



Masatoshi Fukutsuna, chef and owner of sushi restaurant Eiraku, serves sushi to a customer at his restaurant in Tokyo. REUTERS/Issei Kato

# Japan's disappearing delicacies

BY MARI SAITO

OCTOBER 30 – DECEMBER 21 HAKODATE/SHIMONOSEKI/TOKYO

# Disappearing act

In the land of sushi, a favourite squid snack moves out of reach

BY MARI SAITO

OCTOBER 30 HAKODATE

**T**akashi Odajima picked up a cracked and faded photograph and dusted it off with his sleeve. He smiled a little sadly at the image from long ago, back when he was a baby boy.

In the photo, he sits on his uncle's lap as his family poses at a nearby dock, squid heaped in the background. In another, his uncle dries rows of squid, carefully folded like shirts over a clothesline on the roof of their house.

Odajima's family has lived for generations in Hakodate, on Japan's northern island of Hokkaido. It's a city steeped in squid, a place where restaurants outside the local fish market advertise the start of the squid-fishing season with colourful banners.

When Odajima's father returned home from World War II, he supported his family by driving a truck for a local seafood company. He was paid in salt, a valuable commodity at the time.

Using the salt, his family began making and selling shio-kara, a fermented squid dish that derives its name from its taste: "salty-spicy." Because it keeps for days without refrigeration, it was an important source of protein for Japan's starving population after the war.

Seven decades later, most Japanese bars still serve it as an appetiser, and small bottles are sold in supermarkets as a condiment to be eaten with rice.

"Someone once asked me what squid means to people in Hakodate, and I told him that it



Takashi Odajima makes 'shio-kara', a traditional fermented squid dish, at his family's factory in Hakodate, Japan.

REUTERS/Issei Kato

was our soul. I was half-joking at the time," Odajima, 66, said. "But squid was always the main dish, long before we started eating rice."

Out of more than a dozen types of squid eaten here, the Japanese flying squid, or *Todarodes pacificus*, is so central to the national cuisine, it's sometimes referred to as maika, or the true squid.

But now, fluctuations in ocean temperatures and years of overfishing and lax regulatory oversight have drastically depleted populations of the translucent squid in waters around Japan. As recently as 2011, fishermen in Japan were hauling in more than 200,000 tons of flying squid a year. That number had fallen by three-quarters to 53,000 tons last year, the lowest harvest since Japan's national fisheries cooperative started keeping records more than 30 years ago. Japanese researchers say they expect catches of flying squid to be



Takashi Odajima, who runs a seafood company manufacturing 'shio-kara', a traditional fermented squid dish, and other seafood, is seen as a baby in a family photo, at his family's factory in Hakodate, on Japan's northern island of Hokkaido.  
**REUTERS/**  
**Issei Kato**

even smaller this year.

That such a ubiquitous creature could disappear has shaken a country whose identity is intertwined with fish and fishing, a nation where sushi chefs are treated like rock stars and fishermen are the heroes of countless TV shows. The shortage of flying squid, an icon of the working and middle classes, has dealt a hard blow to the livelihoods of not only fishermen, but everyone from suppliers to traders at Tokyo's famous fish market.

The fate of the flying squid is a microcosm of a global phenomenon that has seen marine life fleeing waters that have undergone the fastest warming on record. Reuters has spent more than a year scouring decades of maritime temperature readings, fishery records and other little-used data to create a portrait of the planet's hidden climate change – in the rarely explored depths of the seas that cover more

than 70% of the Earth's surface.

Fish have always followed changing conditions, sometimes with devastating effects for people, as the starvation in Norwegian fishing villages in past centuries when the herring failed to appear one season will attest. But what is happening today is different: The accelerating rise in sea temperatures, which scientists primarily attribute to the burning of fossil fuels, is causing a lasting shift in fisheries.

In Japan, average market prices of the once-humble squid have nearly doubled in the past two years, quickly putting the dish out of reach for many blue-collar and middle-class Japanese families that grew up eating it.

#### **A TOWN'S IDENTITY IS THREATENED**

Here in Hakodate, the squid shortage threatens the very culture and shared history of the town. One of the country's first ports to

open for trade with the outside world in the 19th century, it has the look of a Japanese San Francisco, with gingerbread Victorians and tram lines that slope down to the waterfront.

Odajima's earliest memory is of his mother buying squid from a neighbour's cart piled high with the morning's catch. Now, fishermen barely have enough squid to sell to traders, much less to neighbours. A festival celebrating the start of the squid season in a nearby town has been cancelled two years in a row.

