

Photographing Food

The art of food photography lends credence to the philosophical maxim: Perception is, indeed, reality. With a little practice – along with a super-sized portion of patience – you, too, will develop clever shortcuts and illusory sleight-of-hand moves of your own

Lighting

Treat the food you're photographing as you would any other still life subject and ensure that it is well lit. Many of the poor examples of food photography that I've come across in the research for this article could have been drastically improved with adequate lighting. One of the best places to photograph food is by a window where there is plenty of natural light – perhaps supported with flash bounced off a ceiling or wall to give more balanced lighting that cuts out the shadows. This daylight helps to keep the food looking much more natural.

Props

Pay attention not only to the arrangement of the food itself but to the context that you put it in including the plate or bowl and any table settings around it. Don't clutter the photo with a full table setting but consider one or two extra elements such as a glass, fork, flower or napkin. These elements can often be placed in secondary positions in the foreground or background of your shot.



Be Quick

Food doesn't keep its appetizing looks for long so as a photographer you'll need to be well prepared and able to shoot quickly after it's been cooked before it melts, collapses, wilts and/or changes colour. This means being prepared and knowing what you want to achieve before the food arrives. One strategy that some use is to have the shot completely set up with props before the food is ready and then to substitute a stand-in plate to get your exposure right. Then when the food is ready you just switch the stand-in plate with the real thing and you're ready to start shooting.

Style it

The way food is set out on the plate is as important as the way you photograph it. Pay attention to the balance of food in a shot (colour, shapes etc) and leave a way into the shot (using leading lines and the rule of thirds to help guide your viewer's eye into the dish). One of the best ways to learn is to get some cook books to see how the pros do it.

Enhance it

One tip that a photographer gave me last week when I said I was writing this was to have some vegetable oil on hand and to brush it over food to make it glisten in your shots.

Get Down Low

A mistake that many beginner food photographers make is taking shots that look down on a plate from directly above. While this can work in some circumstances – in most cases you'll get a more better shot by shooting from down close to plate level (or slightly above it).



Photographing Food

Close-up/Macro

Really focusing in upon just one part of the dish can be an effective way of highlighting the different elements of it.

Steam

Having steam rising off your food can give it a 'just cooked' feel which some food photographers like. Of course this can be difficult to achieve naturally. I spoke with one food stylist a few years back who told me that they added steam with a number of artificial strategies including microwaving water soaked cotton balls and placing them behind food. This is probably a little advance for most of us – however it was an interesting trick so I thought I'd include it.

Food Photography Technique

Composition

We could discuss things like shapes, tangents, compositional flow, balance, but it wouldn't mean much. The trouble is that Art is so subjective. One man's rubbish is another's Rembrandt. If you can list a bunch of compositional rules, I'll take those same rules and show you how they've been successfully broken.

Propping

The props or background in food photography can be a very important element of success. Not having the right prop can mean the difference between success and failure. The correct prop or background will help set the mood of the photograph. High key lighting with low-key props can be a recipe for confusion and disaster.

Many times in a food photography shoot, the entire team isn't happy with the shot and no one really knows why. In these cases, propping is usually the problem. The propping is the thread that ties everything together. The colour, texture, and style of the props must complement the food for the "concept" of the photograph to make sense to the subconscious of the viewer. I know, it sounds a little weird, and it is... It's all really subjective and on most shoots, not everyone ends up completely happy with the end results. As a matter of fact, I would venture to say that on all shoots, not everyone gets his or her way, but the important thing is that the end result be consistently excellent. You need to trust in the rest of your team members. If you don't, you need to tweak the team so that the results are better and the working experience continues to be a pleasurable one for the majority of the team, or at least the client.

Camera Angle

Many times the angle that the food is to be photographed from has been determined in advance by the layout artist or art director. He or she will usually have an illustration or sample photograph to show you what they expect you to produce. If not, I would suggest that you choose an angle somewhere between 10 degrees and 45 degrees above the table surface. Your job as photographer is to make a two dimensional medium, (a photograph) as three dimensional as possible. If you shoot from directly above so that you can't see the sides of the food, you eliminate one of the two dimensions left available to create the impression of three dimensions. Not a good idea.

