Hue and Eye

In 1551, Sir Thomas Phillipps declared in his last will and testament, “I bequeath unto my cousin my orange colored cow.” From this statement, we can divine two facts. First, that Sir Thomas owned an orange-colored cow; and second, that he did not expect to outlive the aforesaid cow. Astute readers—especially those steeped in agrarian lore—might also note that the color of the cow (orange) does not correspond to our usual expectations about those beefy creatures. The farm where I grew up, for example, harbored not a single cow of carrot hue.

Sir Thomas’s statement becomes less perplexing, however, if we realize that the color of oranges—the fruit from which we derive the color word orange—was not then what it is now, at least not in England. Oranges, after all, are not indigenous to the British Isles. In his lifetime, the only oranges that Sir Thomas would have seen in English markets were ones imported by ship from Spain and Portugal (in fact, that fruit was still called “portingales”). Not surprisingly, during their slow and hot journey over land and sea, the natural color of the oranges declined from that which we now know as orange to something more resembling rust. Sir Thomas’s “orange colored cow,” therefore, was more likely reddish brown in color. Fortunately, methods of transporting fruit gradually improved in the latter half of the sixteenth century; additionally, around 1595, Sir Walter Raleigh brought orange trees from Italy and planted them in Surrey (in the early eighteenth century, this orange grove was still going strong, the trees having reached a height of eighteen feet). These two facts meant that oranges began to appear in English markets with their glorious hue intact. As a result, the phrase “orange colored” shifted to something closer to what we now understand to be orange. By the seventeenth century the phrase “orange colored”—meaning “the color of an orange”—had become sufficiently familiar that orange developed an adjectival sense. Orange-colored cows were now simply “orange cows.”

All of this begs one question: what were orange-colored things called in England before oranges were introduced in the early fifteenth century? There are three answers to this conundrum. First, there weren’t many things in dreary Medieval England that actually needed to be described as orange. Pumpkins, for example, weren’t introduced from North America until the sixteenth century. On the other hand, carrots—which are indigenous to England—were yellow rather than orange: they didn’t acquire their current color until seventeenth-century Dutch horticulturists got their hands on them (moreover, in Medieval England they were called “dauk” or “tank” rather than “carrots”). Second, other color words such as red and scarlet had broader semantic ranges that encompassed what we would now call orange. “Red,” for instance, was sometimes used to describe the color of the noonday sun (Chaucer employs the phrase “the lightness of the redde sunne” in his translation of Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy); likewise, “scarlet” was sometimes used to describe the color of flames. Third, the words “tawny” and “brusk” were used to denote orange when that color appeared in heraldic coats of arms. (Interestingly, though, in a 1562 dialogue called The Accedens of Armys, this color is noted to be rare—in fact, one man skeptically asks the other, “Is not this colour of your own devising?” to which the other replies, no, it was invented in Turkey). Both “tawny” and “brusk” were gradually supplanted by “orange” after the fruit was introduced to England, an event which also allowed the word red to narrow the range of colors that it denoted.

That impetus to narrow the meanings of color words has persisted into our own age, and—as with the color orange—fruits, vegetables, nuts, and other foods have often been mined to coin new names for ever more precise shades and tints. For example, of the 120 colors currently manufactured by Crayola crayons, 27 of them are named after foods, including “peach,” “plum,” “mango,” “chestnut,” and (less expectedly) “asparagus,” “eggplant,” and “neon carrot.” Martha Stewart’s line of paints comprises 660 different colors, 86 (or 13 percent) of which are drawn from the kitchen or grocery story, such as “cantaloupe,” “cashew,”
“butternut,” “coffee,” and (seriously) “prunella.” However, these simple names are the exception in the Martha Stewart color line. Most of her paint names are word pairs, sometimes in natural marriages (like “green apple” and “mint jelly”) and sometimes in more peculiar juxtapositions (such as “dried fava,” “griddle grey,” “tea bath,” and “friar plum”). Home Hardware’s paint line is even more extensive (1,380 colors), and about the same percentage of those names is drawn from food words: 165 or 12 percent. Here, too, names made of word pairs predominate, such as “caramel cream,” “celery bisque,” “pumpkin glow,” “asparagus cream,” “cinnamon bark,” and “banana whip.” I began to pore over the equally large paint lines of Walmart and Sears looking for more food-related names, but had to stop when my weary eyes began to bleed dusky cranberry tears. Not surprisingly, many of these food-inspired paint names seem to have been devised for the feelings they evoke rather than as real-world instances of specific colors. Martha Stewart’s “brown sugar,” for instance, looks more like “weak tea” or “the water that I pour out of my steam vacuum after cleaning my rugs.” Some of her other paint names, such as “pudding mold,” “pannier,” and “wishbone,” could apply equally well to almost any color. The truly nonrepresentational paint names, though, belong to Home Hardware: “sweet ambrosia,” “coriander bisque,” and (moving out of the realm of food) “evening prayer.” I think it should be noted, too, that Home Hardware sells a paint color called “clown nose.”

Curiously, certain types of food are excluded from the major paint lines. For example, with the exception of salmon, there are no paints named after fish and other seafood: I cannot paint my bedroom “catfish cream,” “sardine whip,” or even “orange roughy.” Eastern European foods are also given short shrift: witness the absence of “neon pirog” and “borscht blush.” Finally, as a Canadian, I am disappointed that there are no paint names involving poutine.