Odajima still works in the family compound, a collection of deteriorating buildings near the Hakodate docks. Walking through a cluttered storage shed, he shows off the factory floor where he keeps his family

huddle of men at the docks for one of the first squid auctions for the season.

They looked over three neat piles of white Styrofoam boxes, comforting one another that it was still early in the squid season.

"Shit, they're all tiny," one buyer said. His friend walked away without waiting for the bidding to start.

At exactly 6.20 a.m., men in green jackets tipped their hats and began the auction. Once an event that used to attract dozens of buyers and take as long as an hour, this one took less than two minutes.

A gruff buyer supplying local restaurants that cater mostly to tourists strode to the front of the pack and bought all 11 boxes without looking. The rest of the group, including Odajima, hung back and shook their heads.

In the month of June, just 31 tons of fresh squid ended up at Hakodate's main market, 70 percent less than the previous year. A typical squid caught in the Sea of Japan now weighs a third less than it did 10 years ago, according to surveys by Takafumi Shikata, a researcher at the Ishikawa Prefecture Fisheries Research Center.

### AN EARLY WARNING ON SQUID

The squid shortage has become so dire, anxious bankers with outstanding loans to those in the industry have started showing up at the annual seminars held by Yasunori Sakurai, one of Japan's foremost experts on cephalopods.

Sakurai, the chair of the Hakodate Cephalopod Research Center, began warning fishermen and other researchers about the effects of climate change on Japan's squid population nearly two decades ago.

The flying squid gains its name from the way it can spread its mantle like a parachute to draw in and eject water, using propulsion to fly above the waves. The squid spend their short life – just over a year – migrating thousands of miles between the Sea of Japan and the Pacific Ocean, mating, then returning to lay eggs in the same area where they were born.

Sakurai blames climate change for recent fluctuations in ocean temperatures – a cold snap in waters where the squid spawn and

Someone once asked me what squid means to people in Hakodate, and I told him that it was our soul. I was half-joking at the time.

**Takashi Odajima**, whose family has made and sold shio-kara for generations



treasure: dozens of 60-year-old barrels made of Japanese cedar. He's one of the last local manufacturers still using wooden barrels to ferment and age his product.

Odajima also refuses to use cheaper imported squid, saying it would harm the brand's locally sourced appeal.

But with costs skyrocketing, he isn't sure about the future of his family business. His 30-year-old son quit his office job to help out after Odajima failed to find new workers. "I wanted to be able to hand it to him in better shape," he said, "but now..."

One morning in June, Odajima joined a



Fishing boat flags used to indicate a large catch called 'tairyō-bata' are seen hoisted on the squid fishing ship *Wakashio-Maru* No.85 before its departure from a port in Sakata, Japan. **REUTERS/Issei Kato**

steadily warming waters in the Sea of Japan where they migrate. These changes mean that fewer eggs laid in the colder-than-average waters in the East China Sea survive, and those that do hatch are swimming northward to avoid unnaturally warm waters in the Sea of Japan.

The Sea of Japan has warmed 1.7 degrees Celsius (around 3 degrees Fahrenheit) in the past century, making it one of the fastest-warming areas in the seas surrounding the archipelago. Based on predictions by Sakurai's former students now at Japan's Fisheries Research and Education Agency, surface temperatures in these waters may rise an additional 3.7 degrees Celsius over the next century.

These changes have taken a toll on squid.

"It's something that's always been eaten on the side, and now it's just gone. Everyone is asking why," Sakurai said.

Others, like retired regulator and researcher Masayuki Komatsu, argue that although Japanese officials and fishermen are loath to admit it, the country's rampant overfishing and lax regulatory oversight are also to blame for the shortage.

"They all blame it on climate change, and that's the end of the discussion for them," said Komatsu, who served as a senior official in

Japan's fisheries agency until 2004.

Since Japan started setting catch limits for the flying squid 20 years ago, fishermen have never come close to hitting the limit of the quotas. This year, the fisheries agency said it will allow fishermen to catch 97,000 tons of squid, a third less than the government's limit for last year, but nearly double what fishermen actually caught during the same period.

The ministry acknowledges that flying squid, particularly those born in winter months, are rapidly declining. But officials say the catch limits are appropriate given the scientific evidence available. They say it is especially hard to study the elusive creature, which travels long distances over a short lifespan and is more susceptible to environmental changes than many other marine species.

"It isn't scientific to simply say that because squid isn't being caught, we need to lower the catch limits, when we don't have the scientific backing to justify that," said Yujiro Akatsuka, assistant director of the agency's resources management promotion office.

