

# Ted Bestor: Report from Sushi Central



**Ted Bestor with a tuna wholesaler at a stall within the Tsukiji Market — “The Fish Market at the Center of the World.”**

Ever since his father’s appointment as a visiting Fulbright professor brought **Ted Bestor** to Tokyo as a teenager in the 1960s, he has been immersed in Japanese culture. Then, in the late 1980s, Bestor became hooked on fish and on Tokyo’s famed seafood market, Tsukiji (rhymes with “squeegie”). While on the faculty at Cornell University, Bestor completed a NYSG-funded project in the mid-1990s which examined interactions between Atlantic fishing communities and the world’s largest market for fresh and frozen fish, focusing on many products from the Northeast such as bluefin tuna, sea urchin, lobster, and monkfish.

Now, as a Professor of Anthropology and Japanese Studies at Harvard University, Bestor has completed the definitive book on Tsukiji. This huge, bustling landmark on an average day handles over 2,300 metric tons of seafood from around the world. At Tsukiji’s auctions, seafood swiftly changes hands and moves on to the marketplace’s hundreds of specialized stalls, which in turn sell to sushi chefs, fishmongers, food processors, catering firms, supermarket chains, and almost every other sector of the Japanese food industry.

According to the book jacket of *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World*, published this summer by the University of California Press, “Bestor brings to life the sights and sounds of the marketplace, Tsukiji’s rich internal culture, its central place in Japanese cuisine, and the mercantile traditions that have shaped the marketplace since the early seventeenth century.”

Bestor’s NYSG project “Atlantic Fishing Communities and Japanese Seafood Markets: An Ethnographic Analysis of Socio-Economic Integration,” was the first systematic effort to examine the socio-economic structure and cultural contexts that frame the international seafood trade and that link Atlantic fishing communities to Tokyo’s Tsukiji Market. His book, based on research extending from the late 1980s to the present, and carried out not just at Tsukiji but also

in other parts of Japan, and in the Northeastern U.S., Korea, Taiwan, and Spain, examines – and explains – the complex social institutions that organize Tsukiji’s daily seafood auctions and the supply lines leading to and from them.

Bestor’s illustrated and entertaining book gives a clear analysis of the seafood market process, while also painting a picture of Tsukiji from many perspectives. What can be learned from this book and applied to the American seafood industry? The book provides a roadmap of how Tsukiji works and how it handles imports, and people in the trade can apply the detailed account of the marketplace as a whole to their own part of the seafood industry. Bestor’s book also compares Tsukiji to other markets. He notes that New York’s Fulton Fish Market, although the largest in North America, handles a fraction of the tonnage of Tsukiji’s trade and is set up quite differently. “Fulton Fish Market doesn’t have an auction system,” says New York Sea Grant’s seafood specialist **Ken Gall**, “but it, too, has a complex system of relationships that has influenced the domestic seafood marketplace in New York City and the surrounding region for over a century.” To Bestor, some of the most interesting facts about the market revolve around how supply lines are organized, and almost constantly re-organized. “Fulton, like Tsukiji, is inevitably part of a much larger social and cultural environment,” says Bestor. “Markets like these don’t simply feed cities, they are part of the soul and spirit of cities, and they cast influence over entire maritime economies.”

Stateside, Ted Bestor has spoken to dozens of people in the American fishing industry, primarily in New England. He has worked with the American Seafood Institute in Port Judith, RI, especially on its export trade promotion program. He welcomes comments and questions about Tsukiji, and can be reached at [bestor@wjh.harvard.edu](mailto:bestor@wjh.harvard.edu). His website, which includes Tsukiji information, is [www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~bestor](http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~bestor).

— **Barbara A. Branca**



**A bustling stall at Tokyo’s Tsukiji market.**

**All photos courtesy of Ted Bestor**