The lower angle you shoot from, the more height the food will appear to have. If you go too low though, you won't be able to see the top of the food, thus eliminating another dimension. These suggestions here are only basic rules of thumb. Always remember, breaking the rules can sometimes be a fun and exciting thing.

Photographing Food

Another factor in the decision of camera angle is that the lower you go, the better the food looks, but the more props you need to take up some of that vertical space created in the composition. Also, remember that the professional is attempting to fill up image space in such a way as to make the client happy. Food tends to be a horizontal subject matter, but sometimes the ad space you are trying to fill is vertical and sometimes there is copy (words) that you need to work into the composition. If you're an amateur and just trying to make a pretty picture, you will probably find yourself taking mostly horizontal pictures from kitchen chair height.

Focus

Along with lighting, focus tends to be a very trendy component of food photography. Limited focus usually produces a more "artsy" feel to the photo and is seldom used in packaging and often used in editorial food photography. Maximum focus is usually the technique of the packaging project. Of course, there are always exceptions.

When limiting focus, make sure that you pick out the plane of focus with great care. Usually, you will want to select an angle of the food that is either at the very front of the plate or somewhere in the first third. Try to choose an area where there is something specific to look at. If there is a pea sitting on a field of rice, focus on the pea. Give the viewer something prominent to look at. I find that I either shoot almost wide open or fully stopped down. (mostly wide open)

Lighting

Mood – Before you begin lighting a subject, you need to know which way you want to go, whether it's high key, low key, or somewhere in between. You can always change your mind and go in another direction, but at some point, you have to begin in one direction or another. Most times, the mood of the shot will be determined by the art director or the leader of the project. Their printed piece will have a "look" that they are attempting to maintain. This look should be supported by not only the lighting, but also the propping, focus and composition.

Shape

Probably the biggest decision a food photographer will make during the creation of a photograph, is where he will place the main light. Most novices will not realize how important an inch or two can be when positioning the main light.

Remember! Your job is to make a two-dimensional object (the final image) look as three dimensional as humanly possible. One way you will do that is by lighting the object in such a way as to create as much shape and texture as possible. The placement of the main light is made to create shape. Is the main object being photographed most like a cube, a sphere, or a cylinder?

There are "classical" ways that artists have used to illustrate these shapes for centuries and there is a good reason for that! You might want to consult a "how to draw" book, you'll be amazed how much you can learn from drawing books. Your real challenge is not so much to learn how to light well, the real challenge is to learn how to "see light" and what it does to the world around you. The great thing is that you don't need to be in a photo studio to learn this. You can study light anywhere you find yourself with a few extra moments to give a little thought to what's sitting in front of your face.

Another great way to learn how to light is to visit sites like the Black Book or the Work Book. These sites are advertising mediums for the best photographers in the world. Just for fun, try to figure out how they did the shots that you find yourself admiring. They don't have to be food shots either, just really good shots. Good Lighting is good lighting... Where was the light placed? How big was the light? How many lights do you think they used? Was it the light that "made" the shot, or was it the shadow that made the shot great? LEARN TO SEE THE LIGHT. Then it will be easy to see the light on

Photographing Food

your shots too. Take a picture. Look at it. No, I mean REALLY look at it! Move the light, take another picture and compare it to the last one. (Repeat as needed) You need to think in terms of learning to see the light, not in terms of making pictures.

Pressing the shutter, does not a photographer make...

Which is the most important surface of the main object? If you put the main light on that side, will the shadow obscure some other important object? Is that necessarily a bad thing? What if I raise the light a couple of inches? Will that change the shadow and make it worse or maybe better? What about if I move the light a little farther behind the subject? Does that give me a little more texture, or does it cause a glare on the surface?

Texture

Do you want to emphasize or deemphasize the texture of the subject? I like to “scrape” the light down the side of a food item when I’m looking for maximum texture (which is most of the time) One inch can really make a difference when you’re trying to do this. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had to reposition my lights and reflectors after the client has spun the plate just a fraction of an inch. In food photography, inches really do matter. And bigger is not always better, either...

