



Jiro Dreams of Sushi Discussion Guide

Director: David Gelb

Year: 2011

Time: 81 min

You might know this director from:

Lethargy (2002)

A Vision of Blindness (2008)

FILM SUMMARY

JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI brings you inside the kitchen of 86 year-old Jiro Ono, "Japan's living national treasure," who is considered by many to be the world's greatest sushi chef. Jiro is the proprietor of Sukiyabashi Jiro, a 10-seat restaurant located in a Tokyo subway station. It was the first restaurant of its kind to be awarded a prestigious 3-star Michelin rating. Despite the high cost and limited menu, food lovers across the globe travel far and wide to dine at Sukiyabashi Jiro, often making reservations more than a year in advance.

Throughout the film, we get to know the moody, ill-tempered Jiro who started apprenticing for a sushi chef at age nine. Nearly eight decades later, Jiro strives for perfection, placing sushi preparation and the running of his restaurant above all else. The film paints a complex portrait of an exacting patriarch who demands perfection from himself, his sons, and the hard-working apprentices who work up to ten years before they're even allowed to cook eggs. At the heart of this film is a complicated relationship between Jiro and his eldest son, Yoshikazu, who has spent the better part of his life living under the tutelage of his father with the hope that someday he will take over the running of Sukiyabashi Jiro and step out from under the shadow of his legendary father.

FILM THEMES

Jiro is a man of singular purpose. He has dedicated his life since the age of nine to one pursuit: perfecting the art of sushi. In our fast-paced, profit-driven digital age with cheap mass production and fast-food restaurants dotting the global landscape, Jiro is slightly out of step with the times. Not motivated by material wealth or social status, he's dedicated to his art. Yet his obsession comes with a price to his personal life, including time with his sons when they were young. The film looks at the pursuit of perfection, the way we live, what we value and the trade-offs often made by those willing to devote themselves to an ideal.

VALUING CRAFT IN AN AGE OF MASS PRODUCTION

One of the most astonishing details revealed in the film is that apprentices who work at Sukiyabashi Jiro might have to wait 10 years before they are even allowed to cook eggs, or that they might have to make them 250 times before Jiro deems them acceptable. At a time of industrial scale production and globalization, Jiro and the aspiring sushi chefs that train with him stand in stark contrast to modern modes of production that value efficiency and volume over craft and skill.

MORE THAN MONEY

Despite the enormous success of Sukiyabashi Jiro and the high cost to eat at this world renowned restaurant, Jiro seems less interested in making money than in honing the art of sushi making. This labor intensive work, in which only the finest ingredients are used, is not a formula to maximize profits, yet Jiro sees value in his work that extends beyond money. This film challenges the viewer to question the modern status quo that often places profits before all else.

IN SEARCH OF PERFECTION

Ai Weiwei said in an interview, "All my father asked for was to have a variety of expressions in literature and art. He said that rather than just one type of flower, there should be a whole garden, because every flower deserves its own identity and has its own beauty. That simple idea is seen as a threat to Communist leadership that wants to inhibit variety of expression." But this is true of many countries—even democratic ones.

THE ARTIST VS. THE MAN

Jiro's father abandoned the family when Jiro was just 7 years old. Despite his experience with an extremely harsh father, Jiro is so focused on his craft that he neglects to spend time with his family. People in search of perfection often direct their time and energy to their particular obsession, making sacrifices in their personal lives that many of us are unwilling to make. Those sacrifices can have direct impact and consequences on the lives of others. While the film is sympathetic to Jiro, it doesn't shy away from discussing the toll on Jiro's sons because of their father's devotion to the art of sushi.

"Once you decide on your occupation... you must immerse yourself in your work. You have to fall in love with your work. You must dedicate your life to mastering your skill. That's the secret of success."

Jiro Ono

"I either buy my first choice, or I buy nothing. If ten tuna are for sale, only one can be the best. I buy that one."

