

# Fishy Business

Tony McNicol talks to stallholders and tourists in “Tokyo’s kitchen.”

Calling the Tokyo Metropolitan Central Wholesale Market, better known as Tsukiji, just a market is a bit like calling Tokyo and its 20 million inhabitants just a city. Tsukiji is the biggest fish market in the world. Each day over 2,000 tons of seafood of nearly 500 varieties is sold there on some 11,000 wholesale stalls.

From the very early hours of the morning to around noon the market seethes with hurrying shoppers, stallholders, and market workers. Stand still in any one place for long and you are likely to hear a sharp honk from one of the ubiquitous three-wheeled scooter trucks—or perhaps a blunt “*jama!*” (move it!) from one of the Wellington-booted Tsukiji workers. The market even gets several hundred sightseers a day—mostly foreign tourists.

Yet despite its status as a part of living Tokyo history and the spiritual home of Japanese seafood cuisine, Tsukiji is changing. For one, it is getting smaller. The neighborhood Tokyo fishmongers who traditionally buy at the market are disappearing to be replaced by supermarkets. Meanwhile, there are plans to move the entire market from its historic location near Ginza to a modern site further out in Tokyo bay. Many workers are uneasy about the changes that would bring to the traditions of “Tokyo’s kitchen.”



Hatanaka Takeshi

*I work with squid. The transport company brings the squid in the morning and we take it to the stalls inside the market. The squid comes from Indonesia, China, Vietnam, lots of countries. Everyday I start work at 3 a.m. and finish at noon. I've been doing this for thirty-six years now. It was hard at first. We have to go into -25-degree refrigerators to bring out the squid. In summer is it more than 30 degrees outside, so the temperature difference is the toughest thing—but I'm used to it. I come to work by car. It takes me about forty minutes to get here—it's quicker in the morning because the roads are quiet. They say that in about six years they are going to move the market, but I think it will probably take longer than that. I am completely against it; the new place is too far away.*



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Tamura Hiroaki

*We sell about five kilos of wasabi a day here. Our customers are sushi-shops, restaurants, supermarkets, and fishmongers. [Wasabi is an essential ingredient in sushi and is mixed with soy sauce as a dip for raw fish.] Since wasabi takes years to grow, the bigger roots are more expensive—even for the same weight. But actually the type of wasabi is more important than the size. Wasabi are like flowers; the same species of flower can have yellow or pink varieties, and different varieties of wasabi have different tastes. Good wasabi isn't just hot; it is a little sweet, too. The most expensive wasabi we have ever sold was 1,700 yen (14 dollars) for 100 grams. Sometimes if there is a typhoon, the farms can't harvest the wasabi because the fields are flooded. Then the price goes up. The shop has been run since the Edo period, about 1700 in the Western calendar. But I couldn't tell you for how many generations.*

**Joerg Dickmann**

*I came to Japan to visit a friend and get a tattoo on my arm. I was planning to get to the market a lot earlier, but last night I went out in Shinjuku... I've got a hangover. That's why I am carrying a bottle of water. The market is pretty huge; I eat a lot of fish at home, but there are so many things from the sea here that I have never seen before. I have never seen fish so big. I want to go and eat sushi now.*



**Kaneda Toshio**

*We sell sea urchin. Most of our customers are sushi restaurants—from expensive ones to conveyor-belt sushi. Our sea urchin comes from Aomori and Miyagi prefectures, but we also stock sea urchin from Russia, China, and the United States. The cheapest is from Los Angeles—1,500 yen (13 dollars) a box. Hokkaido Aomori is the best. It costs 15,000 yen a box. There are about 100 shops in Tsukiji that sell sea urchin, so it's very competitive. There are daily auctions at 5 a.m. Lots of people say they don't like sea urchin, but that's just because they haven't tasted the best kind. Good sea urchin is fragrant, sweet, and there is no sour or astringent aftertaste. I only eat sea urchin a few times a years myself. I have to look at it every day!*



**Kirigaya Masanosuke**

*This is a conger eel stall. We sell about 1,000 eels a day. My job is to fillet them. In June, the best eel is from Tokyo bay: they have more fat on them. In the winter though, Nagasaki eels are better. Tsukiji has changed a lot in the sixteen years I have worked here. The biggest difference is the distribution system. It's much more convenient now. Once delivery was all by train and boat, now produce comes in by plane. I like this job. It's my duty to give my customers fresh fish.*



Tony McNicol is a freelance journalist and photographer based in Tokyo.



# Sushi Aoki

Second-generation sushi chef Aoki Toshikatsu runs one of Tokyo's finest sushi restaurants.

**D**o you mind if I use this?" Aoki Toshikatsu takes my business card and lays it on top of a packet of cigarettes. "This is sushi," he says earnestly. Then, deftly trapping the card and packet between straightened first and middle fingers, he turns the pair upside down, and dunks them in imaginary soy sauce. "You have to dip the sushi fish-first, not rice-first."

Dressed in T-shirt and denim shorts, the sushi chef looks somewhat younger than his forty-two years—but he speaks with a gentle authority that comes from being at the very top of his profession. Aoki runs a sushi restaurant opened by his father fifteen years ago which is now one of the best known in the capital. It has space for twenty to thirty customers, a small Shinto shrine on the far wall, and a pristine Japanese cypress



Aoki Toshikatsu at work

counter that runs the length of the room.

Soon Sushi Aoki will be opening for lunch, but between barking orders to his staff, Aoki tells me about his work. Up before six in the morning six days a week—"it's not that early"—the day begins with Aoki heading over to nearby Tsukiji market to select the day's fish. Nothing is more important than fresh high-quality ingredients. After the morning's shopping, he and his staff prepare for lunchtime. On a quiet day Aoki might sneak a short nap in the afternoon. Dinner finishes at 10 p.m. and clearing up an hour after that.

Aoki says that about four-fifths of his restaurant's fare is "*Edo-mae* sushi," or traditional Tokyo sushi. The remainder leaves the master sushi chef special freedom to be adventurous. One avant-garde menu item is fried sea eel served with a portion of caviar. "It's fun to give the customers something unusual," he says.

Arguably the most distinctive and essential feature of traditional sushi is the counter. It enables the chef to talk to his customers, prepare the food before them, and serve it to them personally. Some diners will plump for "*o-makase*"—leaving it up to Aoki to choose from the choicest ingredients of the day. If they have been to the restaurant before, Aoki will invariably remember their likes and dislikes. If not, he will carefully scrutinize his new customer and tap all his experience to present a menu he believes they will enjoy.

Aoki says he always aims to leave the customer wanting a little more—the Japanese concept of "*hachibunme*" (80% full). Just as they lay their chopsticks down, he will casually mention some unusual delicacy or out of season item they didn't have the luck to sample that time. No doubt, he can be confident they will be back before long.



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Grating *wasabi*, an essential sushi ingredient

Tony McNicol