

The Japanese are driven to change their appetite as global stocks of bluefin tuna plunge.

By **BLAINE HARDEN** and **AKIKO YAMAMOTO**

TUNA cannot look like skinny Japanese women, says Tsunenori Iida. He ought to know. His family has been buying and selling tuna for seven generations at the world's largest fish market. Six mornings a week for 43 years, Iida has been casting his eyes and running his fingers over the torpedo-shaped carcasses of bluefin tuna, the most precious fish in the sea.

They are brought here to Tokyo's Tsukiji market, where a dawn auction sets the global price. "I look for beauty and balanced plumpness," Iida said. "I am looking for a Catherine Zeta-Jones type of tuna."

Alas for Japan, which wolfs down a quarter of the global tuna catch, and for the rest of the world: an increasingly voracious appetite for sushi is driving the supply of plump pulchritude served raw perilously low. Japan – after years of over-fishing a species that is as much sacrament as food – is feeling the pinch more than any other country.

As of this year and for the next four years, the country's annual fishing quota has been slashed in half for southern bluefin tuna, found in the warm waters of the Southern Hemisphere. And its quota for Atlantic bluefin has been cut by almost a quarter. Bluefin, which have been fished to the brink of extinction in some areas, are the largest tuna. They produce the most succulent sashimi-grade flesh, which is eaten raw either as sushi or on its own, as sashimi.

Wholesale tuna prices, up about 20% in the

Feeling the pinch



Bidding war: At Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market, a dawn auction sets the global price for bluefin tuna.

Below
Fish dealer Tsunenori Iida and his family have been buying and selling tuna for seven generations at the Tsukiji market.

past year, are so high that Japanese restaurant owners say they cannot pass on the full cost to customers. Still, tuna remains on the menus because there is no real choice. Without a sizable slab of rich red flesh on prominent display, a sushi restaurant in this country loses face – and customers.

"Tuna is the sushi in a sushi restaurant,"

said Izumi Niitsu, who manages Kihachi, a restaurant in Tokyo. He has been slicing and serving the stuff for 40 years. "If you have good tuna, you have a reputation of being a proper restaurant." Niitsu now sells his highest grade of tuna (the higher the fat content, the higher the grade) at about US\$5 (RM17.50) for a piece about the size of a matchbox. His wholesale cost for such a piece, he says, is often more than what his customers pay.

"When customers order tuna after tuna, my heart sort of pounds," said Niitsu, who tries to cover his tuna losses by gently encouraging customers to enjoy species of raw fish that he sells at a profit.

Across Japan, quotas are squeezing the supply of sashimi tuna, and soaring prices are reducing demand. In the first quarter of this year, imports fell 24% compared with the previous year, according to one recent industry report. Another report says that for all of 2006, household consumption of sashimi tuna fell 20%.

Yet as the Japanese eat less sashimi-grade tuna, Americans, Europeans and Chinese are eating more. In the United States, the second-largest market for fresh tuna, imports have continued to rise this year. That, in turn, is driving up demand and prices. It is also putting further pressure on tuna stocks that have been over-fished for decades.

Six years ago, one especially nice bluefin sold at Tsukiji market for US\$173,600 (RM607,600), because of its size, quality and, it is said, a fierce bidding war. At a recent morning auction, Iida bought an average bluefin, weighing 115kg for US\$9,500 (RM33,250). "The price was higher than the quality of the fish justified," he grumbled.

Since 1950, the global catch has risen more than tenfold, to more than four million tonnes in 2002, 2003 and 2004. A report this year by World Wide Fund for Nature said that the tuna fishing fleet is now far larger – in some cases 70% larger – than is needed for a sustainable catch.

The consequences have been severe, especially for bluefin tuna. The total population of southern bluefin has been reduced to about 8% of levels before industrial fishing took off in the 50s, according to a United Nations report. Japan admitted last year that its fleet had caught one-third more southern bluefin



tuna than it was entitled to under an international quota.

"We have to change our appetites to protect these fish," Iida said, as stomped off at 4:30am in his rubber boots to inspect fresh and frozen tuna laid out on wooden pallets in two auction rooms. Last year, before the quotas were cut, so many tuna carcasses were wheeled out to the auction floor that they had to be stacked on top of each other. Those days, Iida said, are gone forever.

"We were too loose in governing our own fishing," he said. "We now need a very rigid regimen to show the world that we can control ourselves. Instead of eating tuna twice a week, the Japanese are going to have to settle for twice a month."

Iida, though, still has to find a way to deliver a tonne and a half of tuna a day – worth about US\$180,000 (RM630,000) at recent auction prices – to customers who have relied on his company for decades. Those customers include some of Tokyo's best sushi restaurants. To deliver the goods, Iida buys as many quality tuna as he can get, if the day's auction serves them up. If not, he relies more than ever on his big freezer. Tuna frozen with special "flash" methods can be kept for up to a year with little or no perceptible change in its taste.

The World Wildlife Fund and other environmental groups say that much more regulation is needed to protect the fish. But Japan has won some measured praise for abiding by substantial reductions in its tuna quota and for finally realising that over-fishing is a national problem. Iida believes a permanent change in Japanese attitudes and consumption can save the tuna – and preserve his country's tuna-centric culture.

"We all have to share what we have," he said. "If we do that, I don't think they will go extinct." – LAT-WP