### **A FISHING TOWN ON THE ROCKS**

Ripped curtains and fraying bits of cardboard cover windows of the empty storefronts along the main shopping street in Sakata, a town on the northwestern coast of Japan that once thrived as a major trading hub for rice and later as a fishing port. Old signs for grocery stores, camera shops and beauty parlours are barely visible through a thicket of vines.

Wooden warehouses that once stored the region's rice are one of the few reminders of the town's prosperous past. They were turned into souvenir stores after the buildings were featured in a popular television drama series.

On an early summer day, the docks were deserted except for a group of young Indonesian men living in shared rooms next to the port. They're Japan's answer to an ageing industry, part of an army of young foreign men brought into the country to take fishing jobs spurned by Japanese men.

Shigeru Saito was 15 when he boarded

Fish traders check squid before an auction at Hakodate wholesale market in Hakodate, Japan.

REUTERS/  
Issei Kato



his first fishing boat. By the time he was 27, he was at the helm of his own ship. He never questioned his path. Both his father and grandfather, born on a small island off Sakata's coast, had been fishermen.

Now 60, Saito has steered dozens of ships all over Japan. When Saito started fishing, Japan had a fleet of more than 400 ships harvesting squid. He now captains one of the 65 remaining ships specially kitted with powerful light bulbs that lure squid from dark waters.

Until recently, his crew could return to port in two weeks after the start of the squid-fishing season in early June with their ship's hold full of flying squid. Now, it takes them almost 50 days to catch that much.

"We're having to travel farther and farther north to chase squid, but there are limits," he said, pausing his round of checks to sit in the captain's room of his ship, the *Hoseimaru No. 58*, where he sleeps in a tiny cot under boxes of equipment.

As competition intensifies for an ever-dwindling catch, fishermen have begun blaming trawlers from China, South Korea and

Taiwan for overfishing in nearby waters. In recent years, fishermen from North Korea have also joined the competition. Japan says North Koreans are illegally poaching squid in the Yamato Shallows, a particularly abundant area in the Sea of Japan.

Saito's fishing lines got tangled in a net set by a North Korean boat there last year. Cautious about any confrontation with North Koreans, he and other Japanese fishermen abandoned the area early in the squid season.

"We can't fish in these conditions," he said.

Young Japanese men like Saito's son are reluctant to join the industry, with its long months away from home and physically gruelling labour. His crew is already half Indonesian. Soon, he said, only the captain will need to be Japanese.

In the last decade, the number of fishermen in Japan has declined by more than a third to fewer than 160,000. Of those left, an average fisherman earns about \$20,000, not even half of Japan's national median income.

"My son is a salaryman in the city," Saito said. "I couldn't recommend this to him – how

could I? We're away a third of the year," and, with North Korean poachers on the prowl, "the waters are more dangerous now."

The next day, men set up folding chairs and tents on Sakata's dock for a ceremony marking the start of the fishing season. Saito joined other captains in the front row, bowing his head with his baseball cap in his hands. Young Indonesian men fidgeted in the back of the crowd. Melodic chants of Buddhist monks filled the salty air.

"We know we are powerless before the might of nature," one monk said as the captains fixed their eyes on the ground. "We cannot go against the power of the sea. But we pray for a bountiful harvest and safe passage over the seas."



Our culture surrounding fishing is disappearing, and our culinary culture is also fading.

**Kazuo Nagayama**  
chef at sushi bar in Nihonbashi district of Tokyo

### ANXIETY IN TOKYO

Several weeks had passed since Japan's squid-fishing fleet left port. But in Tokyo, near the Tsukiji fish market, Atsushi Kobayashi was waiting anxiously. The specialist wholesaler still hadn't received a single shipment of flying squid from northern Japan. His driver sat on the concrete curb next to Kobayashi's truck smoking in the midday sun.

In the past, each week Kobayashi would unload three to four shipments of 1,200 squid, to be dispatched to high-end sushi restaurants around Tokyo.

"Last year, the fishing season ended in November because the squid disappeared" – two months earlier than usual. He unlocked his phone to message another customer that he had nothing to sell that day.

Elsewhere in Tsukiji, the largest wholesale seafood exchange in the world, hundreds of other family-run fish traders were also awaiting this season's catch. But by the time cases of squid finally began to arrive later in the summer, many of the traders were preparing to close their stalls to abandon the 80-year-old market.

In October, hundreds of fishmongers moved to a gleaming new market on the waterfront that cost more than \$5 billion. But others, their businesses already failing from a drop in consumer demand, higher operational costs and a lack of interest from the families' younger generation, didn't make the move.

Those who left felt a powerful sense of loss about a place that has been a colourful symbol of the country's fishing industry.

