



Jiro Dreams of Sushi Discussion Guide

Director: David Gelb

Year: 2011

Time: 81 min

You might know this director from:

A Vision of Blindness (2008)

Lethargy (2002)

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. With a 3-star Michelin rating, Sukiyabashi Jiro attracts food lovers from all over the world, including master chefs who often make reservations months in advance.

Throughout the film, we get to know Jiro who started apprenticing for a sushi chef at age nine. Nearly 8 decades later, he is still striving for perfection in his craft through meticulous preparation of fish. The film paints a portrait of an exacting patriarch who demands perfection from himself, his sons, and the hard-working apprentices who work up to 10 years before being allowed to cook eggs. The film examines Jiro as a father, revealing his complicated relationship with his eldest son, Yoshikazu, who has spent most of his life in the shadow of his legendary father, and who will someday take over the running of Sukiyabashi Jiro.

Delectable and mesmerizing, JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI illuminates the Japanese philosophy of “shokunin,” meaning “artisan” or “craftsman.” Jiro embodies the spirit of one who is dedicated to mastering a craft in order to become a shokunin. In turn, his apprentices are inspired to reach this ideal, and perhaps viewers of this film will come away more devoted to their own passions as well.

FILM THEMES

Since age 9, Jiro has dedicated his life to one pursuit: perfecting the art of sushi. Not motivated by material wealth or social status, he's dedicated to his art. Yet this comes with a price to his personal life.

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 the eggs 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 of eating at this world-renowned restaurant, Jiro seems less interested in making money than in honing the art of sushi. This labor-intensive work, in which only the finest ingredients are used, is not a formula to maximize profits. Jiro finds value in his work that extends beyond money. The film challenging us to question the modern status quo that often places profits before all else, and that equates success with wealth.

RESPECTING THE EXPERTISE OF OTHERS

Jiro, his son, and the other sushi chefs recognize that the fish vendors they buy from are experts in their field. Jiro also values the rice expert's knowledge. This mutual respect allows everyone to focus on their specialty, knowing that their dedication is acknowledged. The rice expert and fish vendor trust that Jiro will honor their products to create his masterful sushi. This respect is a necessary foundation for the apprentices who study under Jiro as well. They work hard to become "shokunin," or "craftsman." Author Tasio Orate says the word shokunin also implies an attitude in mastering one's craft to fulfill a "social obligation" that is both "spiritual and material."

THE ARTIST VS. THE MAN

Jiro's father abandoned his family when Jiro was just 7 years old. Despite Jiro's experience with a harsh father, or perhaps because of it, he becomes so focused on his craft that he neglects to spend time with his own family. People in search of perfection often direct their time and energy to their particular obsession, making sacrifices in their personal lives that can have a direct impact on the lives of others. While the film is sympathetic to Jiro, it doesn't shy away from discussing how his devotion to his work has taken a toll on his sons.

“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 how absent he was in his sons’ lives? Are you familiar with Jiro’s 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 stance and his dedication to craft? In today’s 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 this is the case?
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 there’s 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? Or is it understandable considering Jiro lost his father at a young age?
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 Jiro steps down and it’s his responsibility to run the restaurant and act as 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 wears the traditional sushi chef garb, keeps his fingers wet with vinegar, and keeps 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. The next time you go out for sushi, try to view the sushi not only as something delicious to eat but also as a culinary art.
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.