

# OYSTERS OYSTERS OYSTERS

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**S**PRAWLING Matoya Bay lies halfway between the little towns of Toba and Kashikojima on Japan's Shima Peninsula. Both of the towns are associated in the public mind with Mikimoto cultured pearls. Toba's Pearl Island complex promotes and sells them, and huge Ago Bay off Kashikojima is where Mikimoto pearls are cultured and harvested in oyster beds that seemingly stretch forever. Kokichi Mikimoto (1858-1954) was born in Toba and spent his long life developing the modern cultured pearl industry. It has been joked that Mr. Mikimoto's spectacular success started the Gulf War of 1990-91. Until Mikimoto-*san* came along, Kuwait on the Persian Gulf was the world's pearl center. When the pearl business shifted to Japan,

poor Kuwait drilled for oil. You and Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, before he was hanged, know the rest of the story. But I digress into global politics. Yoshi and I were more interested in eating oysters than acquiring pretty bobbles produced by bivalves. Three rivers carry nutrients into Matoya Bay, which plays no significant role in the production of pearls. Matoya oysters are cultivated for eating. The bay's plankton grow fat on the river-bourne nutrients and its oysters grow fat and famous on the plankton. I've never met an oyster I didn't like. I'll take them raw, broiled, baked, smoked, stewed or fried. A popular restaurant on a hill overlooking Matoya Bay serves oyster-based dinners. The

panoramic view from the restaurant looks like the one below. We made reservations. We were staying at a luxury resort hotel in Kashikojima, far south of the bay. In hindsight, we should have ordered a taxi at the hotel and gone straight to the restaurant on the Pearl Highway. But with the arrogance of old Japan hands, we saw a cheaper way of getting there. We boarded a local train and got off at Isobe, which on our small-scale map appeared to be just west of Matoya Bay. Well, it wasn't close to our destination at all, and to make matters worse, the little town of Isobe had only two taxicabs, both busy. One of the two taxi drivers took pity on a couple of stranded foreigners. After delivering his fare, he came back for us at the train station, took us to the distant restaurant, promised to be waiting for us when we finished dinner, and returned us to Kashikojima. Normally an oyster meal is cheap. This one cost \$250. For that price, we could have stayed at the hotel and enjoyed a deluxe, full-fledged French dinner served by tuxedoed waiters. But the Matoya oysters were delicious, as expected.

