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Seeing Red

The fish industry nets a handy tool.

Recounting the nights she spent on Fisherman’s Wharf decked out in a hairnet and boots, hurriedly mixing oil paints to match the flesh of rapidly spooling sections of yellowfin tuna, color expert Jill Pilaroscia still sounds dazed: “I’ve colored for textiles, flooring materials, and carpets,” she says. “I wrote a thesis on coloring factories and how you can shape behavior and experience through color.” But never in her career had she been asked to devise anything quite like what she calls the “fish chart.”

That opportunity came from the seafood distributor and wholesaler H&N Foods International, which commissioned Pilaroscia, founder of the San Francisco consultancy Colour Studio, to create a chart detailing nuances in the hues of yellowfin tuna meat, a key indicator of the fish’s quality.

In practice, the fan-deck of indicators—with its 21 varieties of red, from purplish to pinkish—works like a tuna-specific version of a traveler’s point-to-it book, allowing H&N to communicate a tuna’s color to partners around the world without relying on language skills (try translating “maroonish”) or the unpredictable quality of digital images. “In the past, my client would slice a section out of the tail and then post a photo of it online,” Pilaroscia explains. “But everybody’s computer screen readers color differently.”

H&N was so pleased with the yellowfin chart it bartered Pilaroscia from creating a similar tool for its competition. Instead, it’s thinking of hiring her again, this time to develop charts for bluefin and bigeye tuna. “There are all kinds of food products you could do,” she says. “That’s the exciting thing about being a colorist—everything has a color.” [www.coloursstudio.com](http://www.coloursstudio.com) — Dianne Vadino