Masako Arai was one of them. Her husband's family started their wholesale fish trading business 95 years ago, first in Nihonbashi, where the previous market was destroyed in a massive earthquake and fire in 1923, and later in Tsukiji.

"Our families have lived here and protected this place for generations," the 75-year-old grandmother said.

Near Arai's store were empty spaces where families had tended shop for generations; more than a hundred businesses have closed in the past five years. Nearly a third of the remaining 500 fish traders at the market were losing money.

"It feels like we're always on shifting sand, and we don't know what the future holds," Arai said.

Nor do the chefs who create Japan's signature cuisine.

Kazuo Nagayama has visited Tsukiji most mornings for the past 50 years to buy fresh fish. Once back at his sushi bar in the Nihonbashi district, he changes into his white uniform to write out the day's menu with an ink brush. For the past few years, the 76-year-old chef has found it harder to list local fish he deems decent enough to serve to his customers. On this summer day, the first item on his handwritten menu was yellowfin tuna

National Cooperative Association of Squid Processors Managing Director Hiroshi Nonoyama poses for a photograph at the association's office in Tokyo. **REUTERS/Issei Kato**



shipped from Boston.

“I’m worried that people won’t know what it’s like to taste truly delicious fish,” he said. “Fishermen feel they have no future, and fisherfolk are disappearing. Our culture surrounding fishing is disappearing, and our culinary culture is also fading.”

Nagayama doesn’t allow anyone else to handle fish behind the counter, where customers pay up to \$300 each for the chef’s nightly omakase course. Although his tiny bar is usually fully booked, he doesn’t see a future for it – he has no children and no heir.

“We’ll have to close in the next four to five years,” he said. “I’ll be the last one here.”

#### ‘EVERYONE’S RAISING PRICES’

At Nabaya, a dark bar across the street from his Tokyo office, Hiroshi Nonoyama sipped a beer after another long day at work.

“It’s all depressing news, not a great topic of conversation over drinks,” he said. Nonoyama manages a trade group overseeing 79 companies that manufacture everything from

squid-flavoured potato chips to squid jerky. They’ve been some of the hardest hit by the recent run of poor harvests, Nonoyama said.

“A lot of these guys are old school. They haven’t diversified beyond using flying squid, you see? And when that becomes too expensive? Boom!” he said, crashing his hand on the bar counter.

Already this year, two of his companies had gone out of business because of the rising cost of squid.

“I only heard about one of them because I got a call from the tax office about unpaid taxes,” he said, sighing. The owner, who had employed 70 workers for half a century, was now on the run from his creditors.

“Everyone’s raising prices, but how much are customers willing to pay?” Nonoyama asked.

It’s the same question that Odajima, the Hakodate squid merchant, asks himself every day. He has nearly doubled prices in the past two years to 700 yen per bottle.

“Buyers are telling me that if I raise prices



Squid fishing equipment is seen on the Hosei-Maru No.58 squid fishing ship at a port in Sakata, Japan.

REUTERS/  
Issei Kato

again, they won't be able to sell it as a side dish or condiment – consumers just won't buy it," he said.

His factory's yearly output is almost half of what it was 10 years ago. Looking for ways to survive, Odajima is now courting boutique supermarkets and upscale restaurants.

Recently, Odajima flew to Tokyo to pitch his product. By the time he arrived at Ginza Six, a shimmering luxury mall in the city's posh shopping district, he was already sweating in his oversized pinstripe suit. He adjusted his tie and patted down his freshly cut hair in front of Imadeya, a premium liquor store on the basement floor of the mall.

Two Chinese women sampled glasses of Japanese wine under a pair of Edison bulbs at the shop counter. Shohei Okawa, the store's 36-year-old manager, waited patiently as Odajima pulled several jars of shio-kara out of a cooler he had carried on the plane from Hakodate. Folded copies of Tokyo's subway

map peeked out of his large duffel bag.

"As you know, prices are getting higher, particularly for squid," he said, suddenly sounding formal and looking anxious. "Which is part of the reason why we'd love to sell in a higher-end store like yours."

"What other stores carry this in Tokyo?" Okawa asked. "And is this rare? Is it authentic?"

Odajima quickly added that his product was handmade with no artificial colouring.

Satisfied, Okawa said he would send in orders for a few cases.

Outside, leaning against the mall's glass façade, Odajima was happy – for the moment, at least.

