes its luxury pearls via select fine jewelers across the United States and through its own retail stores in New York, Beverly Hills, and Las Vegas. The parent company's international locations include Tokyo, London, Paris, Monaco, Seoul, and Kuala Lumpur.

**You recently took over the role of leading Mikimoto in the United States. What excited you about this opportunity?**

The business is much the same here as it is elsewhere in the world, and I have been with the company for 30 years. So, in that sense, it is not a great change for me. However, the market and the people are different, and I find that very exciting.

**Are you happy with the awareness of the brand in the United States?**

We have very strong brand awareness in the United States, mainly through selling our pearls in this country. In this market, we have never sold anything but pearls, whereas in Japan, we sell all sorts of things, from gift items to cosmetics. So we see huge potential in the United States.

**Are you planning additional Mikimoto boutiques in the United States?**

Yes. At the moment, we have four retail stores and more than 600 trade doors in the U.S. We are always searching for new opportunities and more suitable places to open up shops. That having been said, we are not prioritizing expansion, because we want to make sure all our existing outlets are operating to their full potential.

**What other plans do you have to grow the brand?**

We've been promoting our product line called Mikimoto Reserve, which consists of only the very best pearls in the market. That is going well. We also see a lot of potential in more fashionable areas. Our goal is to make items that will really excite customers, so they try to express themselves using jewelry. For example, we have a line called Pearls in Motion, which allows the wearer to change the position of the pearls manually, creating many different looks from the same piece of jewelry.

Furthermore, we are using increasingly innovative designers from all over the world, and they have come up with some unique ideas. For example, one of them thought of embedding diamonds in pearls, which is a very radical idea. We are constantly looking for new ways of presenting pearls, so they can be worn on many different occasions.

**How closely do you coordinate brand marketing with your colleagues in other regions around the world?**

Our products all have the same DNA, so to speak, but we always take into account the culture of the country in which we are working when we devise our marketing campaigns. We believe it's important to consider the individual characteristics of the culture that we're in because jewelry is so closely related to culture and history. So in America, we need to focus on American culture.

**How broad is your target market?**

We make sure that we always offer top-quality products. Mikimoto only utilizes the top 5 percent of the pearl harvest

in our jewelry. However, we offer many different sizes of pearls, but even with the less expensive items, the quality does not slip below the best.

**Are you optimistic for growth in 2005?**

Yes, I'm very optimistic. Despite the recent economic downturn, we have been experiencing pretty good growth, and we believe that trend will continue. One reason is that pearls are becoming more popular and more in demand. You only need to look at any fashion magazine to see evidence of that.

**Are you happy with the talent you've found in the United States?**

Yes, I am very satisfied with our staff. We aim to hire good local employees who really understand the market, but who also love the Mikimoto brand and see why it's important. I'm happy to say we have been able to do that. The brain has two sides: left and right. The left side is concerned with data processing and the right is used in creative thinking. Most companies only need their employees to use the left side of their brains, but we need our people to use both sides.

**Is there a major role for technology in the creation of your products or do you place a greater emphasis on craftsmanship?**

Both are important. Cultured pearls can never be made in a factory. They are influenced by the natural environment, so we consider this product to be a gift from nature. However, there is space for us to use as much power as we can to control the cultivating environment, and we do use technology in that arena.

On the design side, we have begun to use computers to help us design our products. Computers help us see a three-dimensional image of a design before it's made, and that's extremely useful. However, that doesn't mean that we no longer need handwritten designs. Once in a while, computers can generate better images than we can draw, but we still prefer to draw our designs in the early stages. ●

*Elements of Life collection: Ocean (top) and Fire. Akoya pearls and sapphires; Tahitian pearls and sapphires*