



Scenes from the new film "Tsukiji Wonderland"



Tsukiji: A wonderland

New film depicts enthusiasm of people at famous fish market

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Just as Hollywood is the home of cinema and Wall Street stands as the global financial center, Tsukiji is a byword for the greatest wholesale fish market in the world.

The Tokyo metropolitan market, known as Tsukiji market, deals with as many as 480 types of seafood and provides for 25 million local people. It attracts 28,000 shoppers a day, and represents the type of Japanese cuisine that puts great emphasis on eating the freshest raw seafood. It supplies quality ingredients to numerous sushi establishments and Japanese restaurants.

An enormous dispute is currently taking place about its relocation, which was initially scheduled for November but has been postponed by Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike. The new site's environmental safety is now strongly doubted.

Although the market is important, its daily operations and the work of the people there are little known.

A new documentary film taking on the challenge of unveiling the market will be released on Oct. 15 at movie theaters nationwide.

The film, titled "Tsukiji Wonderland," includes interviews with about 150 people, and is replete with many beautiful images of fish, appetizing sushi, the arch-shaped market building and a lot of information about Japan's seafood culture. Viewers will probably have fun finding such celebrated chefs as Rokusaburo Michiba and Jiro Ono.

"Any market involves people. I wanted to hear how the people at Tsukiji feel when they are working," said the director Naotaro Endo. "I meant for the film to describe the role of Tsukiji and

hand it down to the next generation."

The film was well received when it screened at overseas film festivals, such as at the Seattle International Film Festival earlier this year and the San Sebastian Film Festival last month and also at movie theaters in Hong Kong and Thailand.

Endo and his crew succeeded in getting the central force of the market — licensed intermediary wholesalers called *nakaoroshi* — to speak candidly about their work and even some of their trade secrets, which they usually would not reveal.

Nakaoroshi have their own business sections in the market. They buy fish from wholesalers and sell them to chefs and retailers. Viewers, as they see their interesting stories woven together, will come to understand the gigantic market that opened in 1935 and its complicated

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but well-organized business system.

Viewers will also learn about the expertise and work ethic of the *nakaoroshi*. These workers check their fish with client chefs very seriously and earnestly explain their products. They look smart, passionate and proud of their work. They're also having fun.



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Theodore C. Bestor with a Japanese translated copy of his book on the Tsukiji fish market

The film production was greatly influenced by Prof. Theodore C. Bestor at Harvard University, who authored a book titled "Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World" as part of his long-running research and fieldwork that approaches the market from various angles.

One of the most impressive things about the film is that it is a marvelous record of the Tsukiji market today, Bestor said. "It doesn't [sentimentally] focus on the market closing but on people's lives, how they continue, and how they work every day. It did a good job in making the social context of Tsukiji come alive."

Bestor also said that when he started his research, he thought the market was just a place for selling and buying, but gradually understood that it is a place of "information."

"The auctioneer, the *nakaoroshi*, the buyer and the chef all work together," Bestor said. "There's a lot of communication going on about particular kinds of seafood, how to use them, what season is

the best and the prices. It's all about information and personal relationships [of trust]. So I think all of those in the film are fascinating to many people."

A sushi chef in the film says, "*Nakaoroshi* are indispensable for my work as I'm not able to select good fish by myself."

Nakaoroshi are required to not only be a good judge of their specialty fish but also provide "correct" fish that meet their clients' requests for price, size and other criteria.

An elderly *nakaoroshi* who has sold shrimp for many years sums up his work by saying, "I just sell shrimp I like to someone I like." That business style could make a poor businessman, Bestor said, "but it means he is very focused on his product."

Another *nakaoroshi* picks up an anago conger eel and can tell its weight without a scale.

This means he learned the skill based on a key Japanese principle for craftspeople — "*karada de oboeru*," which means learning with your body, Bestor says. "One of the things that can really impress the foreign audiences is the degree of knowledge, skill, the degree of dedication that people there bring to their work."

A great fish lover himself, Bestor never stops mentioning the names of his favorites — tuna, anago, octopus, hotategai, shima-aji, salmon, hamo and more. These seafood are featured in the film when renowned sushi chefs carefully and elegantly cook them at their restaurants.

"I think this movie will stimulate lots of people across the world to learn more about Japanese food," Bestor said.

Advance screenings of the film, in Japanese with some English, are being shown at the Tokyo Gekijo (Togekji) movie theater near the market. Visit tsukiji-wonderland.jp/en for more information.