



Amid the market stalls at Tsukiji. Above, from left: A fresh tuna at auction; an auction worker's fish hook.

THE LAST DAYS OF TSUKIJI

Time is running out to see the world's biggest fish market in action before it relocates in October.

BY ROB GOSS

It's just after 5 a.m. at Tokyo's Tsukiji Market. Outside, a brief downpour cuts through the humidity of early summer. Inside, there's an air-conditioned chill in the auction hall as an army of wholesalers move between the rows of tuna lining the floor, trying to evaluate the day's catch. They do this with barely a touch: just a hook through the gills to gently roll the carcass in order to shine a light into the ice-packed slit in its belly; an appraisal of the exposed flesh where the tail has been removed; and a scan of the tags that indicate the tuna's weight, lot number, and where it was caught.

At 5:30 a.m. sharp, hand bells start ringing, drawing the wholesalers into clusters around auctioneers who rap out a breathless string of calls that even to Japanese speakers are incomprehensible. A few hand gestures in return from the huddle, and a tuna is sold. Occasionally a bow is exchanged. Or a casual nod. Then onto the



next tuna and more bell ringing. By 5:35 a.m., as the auctions continue, workers are placing sold tuna onto wooden trolleys and into polystyrene crates before moving them out of the cavernous hall. The noise and commotion is almost overwhelming. By 5:50, it's all but over.

The same scene has played out six days a week for generations at Tsukiji's inner market (*jonai shijo*), but soon it will be no more. After years of delays, the facility will close for good at the end of trading on October 6, its businesses relocating to a new venue in Toyosu—two kilometers away—that's set to open five days later. Walking around Tsukiji, you can see why the move makes sense. The infrastructure here is old and crumbling, and the cramped nature of the place makes for inefficiency.

Even so, October 6 will mark the end of an era; a sad farewell to one of Tokyo's most iconic locations. Tsukiji began operations along the Sumida River in 1935, when it was set up as part of the government's efforts to consolidate

Above: Tuna has been auctioned at Tsukiji since its inception in 1935, and today, more fish passes through the riverside site than any other market in the world.

the city's markets after much of Tokyo was destroyed in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. It has since grown into the country's largest wholesale market, covering 23 hectares in which each year some 700,000 metric tons of seafood—averaging sales of about US\$20 million a day—are traded. To that you can add a robust business (1,100 tons daily) in fruits and vegetables. And scads of restaurants. All told, some 60,000 people move through the market each day for work, from wholesalers and distributors to packers and knife sharpeners.

Among the dealers at Tsukiji this morning—and every morning the market is open—are representatives from Yamayuki, a second-generation tuna wholesaler that operates 25 of the 1,000 or so booths in the inner market. The several fresh bluefin tunas they've bought at auction are carted through the narrow passageways to a butchering station, where it takes three men to gently lift the largest of them—a 200-kilo specimen landed in Nagasaki—onto a workbench. The man in charge at this point of the processing chain, Kanama Udagawa, picks up a long knife and begins to carve apart one of the smaller fish. Opposite him, another member of the Yamayuki team is using a band saw to halve a deep-frozen tuna.

"This one is worth about 7,000 yen per kilo," Udagawa explains as he stops to change knives. "In winter, the prices are much higher. Maybe 20,000 to 30,000 yen. Summer tuna has less fat on it, so the texture is different, and you taste more of the sourness in the flesh—not in a bad way, but you'd be able to tell the difference if you sampled winter and summer side by side."

This is the part of Tsukiji tourists rarely get to experience. Not nowadays. With tourists now not allowed to access the inner market until 11 a.m., when there is very little left to see, and viewing spots for the frozen tuna auction limited to 120 daily, you need contacts to get more than a fleeting glimpse of the market at work.

As Udagawa continues to carve, beads of sweat gathering on his forehead, I chat to the two people that made it possible for me to get behind the scenes: Naomi Mano of event and hospitality firm Luxurique, which can arrange insider tours of Tsukiji; and Kagehisa Imada, the third-generation owner of sushi restaurant group Kyubey. If you are a sushi fanatic, Kyubey might ring a bell: the founder, Imada's grandfather Hisaji, was the man who thought up *gunkan-maki* ("battleship roll"), a style of sushi in which dried seaweed wrapped around a clump of rice forms a container for softer and looser toppings such as salmon roe or sea urchin.

Imada is happy with the tuna Yamayuki has



One of wholesaler Yamayuki's market booths. Right: The company's owner and chief tuna appraiser Yukitaka Yamaguchi.



got him today. “As a restaurateur, you have to trust your wholesaler. The quality of tuna varies by season, and the wholesaler’s job is to get you the best they can on any given day. Summer isn’t the best season for tuna, but this one looks excellent.” He adds, “A chef might judge the quality of a tuna by the color of the flesh, the texture, the season, the taste. What’s amazing is how the wholesalers here recognize a good tuna without tasting or even touching it.”

The closing of Tsukiji hasn’t been without controversy. The relocation to Toyosu—to a contaminated site formerly occupied by a gas plant—was originally scheduled for 2016. The move, however, was postponed by Tokyo’s governor when it was discovered that the groundwater at the Toyosu site still contained high levels of toxins and the new market’s buildings had been built upon hollow concrete chambers instead of a thick layer of clean soil that was meant to solve the contamination issue. That then led to retrofitting, arguments, anger, uncertainty, payouts, surging budgets, and all sorts of other woes that won’t fit onto this page.

The good news is that the end is finally in sight, and we now know what Toyosu Market

Getting There

While Tsukiji’s smaller food- and retail-centric outer market will continue to operate beyond October 6, the days of seeing the famous fish auctions in the inner market are numbered. Tickets for the latter are restricted, so you’ll want to head to Tsukiji before 5 a.m. to sign up for one of the 120 available spots. Better still, go with an expert who can shed light on the market’s rich history and secure you a place at the auction. The writer arranged his visit through Naomi Mano’s **Luxurique** (luxurique.com), a Tokyo-based bespoke travel consultancy specializing in behind-the-scenes tours of Japan’s most compelling cultural destinations. For those who miss their chance to see Tsukiji before it closes, Luxurique will soon be coordinating exclusive visits to the new Toyosu Market.

will be like. The shiny new facility, which will have cost almost 5.5 billion yen (US\$50 million) by the time you add up all the construction, infrastructure, land, and decontamination costs, comprises three main buildings: two for seafood and one for fruit and vegetables. The plus for travelers is that all three will have elevated viewing platforms from where you can watch the action free of charge and without getting in the way—no more dodging the small *taare* carts that whiz around the Tsukiji market floor, braking for nobody. Hopefully, this should mean an end to the frequent tensions between market workers and tourists wandering into restricted zones. At an as yet unspecified date, Toyosu Market will also have an adjacent facility aimed at tourists that’s slated to include restaurants, shops, a hotel, and hot-spring baths.

And what will become of Tsukiji? In the short term, the land will be repurposed as a bus transport hub for the 2020 Olympic & Paralympic Games. In the long term, no redevelopment plans have yet been announced, but bearing in mind this is a swath of prime Tokyo real estate it’s unlikely to sit idle for long. The legacy, on the other hand, will last for years.

“It’s a bittersweet moment. It’ll be a challenge to get used to working in a new market, but that’s something we will overcome,” Imada says. “On a human level, though, I’ll be sad to say goodbye to Tsukiji. I’ve been coming here for our restaurants since I was a teenager. Some of the shops that have been here for generations will be closing rather than making the move to the new market. I’ll miss the place, but I’ll especially miss those people.” ●