"I wonder what my father would think, selling it at a place like this," he said. "It's a little unbelievable. We had so much squid we didn't know what to do with it. Now, it's become a delicacy." <sup>®</sup>

Editing by Kari Howard

# Climate change creates mutant fugu, a deadly Japanese delicacy

BY MARI SAITO

DECEMBER 10 SHIMONOSEKI

**T**he road, hemmed in on one side by empty warehouses and the other by a concrete seawall, ends abruptly in a desolate parking lot. Men step out of their cars and into the darkness, then slip behind the sliding doors of a warehouse. Inside, they huddle under floodlights and wait. A clock on the wall ticks to ten past three in the morning.

“Ready? Ready? Ready?” shouts a man whose arm is covered to the elbow by a black nylon bag. One by one, the men step forward and their hands disappear into the bag.

And so begins a surreal auction in this port city in southwestern Japan. The buyers grip the dealer’s hand, and after a few seconds of secret gesturing felt only by the auctioneer, he yells out the winning bid.

“13,000!” Thirteen thousand yen, or \$114, a kilo.

The furtive bidding, a relic of a time when fish traders wore kimonos whose sleeves obscured their hands as they signalled their bids, is part of the insular world of Japanese pufferfish, or fugu, a fish best known for its ability to kill a person in as little as a few hours.

Although deaths are extremely rare, the whiff of danger associated with the fish’s poison is a significant element of the delicacy’s

enduring allure in Japanese culture. A kilogram fetches as much as 30,000 yen at the market here, and in the December holiday season, when fugu is particularly popular, a luxury fishmonger in Tokyo can sell up to \$88,000 worth of the fish on any given day.

News of poisonings elicits fevered national coverage. When a supermarket in western Japan accidentally sold five packets of the fish without its poisonous liver removed in January, the town used its missile alert system to warn residents.

And now, climate change is adding a new element of risk: Fishermen are discovering an unprecedented number of hybrid species in their catch as seas surrounding the archipelago – particularly off the northeastern coast – see some of the fastest rates of warming in the world.

With pufferfish heading north to seek cooler waters, sibling species of the fish have begun to inter-breed, triggering a sudden increase in the number of hybrid fish. Hybrids are no more dangerous than your average lethal pufferfish. The problem is that they can be hard to distinguish from established species. To avoid accidental poisonings, Japan prohibits their sale and distribution. With the rise of these unclassifiable hybrids, fishermen and fish traders are having to discard a sizable share of their catch.

Kaniya, a seafood-processing company here in Shimonoseki, is one of many in the industry frustrated by the government’s rule to discard such hybrids, considering that most subspecies of pufferfish frequently found in Japan’s northeastern waters have poison in the



A giant statue of a pufferfish is displayed at Karato fish market in Shimonoseki, southern Japan.

REUTERS/  
Mari Saito

same organs and can be safely eaten if handled correctly.

“But we have to follow the rules, because if there’s any problems it leads to hysteria,” says Naoto Itou, the gruff patriarch of the company.

Out of 50 or so species of pufferfish found around Japan, 22 of them are approved as edible by the government. Chefs and fish butchers handling pufferfish are specially trained and licensed to remove its liver and reproductive organs, which contain tetrodotoxin, a potent neurotoxin. Confusingly, the location of the deadly neurotoxin differs in certain types of pufferfish; it can sometimes be found in its skin or muscle, as well as its reproductive organs.

Every morning at 8 a.m., Kaniya receives boxes of pufferfish from fishermen in northern

Japan. By 9, an experienced fish handler is at his post in an apron and hairnet, sorting as many as seven or eight different groupings of pufferfish at a metal counter.

His bare hands moving quickly, the man picks up one slippery fish after another, holding it up for several seconds, examining its fins and checking for prickles. He pauses on one, turns it to the side, traces its back with his finger, then throws it into the discard pile.

The entire process has a hazmat feel: Workers in latex gloves, white masks and plastic aprons gut the fish and take away the toxic parts and dump them into a lock box. The waste is then collected and incinerated.

Asked why he would continue handling such inherently dangerous fish despite all the headaches surrounding hybrids, Itou points to

Fish handlers sort pufferfish before an early morning auction at Haedomari wholesale market in Shimonoseki, southern Japan.

REUTERS/  
Mari Saito



two of his salesmen hovering nearby, fielding calls from buyers.

“Isn’t it a blessing to be able to handle something customers love and want so much? There aren’t many other fish out there like this.”

### **SWEEPING IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

The rise in hybrid species is yet another example of the sweeping impact of climate change on marine creatures, which have undergone a mass migration as water temperatures increase.

Hiroshi Takahashi, an associate professor at the National Fisheries University, first noticed the increase in hybrid pufferfish six years ago. He started receiving calls from a scientific facility on the northeastern coast of Japan’s main island that had buckets of pufferfish it couldn’t identify. In the fall of 2012, nearly 40 percent pufferfish caught in

the area were unidentifiable, compared to less than 1 percent studied previously.

