Yes, it’s a film about sushi, but that’s where any comparison with that other film ends.

After winning over audiences at numerous film festivals, “East Side Sushi,” which takes place in Oakland, and was written and directed by East Oakland-raised filmmaker Anthony Lucero, will open locally September 18. Lucero will be present at the screening at the Grand Lake Theatre in Oakland on the 18th, and at the Sundance Kabuki Theater in San Francisco on the 19th. The film will be showing throughout the Bay Area, with all theaters listed on the film’s website.

The movie is about Juana, a Latina woman, who is extremely capable in the kitchen, and longs to do more than the lowliest restaurant jobs. A young, single mother who lives with her father and daughter, the trio is reliant on the income from her father’s fruit cart and from Juana’s cleaning job.

When she sees a help wanted sign in a sushi restaurant, Juana applies, even though it seems pretty clear that a piece of shiro maguro has never crossed her lips. While her father would prefer her to work at a taqueria – so at least he’ll be able to enjoy the food
she brings home – she gets the job and is a fast learner, so fast that she quickly aspires to become a sushi chef, so she can interact with the customers, rather than doing prep work in the kitchen.

A graduate of San Francisco State’s film program, Lucero has done mostly documentaries, and has worked on special effects for some major Hollywood titles like the forthcoming Star Wars film.

He was inspired to write the story about Juana when one evening he began wondering about the inner life of a restaurant dishwasher.

While he began writing the screenplay with the lead character named Juan, who aspired to work in a French restaurant, he eventually changed him into Juana, and dropped French cuisine in lieu of sushi.

“I like that culture clash, or mix of Japanese and Mexicans in one story,” he said. “Plus sushi is very cinematic. Japanese food is incredibly beautiful.”
Furthermore, he appreciated how the added layer of sexism added to the challenges his protagonist faced.

“Of course women should be able to work wherever they want,” said Lucero. “It seems ridiculous that a woman can’t become a sushi chef, but if you saw one who wasn’t a Japanese male you’d think twice.”

As a food lover himself, but one that doesn’t much like to cook, Lucero became driven by the idea of “what does it take to make good food? Is it your culture, or if you’re a man or woman, does that mean you can make something better than someone else?”

While the stars – Diana Elizabeth Torres as Juana and Yutaka Takeuchi as Aki, the sushi chef who becomes not only Juana’s mentor but her love interest – came from Los Angeles, much else about the film is homegrown, especially since as a low-budget movie, Lucero relied on the help of family and friends.

The reasons for this were threefold; “Why not film in Oakland?” asked Lucero. “It’s a cinematic city that’s beautiful to shoot wasn’t even a thought.” The fact that the movie
had a blending of cultures as a theme also made it the perfect backdrop, he said, and then there was the purely practical reason.

“I could call my family to help out with food and craft services,” Lucero said, noting that while he had friends and family members feeding the cast, he could also ask a relative “can you hold that light stand over there?”

Perhaps the greatest compliment Lucero has received about the film is when viewers ask whether Aki the sushi chef, is a real sushi chef. The answer is decidedly no.

Given the low budget, Lucero’s first idea was for the actors to watch YouTube videos on sushi-making, or ask local chefs if they could observe them. But then on a whim, he called up the Sushi Chef Institute in Torrance, to ask whether the actors could observe some classes. Instead, owner Andy Matsuda said he would teach the actors at no cost.

The actors had two weeks of training. And while they couldn’t afford to hire a sushi chef to be on set, since they filmed in real restaurants, occasionally, one came in to watch.

“Sometimes one would be there, and say ‘Put your knife here,’ or ‘Don’t do it that way,’” said Lucero.

Reguars of Coach Sushi on Grand Avenue will recognize its interior as where much of the action takes place; the kitchen of B-Dama, formerly on Piedmont Avenue, now downtown, is where the back of the restaurant action took place, and the scenes in the stockroom were shot at Mijori Japanese Restaurant and Sushi Bar, also on Grand. All the restaurants allowed Lucero to use their places for free, when they were closed.

Lucero expressed his gratitude that all three restaurants were so accommodating, noting that he did not know the owners of any of them before.

“We were desperate to find a place, or we were not going to make this movie,” he said. “But that didn’t happen. We had so many people who helped us with such amazing generosity.”

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