

A Whole Other World

Deborah Mantle (text) and Markuz Wernli Saito (photos) get up early to watch food in motion at the Kyoto municipal central wholesale market.

In the middle of the night, in the middle of Kyoto, there exists a whole other world; a dynamic domain of ice and thick insoles that is unknown territory to most local residents. Here, produce in vast quantities is brought together, sold, sorted, packed and resold before the majority of people open their eyes.

This is the wholesale market, a buzzing hive of synchronized activity with its own rules and practices and where time and relationships count. Bone-achingly cold for most of the year, camaraderie and friendly banter keeps the atmosphere warm. The people that work here are the middle men (and they are predominantly men) and their job is to maintain the flow of food from the sea to the sushi restaurants, from the fields to the supermarkets.

The Kyoto Chuo wholesale market is not the biggest or the most famous. That distinction goes to Tsukiji in Tokyo. But it was the first of its kind. A century ago, Japan's cities had numerous local markets. However, the rice shortages and subsequent riots of 1918 showed clearly that for Japan's increasing urban population food distribution needed to be on a larger scale and carried out in a more stable, fair and safe way. The Central Wholesale Markets Law was passed in 1923. Four years later, Kyoto's Chuo market was built and became the model for all other municipal wholesale markets. Initially selling only fruit, vegetables and marine produce, a meat market was added in 1969.

Produce is transported to the market from far, very far and near. A local fruit and vegetable market is usually a profusion of colours, shapes and smells. In the municipal market the overriding smell is of damp concrete and the shapes are square; boxes of apples from Iwate, crates of onions from Hokkaido and polystyrene packs of mushrooms. To and from the market, the fruit and vegetables remain shrouded in packaging and only a sample of each is opened to entice the traders before auction.

Walking south and keeping eyes and ears open for the scooters, electric carts and trucks zipping along the alleyways, the mountainous terrain of packed vegetables opens out into a chilly, flooded plain of marine produce. Across the wide expanse and under the harsh electric

lights are clusters of open crates; an island of pink and orange crabs, another of milky squid and, further down, shellfish of all sizes and sorts.

Beyond the small fry is an area sectioned off by thick, plastic, floor-to-ceiling curtains. Inside, carefully laid out on wooden pallets, are the big money, big fish from afar. The labels on the tuna carcasses read Papua New Guinea, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Spain. These fish are auctioned individually. Freshness and fat – the fatter the better – are what the buyers are looking for. And though most of the fish have been transported vast distances, it is the fish caught in Japanese waters that are valued the most.

It is 5.30am and time to buy shrimp. A bell rings and men huddle. All are registered traders; some are buying directly for supermarkets, most are intermediate wholesalers who prepare and resell the produce to retailers and restaurants. The auctioneer, who is sporting a blue towel under a baseball cap, steps onto a small red bench. The buyers, each with a number displayed on their hat, jot down a price on hand-sized chalk boards. The auctioneer accepts the highest bid and a draw is decided amicably by a quick round of janken. Finally, the buyer's number is slapped on top of the shrimps and the deal is done. The auctioneer steps down, the bench is moved a few feet along the long line of shiny shrimp and the process continues.

Goods in the market never stay still for long. Once an auction is over wooden barrows, bicycles and scooters descend. Crates and boxes are piled precariously high and taken away to waiting trucks or moved a short distance to the outlets of the intermediate wholesalers.

A desk, one chair, some weighing scales and a small stove in the corner – the stalls of the intermediate wholesalers look makeshift yet many have been trading for generations.

At the Nakamitsu outlet, Atsuko Nakai interrupts her work to explain that the shop has been in operation for over 60 years. Nearby, four men stand in an efficient fish-processing line. The first scrubs the scales off the fish, the next guts it, the third de-bones the fish and

the last delicately cuts the flesh into fine slices. While sushi chefs are often praised for their deftness, the talents of these market workers go unrecognised. Wielding an array of knives that look more like swords, the men who carve up the large fish need muscle, experience and dexterity to cleave the flesh cleanly from the spine. When fish is money, the goal is to waste as little as possible.

Kyoto Chuo Market is on every city map but not in any travel guide. This is not a tourist attraction. It is a place of work and, strikingly, a place where all claim to enjoy their work. Keeping Kyoto fed is a never-ending, generally thankless job, yet despite the cold, damp and unsociable hours these middle men in this middle kingdom between night and day are happy to do it. **KTO**



Kyoto Chuo Market Facts

Every working day the market sells approximately:

- 1,000,000 kg of fruit and vegetables
- 300,000 kg of marine produce
- 25,000 kg of pickles
- 2,800 kg of seaweed

Around 255,000,000 yen of fruit and vegetables is sold every market day; slightly higher than the value of marine produce sold (around 235,000,000 yen).

During the three year period 2002-2004, the amount of whale meat sold per market day increased 50%, from 22 kg to 33 kg.

The ice factory sells approximately 300 units of 25kg blocks of ice every working day. Knives made specifically for slicing tuna (magurokiri) cost 50,000 yen each.



TOP: Shrimp auction and ice vendor. MIDDLE: The trading of broccoli, crabs, tuna is a social activity. BOTTOM: The craftsmanship of cutting 150 kg of tuna fish.