“It wasn’t one out of a thousand as it had been in the past; this was on a completely different scale,” he says. To an untrained eye, hybrids are barely discernible. Even veterans in the industry say it’s nearly impossible to tell apart “quarters,” or second-generation offspring of hybrid fish. At the end of June, more than 20 percent of pufferfish caught in a single day off the Pacific coast of Miyagi prefecture, 460 kilometres northeast of Tokyo, were hybrids.

Genetic tests found that the unidentifiable pufferfish were a hybrid of *Takifugu stictonotus* and *Takifugu snyderi*. Although they’re close relatives, the *T. stictonotus* usually swim around the Sea of Japan and the *T. snyderi* in the Pacific Ocean. Takahashi believes that the *T. stictonotus* escaped their gradually warming habitat by riding the Tsushima current north and crossing the



Shikishima-maru fishing boat captain Yukio Yamamoto, 49, peels the skin of a pufferfish caught by anglers near Ohara port in Isumi, east of Tokyo, Japan.

REUTERS/Issei Kato

strait just below Japan's northern island of Hokkaido to emerge in the Pacific Ocean. There, they bred with their sibling species and multiplied. The resulting hybrid, which has fine spots and yellow-white fins, could pass for either one of its parent species.

A division of Japan's health ministry in charge of food safety said it began collecting information about the reported increase in hybrid pufferfish in September. Each prefecture has its own tests for issuing licenses to chefs and others, and an industry group has pushed the government to standardise those tests.

Before dawn on a recent weekday, dozens of hobby fishermen throng a deserted dock in the Ohara port, a two-hour drive from Tokyo, to get a chance to catch the creature. They return on the Shikishima-maru around noon, sunburnt and tipsy, carrying white buckets filled with pufferfish.

While the anglers smoke cigarettes and hunch over noodles, Yoko Yamamoto grabs a knife and sits down on a low plastic stool. She works quickly, first striking the fish's spinal cord, then peeling back its skin to remove its poisonous outer layer. Her son, who captained

the boat, then takes over and slashes the fish to its gills to remove its liver and intestines as a moored fishing boat with pastel pink bench seats blasts "Bohemian Rhapsody" from its speakers.

We have to go a bit further now to find them," says Yukio Yamamoto, 49, crouching next to his mother. "You see all kinds of hybrids now; it's been this way for the past few years."

Toshiharu Enomoto, a 71-year-old hobby fisherman, walks over after his lunch and ties a knot in a plastic bag filled with ice and a few pufferfish. Laughing, he talks about the little thrill of the poison. "Some people like it when they feel a bit of tingling on their lips," he says.

The Japanese have eaten the fish for thousands of years. After it was outlawed by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a samurai general who unified Japan in the 16th century, peasants continued to eat it in secret and died in droves. The ban on fugu was finally lifted after World War II following years of petitioning by avid fans.

Despite its deadly nature, the fish has an almost comical face and, with its puffed cheeks and open mouth, looks as though it's perpetually surprised to be so sought after for special occasions.

In Tokyo, high-end restaurants serving pufferfish rely on Otsubo Suisan, a luxury wholesaler at the Toyosu fish market. At the company's wide stall, Koichi Kushida taps his smartwatch and answers calls on his silver Sony Bluetooth. In the span of an hour, the 34-year-old sells thousands of dollars worth of pufferfish.

"It's tasty, isn't it? It's a luxury and has class; that definitely attracts people," he says, deftly packing an airtight bag of gutted pufferfish into a golden box. With more hybrids appearing on the market, Kushida personally checks all the fish himself.

"When we hand it to our customers, we have to be sure it's absolutely safe," he says. "We can't have any problems." 

Editing by Kari Howard

# In a Tokyo neighbourhood's last sushi restaurant, a sense of loss

BY MARI SAITO

DECEMBER 21 TOKYO

**“I**ll have a draft,” says Yasuo Fujinuma, heaving himself down at the sushi counter. He pulls a pack of cigarettes from a frayed pocket of his sweater. From the corner of the restaurant, a small TV hums the noon weather forecast. He never drinks at noon.

“I’ve just come from the hospital,” he says, tapping the filter end of his cigarette on the bar. “My sister died.”

The chef puts his knife down. Another customer peers over the top of his sports pages. After a pause, the chef returns to his cutting board.

“You took good care of her,” he says, placing a sheaf of haran leaf on the chipped black counter. He lines the leaf with a dozen nigiri sushi and hands Fujinuma a mug of beer.

