

Ahi

yellowfin tuna (*Thunnus albacares*)



Yellowfin tuna is one of two species known in Hawaii simply as **ahi**. Similar in general appearance to bigeye tuna (the other species known as *ahi*), the yellowfin may be recognized by its more torpedo shaped body, smaller head and eyes.

In Hawaii, *shibi* is another name for small yellowfin tuna. The bright yellow soft dorsal and anal fins and finlets are distinctive features of the yellowfin. The dorsal and anal fins lengthen with age.

Seasonality & How They Are Caught

Availability and Seasonality:

Caught year-round in Hawaii's waters, yellowfin tuna is usually most abundant during the summer season (May-September). There are wide fluctuations in the annual catch of yellowfin, depending on whether ocean surface temperatures and other oceanographic conditions favor the migration of *ahi* schools to within fishing range of the Hawaiian

Islands.

Fishing Methods:

Yellowfin tuna is landed in Hawaii by commercial and sport fishermen. A large part of the commercial catch (44%) is harvested by longline boats, which may search for tuna up to 800 nautical miles from port and set hooks in deep waters. Yellowfin range from the ocean surface to depths below 600 ft. Landings by the handline fleet, based largely on the island of Hawaii, can be substantial (36%) in some years. Trollers contribute most of the remainder (20%) of the commercial catch of yellowfin. Trophy-sized yellowfin tuna are prized catches in gamefishing tournaments held in Hawaii.

Distribution:

The longline catch and some of the handline (*ika-shibi*) catch of ahi is marketed through the Honolulu fish auction. The majority of the handline catch is sold to wholesalers and intermediary buyers on the island of Hawaii where that fishery is based. The troll catch may be marketed

through the Honolulu fish auction, intermediaries on all islands, or directly to wholesalers and retailers, or it may be shared with family and friends. Most ahi is sold fresh, but surpluses caught during the peak summer season are sometimes dried and smoked.

Quality

Yellowfin is more perishable than either bigeye or albacore tuna. Although the yellowfin's flesh tends to be firmer than that of bigeye tuna, it does not retain the beautiful natural red color as long as bigeye. The quality of yellowfin caught off Hawaii varies considerably with fishing method, care in handling and other factors. Seasonal changes in flesh characteristics occur in many fish species. Noticeable changes occur in mature yellowfin tuna landed in Hawaii.

Yellowfin caught near the ocean surface during the summer season are susceptible to a quality defect known as "burnt tuna". The outward



appearance of the fish may appear normal, but the flesh nearest the spine is opaque and lacks the typical bright red color. It is also more watery, softer and has a slightly more sour taste than normal ahi. Burnt tuna is more likely to dry out on the grill. The defect is related to reproduction, overheating resulting from struggling on handlines and trolling lines and to the challenge of quickly chilling these large fish especially on small boats.

Product Forms and Yields:

Yellowfin tuna landed in Hawaii range from 3 to over 200 pounds in size.

The smallest fish are usually caught around fish aggregation buoys, whereas the largest are often caught by handline. Longlining harvests a wide range of fish sizes, from 20 to 200 pounds or more. The larger yellowfin (over 100 pounds in round weight) are preferred for several

reasons: (1) greater yield of finished products - up to 65%; (2) deeper red flesh color and, (3) greater fat content than smaller *ahi*.

Fresh yellowfin is sold already prepared as *sashimi*, *poke* (traditional Hawaiian raw fish preparation), or dried strips. It is also marketed as loins, loin sections, or steaks at fish markets or markets with fish counter service or self-service counters. Small *ahi* may be sold in the round to retail consumers who prepare their own raw fish dishes or dried fish. Large quantities of fresh yellowfin are shipped by air freight, mostly as dressed (headed and gutted) or loined products, from Hawaii to U.S. mainland.

Color, Taste, Texture:

Yellowfin tuna has flesh coloration that varies from pink in smaller fish to deep red in larger fish. Larger fish typically have a higher fat content than smaller fish, and this is a desirable attribute for raw fish products, as well as for grilling.

Preparations

Yellowfin tuna is widely used as raw fish dishes, especially *sashimi* and *poke*. This fish is also excellent for grilling and has become very popular in “blackened” fish preparations featured in Cajun cuisine. With its mild flavor and firm texture, yellowfin adapts well to numerous applications.



Hawaii Seafood Council

Acknowledgement: produced with support from PacMar, Inc., and NOAA (Award No. NAO6NMF4520222) hawaii-seafood.org