Another issue that is much more important than most photographers realize is light source size. Boxes are more forgiving, and they’re a lot less textural too. There is a rule of thumb in food photography and photography in general. The bigger the light source, the less texture you will end up with. If you’re shooting people, texture usually isn’t your friend. That’s why so many people shooters use large umbrellas and boxes. In food photography, texture is your friend, your desire and ambition. In food photography, small light sources are a good thing.

With all good things, there are drawbacks. When you have small light sources that produce beautiful texture, you also get very crisp cast shadows. Sometimes these shadows are unsightly and unwanted. You will need to experiment with various fill techniques to alleviate these downsides. Believe me though; the advantages of small light sources far outweigh the disadvantages when it comes to food photography and creating texture.

Some food objects have a characteristic that make its texture somewhat unique in the world of photography. Most things we are asked to shoot are opaque objects, but when it comes to food photography, many of our subjects offer us an interesting alternative way of showing texture. Some of the things we are asked to shoot are translucent. The translucent leaves of a salad can show the interesting texture we so desire to create, even more spectacularly than “scrapping light” can produce. Keep your eyes peeled for opportunities like this. Take your time and look to see what each food subject offers in the way of uniqueness. Is there a way to create something special from this particular subject that other subjects do not offer.

Just think to yourself that this photo will only be good if you can somehow figure out a way to make it “special.” Food has different types of reflective qualities. Maybe it’s the sheen of the food that will make it special? It’s all in the light. It can be bland and boring, or it can be spectacular, depending on the lighting. It’s up to you.

Photographing Food

This is a good example of using a small light source. You can see the cast shadow on the left of the plate made from the main light. Do you find it distracting?

Do you think that a large light source could create the same degree of texture? Take a look at the two shadows cast across the upper right of the background.

No matter how hard you try, can't do that with a large light source. Also, notice the highlight area on the lower left hand side of the food item. By using a small mirror reflected back from the main light, I was able to light only the lower half of the item, enhancing the appearance of depth.

Also, the texture of the white dish is enhanced by the use of the small light source. The minimum depth of field was chosen to isolate the viewer's attention. I think it worked.



Please note the direction of the main light. You can see it by looking at the bowl in the upper left of frame. Not from the front, is it?

This image is a really good example of the magic that small light sources and translucency can cause. Take a look at the lettuce leaf and shrimp tail. Besides the neat translucency, backlighting causes increased texture and rim light effects. Rim lighting helps to create that third dimension we photographers strive so hard to create.

Also note the light ratio. The front surfaces are intentionally under lit (compared to the rear main light) to enhance the appearance of depth.



Photographing Food

Ok, I don't always use small light sources. As a matter of fact, this is probably my all-time favourite image. Remember what I said about breaking the rules?

I wanted to use this image to point out something I forgot to mention in the copy above.

The texture of a subject doesn't always mean "rough" texture. BBQ sauce has a texture all its own, smooth. If I would have used a small light source here, I would have ended up with a bunch of bright tiny highlights all over the subject. (like there are in the front of the bottom piece) By the way, sauce and gravy are very tough to deal with.

You need to use a broad light reflector to add layers of highlights- soft highlights.

The thing that really makes this shot, in my opinion, is the colour pallet of the image. This colour blue is really beautiful. As a matter of fact, just this month, there were two Food magazine covers that used the same colours.

Another example of large and small light sources in the same shot. Notice the graduation of tone across the meat? Adds a little interest, doesn't it? Also, check out the reflection on the plate from the large backlight. It's a nice technique.

You want sheen, but not too much on surfaces like this. If there is no sheen at all, the steak looks dry, too much and can't see the food.

You need to work as a team with the stylist to come up with the quality wants. Sometimes the sheen might be the stylist's fault, but more times than not, it's the lighting.



Photographing Food

Yet again, a small light source. Which way is the main light coming in from?

See how the tip of the slice is becoming transparent? See the little spectacular highlights on the filling of the cake? See how the form of the icing rose is in shadow? Shows a lot of dimension, doesn't it?

What do you think that this shot would look like if I would have placed the main light beside the lens, like most novices would have?



This is an example of an Advertising image. Notice how **all** the products are in focus.

This usually isn't the case with Editorial work. Most brochure designers need to sell several products at one time.

Quick quiz... Large or small light source? From behind or in front?

