

The Revival of Matsudo Nanbu Market

Helping a Traditional Market Find New Popularity in an Era of Chain Stores

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In 2005, the Matsudo Nanbu Ichiba market was on the verge of becoming another casualty of Japan's shift to American-style supermarkets and chain stores. The sprawling wholesale market in a Tokyo suburb had fallen empty as the decline of small, family-owned stores and restaurants relentlessly hollowed its customer base.

You would never know that now. On a recent Saturday, the parking lot overflowed as cars lined up to enter. Inside the covered market shoppers filled the narrow walkways to buy from stalls selling everything from live sea urchin and grinning monkfish to locally grown tangerines and pickled daikon radish to cooking pots and handmade sushi knives.

The mood was carnival-like, as crowds gathered to watch a fisher with a sword-like knife as tall as he was. Nearby, a line formed for the morning's biggest draw: the Cash Grab, in which contestants plunge a hand into a box filled with yen bills or coins, and take home all they can hold.



"I like coming here because you can feel the excitement," says Chiaki Asanuma, a sushi restaurant worker who pulled 14,500 yen, or about \$140, out of one of the boxes. "You get an experience that you cannot get at a supermarket."



That experience is the key to the Nanbu market's remarkable turnaround.

Wholesale markets like this one proliferated after the end of World War II, when Japan's recovering economy took off. They supplied the traditional mom-and-pop stores and restaurants that sprang up near train stations and on neighborhood shopping streets to serve increasingly wealthy consumers.





In Matsudo, a half-hour north of Tokyo, the population grew so quickly that the Nanbu market was opened in 1966 as a second wholesale market to serve the city.

Things started to change in the 1990s, as market liberalization, middle-class lifestyles, and an embrace of the automobile transformed consumption habits. The old shopping streets became "shuttered streets" as consumers drove to more convenient chain stores. By the early 2000s, the Nanbu market's future looked bleak as more and more tenants left.

"We were in danger of closing down at any moment," recalls Yoshiki Matsunaga, a long-time employee who now manages the Nanbu market. "The parking lot was so empty you could have played a game of baseball in it."



In 2005 Ichigo, a Japanese sustainable infrastructure company, stepped in to buy the market. Ichigo empowered Matsunaga and the Nanbu employees to take matters into their own hands to find ways to rescue the market.

Matsunaga and his team started visiting markets across Japan in search of ideas.

They opened the market to regular shoppers, and developed a strategy to draw locals by creating a constantly festive atmosphere. The Nanbu market holds events every day that include lotteries, fairs, relay races, toilet roll-stacking competitions, and even a blind-date match-making service in which new couples are presented with blocks of raw tuna instead of a flower bouquet.

Activities such as cooking classes, study tours, and food-tasting events are designed to emphasize what many shoppers call the market's biggest attraction: its stall owners, who have decades of experience selling to professional restaurant and shop owners, and thus offer a deeper level of knowledge and expertise.



"We come here because we can ask questions and learn things that we could not find out at a supermarket," says Hideyuki Terajima, an office worker at a local electronics company who brought his family to shop. "This is a place where professionals come, and we feel special to have the opportunity to talk to real pros."



The efforts have paid off. The market estimates that more than a million people visited last year. At the peak times, such as during the New Year holidays, the parking lot fills by 5:30 a.m.

Officials from other markets across Japan now come to learn from the success of the Nanbu market, which has recently hosted study groups from China, Vietnam, Nepal, and the Dominican Republic. It has also gotten more attention after the 2018 closure of Tokyo's famed Tsukiji fish market.

That popularity was evident on a recent Saturday, when the market had the excited atmosphere of a temple festival.

A crowd quickly formed as fish-stall owner Kazuo Morimoto and two employees dragged out a 70-kilogram (150-pound) bluefin tuna as large as they were. Morimoto then deftly carved up the huge fish, slicing off slabs of marbled, ruby-red flesh. He cut these into smaller pieces for sale to customers, who crowded forward to buy one.

To the curious, he handed out bite-sized samples of buttery chutoro tuna meat so fresh that it seemed to melt in the mouth.

"I'm the king of tuna!" laughs Morimoto, who clearly enjoys explaining the different parts of the fish to customers.



"I've been working here for 45 years, and I have never seen this market so lively," Morimoto says. "We changed our market to survive, and now we are a center for the community."



"It is not enough just to be cheap," Matsunaga adds. "We have to offer an experience that is not possible anywhere else. Ichigo enabled us to try new things and find a new way forward."



For more on Matsudo Nanbu Market:

<https://www.matsudo-nanbuichiba.com/>

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