Conversations roll on like this at the Eiraku sushi bar. They start mid-sentence with no hellos or how-are-yous and veer into private thoughts without much fanfare, punctuated by news of ordinary tragedies.

The chef and Fujinuma talk about how his sister was last in a few years ago, stopping by after an evening dip in the public bath across the street. She had her usual sushi and a beer, then walked home with her cane past an abandoned karaoke bar, past the empty



Mitsue Fukutsuna, the wife of sushi chef Masatoshi Fukutsuna, prepares for the opening of their restaurant Eiraku in Tokyo, Japan. **REUTERS/Issei Kato**

tempura restaurant, turning the corner where two more pubs used to stand.

Eiraku is the last surviving sushi bar in this cluttered neighbourhood of steep cobblestoned hills and cherry trees unseen on most tourist maps of Tokyo. Caught between the rarefied world of \$300 omakase dinners and the brutal efficiency of chain-restaurant fish, mom-and-pop shops like it are fast disappearing.

Fujinuma, 76, pops sushi into his mouth and thinks out loud about the arrangements still to be made for his sister. A hospital consent form he just signed is handed around and examined at the bar.

“It’s just me now,” he says, his mouth still half-full with vinegary rice and fresh fish. He nods at the man and woman behind the



Masatoshi Fukutsuna, chef and owner of sushi restaurant Eiraku, chats with customers at his restaurant in Tokyo. **REUTERS/Issei Kato**

counter. "You're lucky you have each other."

Chef Masatoshi Fukutsuna and his wife, Mitsue, smile without a word. In the 35 years since they opened up shop, the couple has seen many of their friends move away for a job or family, only to return decades later, often without the job or the family, their absence unspoken.

Absence is a part of life here on what remains of the Medaka shopping street, a road so narrow that cars have to drive up onto the sidewalk to let another vehicle pass.

No one can say exactly when the first shop on the street closed. People squint a little and say it was probably the electronics store a decade ago, or maybe it was the rival fishmongers across the street from each other. Next to close was probably the butcher

shop, they say, then maybe the Chinese restaurant after that. In the past decade, three family-owned sushi restaurants in the area have shuttered. In the empty spaces left behind, fluorescent 7-11s have moved in, with microwave bento boxes and \$5 trays of sushi and men in tired suits smoking alone outside.

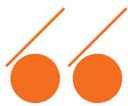
Once the sky turns pink and the sun sets, the street descends into shadow, save for the faintest glow from halogen lamp posts.

It's a neighbourhood in twilight. More like it are scattered across this city, their corner cafes and stores far from the neon blare of the famous shopping districts. The number of independent, family-owned sushi bars in Tokyo has halved to 750 in the last decade, a trade association says, driven out of business by fast-food joints and a younger generation

that doesn't want to inherit them.

"People would rather pay 100 yen for a plate of sushi at a really cheap place or they'd shell out tens of thousands of yen to go to a famous sushi restaurant in Ginza that they heard about on television," says the chef, absentmindedly changing the channel of the TV. "But places like ours, shops that are right in the middle, we just can't seem to survive." A game show starts playing, and canned laughter soon fills the room.

To compete with cheaper corporate-backed restaurants, Eiraku has kept its lunch and dinner prices unchanged for the past 10 years. Their sushi lunch sets start at \$8, while dinner and drinks usually cost around \$50 per couple.



It's like being with mom and dad... It's so comforting.

Customer at Eiraku sushi bar



To keep expenses down, Fukutsuna drives his Honda motorcycle to the new Toyosu wholesale market every morning to haggle over small amounts of fish. He buys only what he might sell in a day, but takes pride in picking the best seafood himself. His oldest son, who works as a manager of a three-storey sushi chain with hundreds of tables on the other side of the city, never goes to the market himself and orders his supplies in bulk.

"They charge you 30 percent more if you order by fax, online or by phone," Masatoshi says.

Despite their best efforts, the office workers and factory men who once stopped by during the day are long gone, their offices and workshops outsourced to far-flung neighbourhoods or foreign countries. One of the couple's former customers, an executive of

a medical equipment firm, still sends one of his junior employees across town every year to deliver a new company calendar. It stands on the restaurant's limited wall space like a bittersweet reminder, hung across the room from an aerial photograph of the old Tsukiji fish market.

The bar can only seat 10 people at a time. Most patrons prefer to sit on one of the four stools at the counter, where they can point directly at the fish on display and watch the chef prepare their dish. Elderly customers find it harder to sit at the two low tables set out on tatami mats near the front of the restaurant. When the couple's children come home for the holiday season, their grandchildren throw off their shoes and play on the cushions.

