

FEATURES



Shoppers inspect fish at the Taipei City Wholesale Fish Market's retail section soon after it opens.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES



A stallholder sells a cabbage at the No. 2 Fruit and Vegetable Wholesale Market.

PHOTO: CHEN JUNG-FONG, TAIPEI TIMES



The retail section of the No. 1 Fruit and Vegetable Wholesale Market offers a huge range of fresh produce.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES



A vendor sorts prawns at the Taipei City Wholesale Fish Market.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES

Taipei wholesale fish and produce markets

- » **Taipei City Wholesale Fish Market** (台北市魚類批發市場)
Address: 531 Wanda Rd, Taipei City (台北市萬大路531號)
Telephone: (02) 2303-3117
- » **No. 1 Fruit and Vegetable Wholesale Market** (第一果菜批發市場)
Address: 533 Wanda Rd, Taipei City (台北市萬大路533號)
Telephone: (02) 2307-7130
- » **No. 2 Fruit and Vegetable Wholesale Market** (第二果菜批發市場)
Address: 336 Minzu E Rd, Taipei City (台北市民族東路336號)
Telephone: (02) 2516-2519
- » **Minzu Fish Market** (民族魚市場)
Address: 18, Alley 2, Ln 410, Minzu E Rd, Taipei City (台北市民族東路410巷2弄18號)
Telephone: (02) 2509-6365

For a complete list of wholesale markets in Taipei City, as well as other useful information, go to the Taipei City Market Administration Office's (台北市市場處) Chinese-language Web site: www.tcma.gov.tw/new/sale_market.asp

Fresh food for the early riser

Although they exist mainly to serve restaurants and retail stores, there is still plenty at Taipei's wholesale fish and produce markets for the home chef to get excited about

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

It would be another hour before dawn but the area at the corner of Wanda Road (萬大路) under the Shuiyuan Expressway (水源快速道路) was humming with activity. For many of the people here, this was the busiest part of their day, for business at the Taipei City Wholesale Fish Market (台北市魚類批發市場) was in full swing. In Taipei, if you're in the business of making sure you are getting the freshest and biggest range of fish and seafood available, this is the place you come. That was why I stood wrapped up against the cold night air to meet Eiji Nakamura, the head Japanese chef at the Far Eastern Plaza Hotel, who makes the trip to these markets once a week. For Nakamura, the reason for these excursions is to make sure he can stay ahead of the game, monitoring what is coming onto the market through the seasons, as well as to procure items that are likely to feature as a daily special on the menu of his restaurant, Ibuki. Whatever is coming into season, it is likely to appear at these markets before making its way downstream to the high street stores and local markets.

Entering the cavernous shed with its wet concrete floor, the air acquired an additional chill from the huge baskets of ice lying about on which the fish were stacked. Men and a few women dressed in warm jackets and rubber boots milled around as auctioneers shouted prices in an incomprehensible steam of numbers and catchphrases. As a new lot came up, a crowd would gather around a bidding station. Others, more leisurely, were inspecting the fish on the bidding floor, many with notebooks in hand. Shopping here is a serious business, and those doing the shopping all wore blue baseball caps with a number sewn in red, marking them out as licensed distributors, the only people permitted to bid. According to figures from the Taipei City Market Administration Office (台北市市場處), the market has an average daily turnover of 150 metric tonnes, with the volume rising to 250 metric tonnes during holiday and festival periods.

By the time I met Nakamura at 5:30am, the action at wholesale market was winding down, and the interest had shifted over to a smaller retail market where many restaurant owners could be found looking for their catch of the day.

For Nakamura, the main interest was picking out specialties to supplement the hotel's main procurement inventory. A stand offering large tiger prawns caught his interest, and after shopping around, he picked up a kilogram. Nakamura was one of the earliest visitors to this part of the market, and many stallholders were still setting up. There was an almost collegial atmosphere as he picked through various offerings, comparing prices, taking notes, checking for freshness.

This atmosphere would vanish later in the morning. When I walked through the markets again at around 8am, the isles were packed with grannies picking up their own daily supplies, and the pace of business was much brisker. Squeezing through the crowd, avoiding the

cascades of water flung over worktables to wash away blood and entrails, looking at the faces all intent on their business, it was easy to see why this drab, wet and cold concrete arena of stalls had become such a mecca for food lovers.

The fish market, which covers a 2.2-hectare site, is dwarfed by the neighboring No. 1 Fruit and Vegetable Wholesale Market (第一果菜批發市場), which sprawls over more than 5 hectares. Here too, retail stalls are mixed in with the wholesalers, and the market flows out into a vibrant morning street market along Fuming Street (富民街).

This was the next stop. As with the fish market, the wholesale fruit and vegetable market offers a preview of things just coming into season. It was a delight to find some lovely new local strawberries, which had yet to appear in Taipei's markets. They would still be a little tart, the stall owner said, suggesting some imported varieties instead. David Ansted, Far Eastern's executive chef, who had accompanied Nakamura on this trip, picked up a number of boxes of the local fruit, saying that the tartness had its own special appeal. "It produces a very intense flavor when cooked," he explained.

The wholesale section of the fruit market was a huge hanger, but the fruits and vegetables were displayed there like jewels. Getting the best was not always an easy matter, and even at this early hour, vendors would shake their heads over some premium item, saying that the stock had already been sold out. Wax apples, black cherries, blueberries, varieties of lemons, quite apart from all the seasonal fruit, were on display, and very tempting if you were prepared to buy your fruit by the case. The grand scale of this market even made it a stop for a South Korean tour group who arrived in a coach to have pictures taken next to the stacked boxes of fruit.

Moving out of the wholesale area, we entered the retail market for fruit and vegetables, which was a treasure trove for anyone looking to buy larger quantities or simply seeking ingredients not readily available at smaller markets. Fennel, parsley and organic-grown basil were unexpected finds, as were whole hibiscus flowers, along with heaps of chilies of various sizes and spiciness, garlic whole, peeled, chopped and mashed, and bales of spring onions. Local and imported produce were both available. While some of the shops clearly favor customers buying in bulk, there was also plenty here for the home chef to get excited about.

Our shopping done, I walked back through the wholesale fish market. All that remained of the pre-dawn bustle were mountains of Styrofoam boxes and acres of torn, wet plastic sheeting waiting to be recycled. Workers were out with hoses washing down the concrete floor while others were sitting at neighboring cooked food stalls winding down after their day's work. It would all start again at 3am next day.

As with most traditional markets, both wholesale markets are closed Mondays.



The catch of the day on display at the Taipei City Wholesale Fish Market.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES



Fruit stacked high at the No. 1 Fruit and Vegetable Wholesale Market's wholesale section.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES