



SWEET BEAN

A film by Naomi Kawase

Official Selection, 2015 Cannes Film Festival, Un Certain Regard

Official Selection 2015 Toronto International Film Festival

2015 / Japan/France/Germany / 113 min. / Color / In Japanese w/ English subtitles

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Short Synopsis:

Sentaro runs a small bakery that serves dorayakis - pastries filled with sweet red bean paste. When an old lady, Tokue, offers to help in the kitchen he reluctantly accepts. But Tokue proves to have magic in her hands when it comes to making sweet bean paste. Thanks to her secret recipe, the little business soon flourishes...And with time, Sentaro and Tokue will open their hearts to reveal old wounds.

Long Synopsis:

A lonely baker has his life and business reinvigorated when he hires an elderly woman with an uncanny culinary skill and a mysterious communion with nature, in this graceful, quietly moving drama from Japan's Naomi Kawase (*The Mourning Forest, Still the Water*).

Adapted from the novel by Durian Sukegawa, the new film by Naomi Kawase is a graceful ode to the invisible essences of existence — to the beauty and joy we can discover once we learn to listen to nature and feel the life that is coursing through and all around us.

"*Sweet Bean*" is a delicious red bean paste, the heart of the dorayaki pancakes that Sentaro (Masatoshi Nagase) sells from his little bakery to a small but loyal clientele. Absorbed in sad memories and distant thoughts, Sentaro cooks with skill but without enthusiasm. When seventy-six-year-old Tokue (Kirin Kiki) responds to his ad for an assistant and cheerfully offers to work for a ridiculously low wage, Sentaro is skeptical about the eccentric old lady's ability to endure the long hours. But when she shows up early one morning and reveals to him the secret to the perfect red bean paste — listening to the stories of wind, sun and rain that the beans have to tell — Sentaro agrees to take her on, trusting her strange ability to connect with nature. With Tokue's new home-cooked red bean paste recipe, Sentaro's business begins to flourish — but along with her smiles and culinary skill, Tokue is afflicted with an illness that, once revealed, drives her into isolation once again.

Using cookery to explore her perennial theme of communion with nature, in *Sweet Bean* Kawase also poignantly addresses the discrimination that condemns many like Tokue to live their lives segregated from the rest of society. Beautifully shot and quietly moving, *Sweet Bean* is a humble masterpiece from a singularly accomplished filmmaker. —synopsis courtesy of Toronto International Film Festival

Director's Statement:

Cherry trees in full bloom remind us of death. I do not know of any other tree whose flowers blossom in such a spectacular way, only to have their petals scatter just as suddenly. Is this the reason behind our fascination for blossoming cherry trees? Is this why we are compelled to see a reflection of our own lives in them?

Sentaro, Tokue and Wakana meet when the cherry trees are in full bloom. The trajectories of these three people are very different. And yet, their souls cross paths and meet one another in the same landscapes.

Our society is not always predisposed to letting our dreams become reality. Sometimes, it swallows up our hopes.

After learning that Tokue is infected with leprosy, the story pulls us into a quest for the very essence of what makes us human. As a director, I have the honor and pleasure of exploring different lives through cinema, as is the case with this film.

By unveiling the complex mechanics of this society, I hope to further an understanding of the very essence of existence. *Sweet Bean* is the meeting of two souls who unite in order to face life's obstacles. How many times must we be knocked down before we can reach paradise?

Sometimes an impenetrable silence engulfs us. And yet, the joy resulting from commitment and connection to the world allows us to better appreciate its changes and evolution. Through this film, I therefore wish to reveal and underline the joy we are able to feel at these precise moments.

Throughout our lives, there are times when we might find ourselves filled with regret and despair, and feel like giving in. Despite this – or maybe even because of this – we are nevertheless capable of holding onto our hopes and of continuing to have faith in the future.

-Naomi Kawase

Interview with Naomi Kawase:

How did you get the idea to adapt the book “An” by Dorian Sukegawa, edited in 2013 in Japan?

Actually, Dorian Sukegawa is in one of my films, *Hanezu* (2012), as an actor. We went to Cannes together when the film was selected for the Competition and, while we were there, he briefly talked about the story of *An*. Later he finished the book and sent it to me, and he asked me if I was interested in making a film based on it. So I read the book and I was drawn to how it carefully traced the presence of “what’s invisible” in life. Cinema is the medium in which we construct reality with what’s visible, but at the same time, I believe cinema can also create the presence of what’s invisible in life and present it for us as audience.

How personal is this film? How did you adapt the story from the book to the script of the film?

When I was writing the screenplay, I locked myself up in the library located inside the property of National Tama Zenshoen, which is the sanatorium in the outskirts of Tokyo for leprosy and ex-leprosy patients.

I also spent some time walking alone inside the forest of the sanatorium, feeling the actual light and winds of the place, and talking to some ex-patients who actually reside in the sanatorium, so that I could bring more reality into my script, as well as making the literal language into more of cinematic language.

As a personal standpoint, I was especially seeing one of the main characters, Tokue, in the reflection of my own foster mother, who passed away three years ago.

The three main characters of the film are lonely people who for various reasons do not belong in society. How do their situations change in the film? What do they come to understand?

First, one cannot live alone. This is what I think of us as human beings. Also, most of us have experienced some kind of failures in life. Sometimes, such failures can change one’s life dramatically. Even so, every one of us can still possess the power to continue living one’s life no matter what, and I believe it is inside us by nature. However, sometimes, our societies could confront such will and desire of someone, and in this film, we could see the main character Tokue being “robbed” of most of her lifetime, but at the same time, she had also learnt a lot of things from the particular situation she was put in. Being helped by or passed on by Tokue, who had lived and experienced much more, the two other main characters, Sentaro and Wakana, gain their own ways of believing in who they are and become able to make one small but very important step forward in their own life.

Is society such an agent of exclusion? Or do you think people create their own barriers?

In contemporary societies, it seems to me that sometimes people are creating their own barriers. As a consequence in a broader scale, such barriers might be leading us to re-create the notions and actions of trying to get rid of the “others”. Sometimes, someone who looks so angry from afar can actually be crying if we get close enough to see the person. Such a person can simply be looking for the warmth of others.

Even if this time the action merely takes place in the city, in opposition to your previous film *Still the Water*, nature still is superb too in *Sweet Bean*. What part does nature play in this film?

As an essence, the role of the nature in this film is not any different than the one in my previous film or films. Nature is something that quietly watches over us, human beings. The cherry trees for instance don't speak any word but they understand and accept what and how we are. They bring flowers every coming season, no matter what, which I think is so lovely.

How did you choose the main actors?

As for Tokue, I discussed with Durian Sukegawa, the author, and we decided to ask the actress, Kirin Kiki. She read the original story and very happily accepted our offer immediately. For Sentaro, I had been dreaming to make a film with him for a long time, and he took my passion pleasantly. As for Wakana's role, it took awhile to finally decide on the actress, but at the end, we decided to go with her who is a real granddaughter of Kiki Kirin, who plays Tokue.

Do you believe simple things as recipes can change people's lives?

Yes, I believe so. To be honest, I really love eating and can't resist to delicious dishes. Eating good food makes my mind wondrous and happy. I also believe no one would be angry for eating delicious food.

Naomi Kawase Select Filmography:

2015 Sweet Bean- Cannes Film Festival, Un Certain Regard, Opening Film

2014 Still The Water, Cannes Film Festival, In Competition

2011 Hanezu, Cannes Film Festival, In Competition

2008 Nanayomachi

2007 The Mourning Forest, Cannes Film Festival, Grand Prize

2003 Shara, Cannes Film Festival, In Competition

2000 Hotaru, Locarno Film Festival, CICA Award & FIPRESCI Prize

1997 Suzaku Cannes Film Festival, Golden Camera

Cast:

Tokue...Kirin Kiki

Sentaro...Masatoshi Nagase

Wakana...Kyara Uchida

Dorayaki Shope Owner...Miyoko Asada

Yoshiko...Etsuko Ichihara

Crew:

Directed and written by...Naomi Kawase

Producer...Masa Sawada, Yoshito Oyama

Co-producer...Thanassis Karathanos

Director of photography...Shigeki Akiyama

Lighting...Yasuhiro Ohta

Art director...Kyoko Heya

Assistant director...Yuki Kondo

Editor...Tina Baz

Music...David Hadjadj

Sound...Eiji Mori

Sound designer...Roman Dymny

Sound editor...Boris Chapelle

Sound re-recording mixer...Olivier Goinard