### SHOP CLOSINGS ARE MIDDLE-OF-THE-NIGHT AFFAIRS

At 5 p.m., moments after flicking on the restaurant sign to open for dinner, Mitsue walks over to the whiteboard and takes sardines off of the daily menu. Too expensive. It could be global warming, the pair say, or it's just an off week or year, a bad harvest. Fishmongers give them a different answer each time. Whatever the reason, they can't serve the fish tonight.

Behind the counter, Mitsue and Masatoshi work in comfortable silence, often with their backs to each other. The 63-year-old chef, despite his wispy white hair, still has the look of a bemused boy, while Mitsue, 61, has an unlined face that sometimes betrays an expression of concern. They met when Mitsue was still in high school.

Like many long-together couples, they bookend each other's sentences, and Mitsue often repeats orders for her husband and nudges him to finish a train of thought.

"The only reason why we can stay in business..." he starts. "Wait, what was I going to say?" he turns to his wife, who is never more than a few feet away from him in their tiny kitchen. She stirs a pot of miso soup on their two-burner gas stove. "We can stay in business because our children are grown, because we



Clockwise from top left: Masatoshi Fukutsuna, chef and owner of sushi restaurant Eiraku, checks the quality of raw tuna at Toyosu Fish Market in Tokyo; Masatoshi Fukutsuna, chef and owner of sushi restaurant Eiraku, chats with a wholesaler at Toyosu Fish Market in Tokyo; A sushi dish is served to a customer at Eiraku restaurant in Tokyo. **REUTERS/ Issei Kato**



own the place ourselves, and we make just enough for the two of us to live on," she says.

They can't say when they will retire, but they're both adamant their oldest son shouldn't take over the business.

"I want him to make his own way, and do well for his family," says the chef.

In the meantime, they make sure never to

go away for longer than a few days. Even when they travelled to Guam with their children and grandchildren two years ago, they were gone just four days.

"I don't want them to think that we've gone out of business," Mitsue says.

Shop closings are quiet, middle-of-the-night affairs. Neighbours only find out when



Eiraku sushi restaurant is seen along Medaka shopping street in Tokyo. REUTERS/Issei Kato

they see an ominous sheet of paper tacked onto bolted doors. The notes, usually hastily written, are letters of gratitude to their customers of 10, 20 or 30 years. Soon, vines will tangle over the empty doorway, and its passing will barely be remembered by those still here.

Night falls, and neighbours shiver down the street in their heavy coats.

A young couple walk into the restaurant and sit down at the counter. They take off their jackets and order a plate of sushi to share.

"It's like being with mom and dad," the woman says as she sips a glass of beer with her husband. "It's so comforting."

Soon, the bar is empty again. An hour or more passes, then the phone rings. Sushi delivery for two in the neighbourhood. The chef gets to work, packing lacquered containers with nigiri, then grabs his red helmet. Years ago when they had more business, Fukutsuna would ask his twin brother to make deliveries at night. Only the best customers could tell the identical siblings apart. His twin eventually

opened a restaurant of his own, but it failed and these days he's back in the neighbourhood. Now, deliveries are so rare the chef handles them alone.

The wood-framed Citizen clock strikes 8, and Ryuichi Sakano walks over to the bar. He pours a glass of Chivas Regal from the bottle he keeps behind the counter.

Sakano, 63, has been eating here, off and on, for decades. He's travelled all across Tokyo working as a crane operator on big construction sites, but he's never found another place like this.

"Their son says his father's sushi is the best," he says, picking at a piece of shellfish. "I've known Ma-kun for 50 years and he knows I'm a picky eater," he says, referring to the chef by his schoolyard nickname. "It's hard because lots of people 'round here are living on a pension and they can't afford to eat well."

"That's going to be us soon," says the chef, laughing. The men start discussing the meagre monthly pensions they will need to live on and wonder aloud how much longer they can keep working. Sakano has to wear a safety belt every morning to climb to the top of his tall crane and says his body just can't keep up with the work.

"You hear about that restaurant on the main road?" Sakano asks suddenly. "The bank took the business, you know, to cover the loans."

Mitsue looks over. "I wonder what they'll put there," she says.

"I think it might be a gyoza place, some chain restaurant," Sakano replies. "Or maybe it'll be another high-rise." A moment later, Mitsue remembers to share news of their other customer's death.

"He took good care of her," repeats Sakano. "It couldn't have been easy, all those years."

Another silence. "It's my daughter's birthday today," he says. Mitsue nods. Everyone knows he hasn't seen her in years. The subject is left hanging and they turn back to the TV. <sup>®</sup>

Editing by Kari Howard