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From Strange Cargo to Culinary Star

By Henny Sender

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One of the first characters we meet in Sasha Issenberg's "The Sushi Economy" is Akira Okazaki. It is 1971 and Mr. Okazaki, an employee in Japan Airlines' cargo division, is looking for cargo to air-freight to Japan. Like China today, Japan was then on its way to being a global-export powerhouse. But the bulging bellies of its planes heading to North America were returning home empty. Mr. Okazaki sent a note to a staffer in Toronto asking about the tuna catch off Prince Edward Island in Canada. The answer: The tuna were plentiful and eventually -- after much experimentation with keeping the fish fresh -- exportable. With that exchange, the tuna trade centered in the Tsukiji wholesale seafood market in Tokyo took a giant step forward.

Tracing the development of the global supply chain and the global demand for the tuna that goes into sushi, Mr. Issenberg focuses on the often anonymous individuals who have contributed to the process, from Mr. Okazaki to brokers in Tsukiji, from chefs in Austin, Texas, to the fish "launderers" in the Mediterranean who serve, as Mr. Issenberg puts it, a "new black-market seafood commerce -- illegal, unregulated and unreported catches." The book is eminently readable and more anecdote-rich and quirky than its subtitle ("Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy") might suggest.

As with so many other goods, the transformation of the sushi business starts in the 1950s with the development of shipping containers that by the 1970s had been adapted to Boeing jetliners. Prior to World War II, sushi was little known beyond Japan, where it started as a fast-food snack sold in countless stalls in Japan and its colonies in Asia. By the mid-1970s, thanks to sophisticated packaging and improvements in cooling technology, tuna was a major export out of North America and one of the most profitable sectors of the world's cargo business.

During Japan's bubble years, in the 1970s and 1980s, the price of the finest sushi skyrocketed -- and with it the entire sushi economy. A license to a seat at the Tsukiji fish auctions (comparable to a New York City taxi license) went for \$2 million at the peak -- and now trades hands at a mere \$100,000 in a deflation-prone, more sober Japan. Fish markets around the world, Mr. Issenberg notes, bear "the nostalgic burden of representing a city's unyielding, true character." They are thus expected to be "the putrid, hustling id pushing back against the modernizing municipal ego." The Tsukiji market fits this grand theory, but its purpose is also more simply understood: "to make sure that new mercantile Tokyo has something fresh for dinner."

Mr. Issenberg asserts a connection between sushi chefs and Samurai. "Japanese history," he writes, "killed off the samurai at the same point in the mid-nineteenth century that it birthed the sushi chef and a significant inheritance -- to be the lone knife-wielding guardian of honor and order." Still, the book makes a better claim, in its reporting, that

the sushi component of Japan's economy is a microcosm of the postwar salaryman society, with its strict hierarchy and entrenched seniority system.

As Mr. Issenberg makes clear, the more entrepreneurial or aspiring sushi chefs, feeling thwarted at home, leave Japan to seek their fortunes abroad. Among them is the most famous, Nobu Matsuhisa, founder of the upmarket Nobu restaurants that now dot global capitals with their founder's distinctive fusion-style sushi.

At the same time, sushi expertise is becoming globally democratized. "Learning sushi in America is much easier than in Japan just because the rules aren't as strict here," says Le Vu, the son of Vietnamese refugees and a chef at Uchi, a sushi bar in Austin, Texas. "It's just faster in America. In Japan, it's a whole life journey." Even so, many aspiring non-Japanese sushi chefs encounter resistance from those who want their sushi prepared only by someone with a Japanese face.

The last part of "The Sushi Economy" turns to the plight of the tuna and those who depend on it for their prosperity in an overfished world. Quotas have become meaningless, in part because pirates in places like Libya and Turkey routinely exceed them. The pirates' efforts are opposed valiantly by a few people, such as Roberto Mielgo Bregazzi (a Madrid-based tuna-industry consultant who traces the links between such pirates and the Gadhafi family) and Arata Izawa, a staffer at the World Wildlife Fund in Tokyo who pressures Japanese supermarket chains such as Ito-Yokado to boycott Turkish fish.

The problem may become moot anyway. Mr. Issenberg ends by profiling a Japanese entrepreneur, Yoshio Okubo, who is trying to bypass the Tsukiji market and "brand" the tuna he distributes -- a kind of "boutique fish" bred carefully in fisheries rather than harvested from the ocean. The hoped-for appeal of the brand -- in a world of food scares -- is purity and safety. After all, Mr. Issenberg writes: "A fisherman may know where a fish was caught, but who can say what it ate at sea?"

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