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'Tsukiji Wonderland': Film Review

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Courtesy of Seattle International Film Festival

The Bottom Line

An in-depth foodie doc highlighting the social bond between merchants and chefs.

See the world's most famous fish market before it closes.

Long a pilgrimage destination for foodies visiting Japan, Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market offers a mindboggling array of prime seafood from around the world. A loving look at the people who make it what it is, Naotaro Endo's *Tsukiji Wonderland* documents the scene for posterity, arriving just before the vast market is slated to close, moving to less valuable real estate further from the city center. Though perhaps more detailed than the casual moviegoer would like, the doc holds substantial appeal for the kind of audience that has made films like *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* word-of-mouth hits.

Jiro Ono himself is among the many sushi chefs (and other culinary luminaries, including Noma's Rene Redzepi) who make appearances here, speaking at length about how much they depend on the market's "nakaoroshi," the intermediate wholesalers who cull through each day's arrivals and present the best they can find. We spend time with many of these men, some of whom can trace their stands' operations back to Tsukiji's 1935 opening. If we can't see for ourselves how discriminating they are, countless interviewees attest to a level of knowledge that is unparalleled.

These men know everything there is to know about gauging the quality of any given fish. Moreover, they get to know the sometimes peculiar preferences of each chef they serve, knowing which likes his sardines spongy. Kizushi chef Ryuichi Yui reports that one of his go-to merchants will reject 30 or 40 conger eels for every one he asks Yui to buy. A smart restaurateur has so much faith in his handful of nakaoroshi he'll even buy things he didn't order if the vendor thinks he should.

Harvard anthropologist Theodore C. Bestor guides us through the market's history while

local writers testify to its indispensable place in Japanese food culture. Even at nearly two hours, the film can't quite do justice to the physical scale of this place while depicting its chef/merchant social scene — it doesn't even mention the crush of tourists that has forced officials to write up new rules, nor does it visit the cafes surrounding the market where you can have a breakfast feast on the freshest sushi imaginable. But it touches on enough specialized parts of the market — and yes, observes the world-famous tuna auctions — enough to make obsessed viewers feel they've got their money's worth, especially if they can't afford to make the trip themselves.

Venue: Seattle International Film Festival

Production company: Shochiku Co.

Director-editor: Naotaro Endo

Producers: Maiko Teshima, Kazuha Okuda

Directors of photography: Taro Kimura, Tojiro Kurita, Shinichi Tsunoda, Yuichiro Kobayashi, Goki Yoshida, Makoto Miki

Composer: Takayoshi Kido

In Japanese

Not rated, 110 minutes