Hiroki Fujita

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Did your view of sushi change after watching this film? Have you come to see it as an art?
2. When Jiro’s son was a child, he once discovered his dad at home and announced, “Mother, there is a strange man in the house.” Did your feelings toward Jiro change when you realized the how much Jiro’s work impacted his sons when they were young? Are you familiar with this sort of drive in people – in yourself, or in anyone close to you?
3. Jiro is very clear that he is driven not by money but by a desire to achieve perfection. Do you think he is old-fashioned in his values, or do you admire his uncompromising stand and his dedication to craft? In today’s post-industrial, mass-produced culture, where is the place for passion and craftsmanship like Jiro’s?
4. Is “what you do” an accurate reflection of “who you are”?
5. Other than a female cashier and one female cleaner, there are no women working in Jiro’s restaurant. In fact, women seem largely absent from the world of sushi. Why do you think that is?
6. While the popularity of sushi has increased, the availability of high-quality fish has decreased. Do you think Jiro and other sushi chefs should stop serving popular fish that are in danger of becoming extinct (such as blue-fin tuna)?
7. Considering the economic climate today, does it bother you that Sukiyabashi Jiro charges ¥30,000 (USD \$300 or 225 euros) for a meal and no shortage of people willing to pay that sum?
8. Given Jiro’s harsh upbringing, are you surprised he was such a strict and distant father to his own children?
9. Jiro has maintained the same routine for nearly half a century, getting up before sunrise, taking the subway to his restaurant and coming home after dark. Does this suggest great discipline and self-sacrifice on his part, or a certain amount of rigidity and the need to maintain order and control over life?
10. Do you think Yoshikazu, Jiro’s eldest son, will do things differently from his father once his father steps down and he runs the restaurant and is the top chef?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Itamae is the name conferred on the Traditional Japanese Sushi Chef.
- In addition to being in charge of sushi preparation and presentation, the Itamae is also responsible for entertaining guests, as well as calculating the bill at the end of the meal.
- It is believed that sushi originated from an attempt to preserve raw fish before the existence of refrigeration. Wrapping salmon or tuna in rice allowed the fermentation of the rice to prolong the life of raw fish.
- An Itamae always wears the traditional sushi chef garb, always keeps his fingers wet with vinegar, and a sharpened hocho (professional grade sushi knife) at his side.
- The three main types of hocho (professional grade sushi knives) used are the tako hiki (octopus puller), the yanagi ba (willow blade), and the fugu hiki (pufferfish-puller).
- Fugu (pufferfish) sushi must be prepared properly, or else it can cause lethal poisoning. Therefore, it can only be prepared by specially trained and licensed Fugu Itamae.
- Chef Jiro Ono is considered a shokunin, a Japanese term that, according to The New Yorker, means “a person who embodies the artisan spirit of the relentless pursuit of perfection through his craft.”
- Jiro’s restaurant is based at the entrance to Tokyo’s Ginza metro station in the basement of a business building. The modest restaurant is surprisingly small and simple compared to fancy sushi restaurants being built around the globe.
- The rice at Jiro’s restaurant is served at body temperature, because, according to Jiro, each ingredient has an ideal moment of deliciousness.
- Jiro’s younger son runs a second restaurant which is an exact mirror image of the original, since Jiro is left-handed and Takashi is right-handed.
- David Gelb, who directed JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI, is the son of Peter Gelb who is currently the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. When David was a child, his father was the assistant manager of the Boston Symphony Orchestra whose conductor was Seiji Ozawa from Japan. As a result, David spent a great deal of time visiting Japan and developed an interest in the country.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film so that others can enjoy and be inspired by the story of sushi chef Jiro Ono.
2. Learn the history of sushi, from its inception in the 4th century to the innovative approach of Jiro Ono. Do some research to learn about the training it takes to become a Master Japanese Sushi Chef and what attributes are necessary to earn this title.
3. Appreciate the craftsmanship the next time you go out for sushi and try to view it not only as something delicious to eat but also as “food art” and craft.
4. Consider whether you have a particular passion or skill that you would like to master. If so, come up with a plan for how to start focusing on the things you love. If not, there are plenty of artists and craftsmen you can help support.

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