Did I use any mirrors? How about cast shadows? What shape are the beans? What is the typical way to light that particular shape? Is the light ratio relatively high, or low?



Of all the products in the shot, what one item dictated the direction of the main light?

Again another example of translucency and rear light.



Photographing Food

Remember when I talked about lighting for shape?

What shape are these food items? Again a large light source, right? Yes and no.

The large rear light creates some really cool reflections on the plate (I use this technique all the time), but is that the only light source that I used?

There's a lot of texture in the front of that wrap, not a large light source thing, is it? Look at the translucency of the tomato.



Look at all the texture on the top of the pie! How did I light the inside of the pie?

Do you think that the slight cast shadow across the front surface of the ice cream box adds any dimension? Any of those leaves appear transparent? Small light source?

Remember, the key to getting better as a photographer, is to learn to see the light. You do that by observing images and experimenting.



Photographing Food

Rules of thumb in food photography

Use a smaller light source than you feel comfortable with.

Larger light sources are more forgiving and easier to use. They also create very little texture on your subject. Smaller is better!

Keep the light lower than you think you should

Low lights create more texture on the top surface of moist food items. Too many food photographers keep their main light so high that they don't get as much texture as they could. They do this, mostly out of habit and because the cast shadows from high light sources are less distracting. What they don't realize is that shadows can also be "interesting" too. I read on some forum somewhere that it's not the light that makes most photographs beautiful, but the shadows that make the shot. I whole-heartedly agree.

Use more mirrors than you think you should

Mirrors are like little baby "main lights" whose shadows can be hidden. If I don't have a hundred little mirrors lying around my studio, I don't have a one. Mirrors are great things. You can either make them in all shapes and sizes or tape them off to the shapes you need at the time. There are times you need the light to be long and thin and there are other times when you can use a circular mirror. I love mirrors.

Use less overall fill light than you think you should.

One mistake many photographers make is to use more fill light than they need. The rule of thumb is that the less fill light, the more drama and texture you end up with. You can go too far though. Very seldom do I see a successful food photograph with black areas in it. Black food is usually a no-no. Keep the main light as far back as you can without creating too much glare of the food surface.

Don't light from the front

Most amateurs light from the front. You can't get too much texture from lighting from the front. Don't light from the front. Did I mention lighting from the front? Don't.

Photographing Food

Trickery

We've all seen the seductive photos of vividly colourful fresh vegetables, sumptuous cherry pies, and golden-brown roasted turkeys. These pictures, often found in glossy cookbooks and magazines, make us believe that if we follow the recipe we, too, can create such delectable dishes. And many of us can. Well, almost.

A peek behind the kitchen door would reveal the sometimes bizarre tools of the food photography trade that transform fresh baked brownies and juicy crown roasts into science fair projects masquerading as culinary delights. Food is among the more difficult of subjects for photographers. The laws of nature guarantee it: Hot foods cool, moist foods dry out, frozen foods melt especially fast under hot lights, vegetables wilt, and fruit turns brown. But determined food photographers rise to these challenges with their extraordinarily inventive bag of tricks. And yes, that includes motor oil, spray deodorant and brown shoe polish...

There are a couple schools of thought regarding food photography: Purists only use real food, and others of a more, practical bent resort to using imitation food at every opportunity.

If a photo is destined to become part of an ad campaign, rules require the subject food product to be the "real thing." However, imitation strawberries in a slightly out-of-focus background and acrylic ice cubes in faux lemonade are acceptable.



In addition to the requisite photography equipment, food photographers need supplies from hardware, grocery, fabric, drug, and art supply stores to accomplish their food photography feats. Here's some of what you may find on their shopping lists, and at least one reason each has its rightful place in the photographers apron pocket:

Blowtorch

For browning the edges of raw hamburger patties, the goose-bumpy skins of nearly raw poultry, and hot dogs. (Caution: simmer hot dogs for a while before torching, unless your goal is an action shot of a pink-meat food explosion.)

Motor oil

As a stand-in for unphotogenic syrups.



Cooking oil

To give a nice glossy sheen to meat and fruit.

Glycerin

Along with various sizes of artist's paintbrushes (to make seafood look like it was just caught that morning) and a misting bottle (to spritz lettuce salads, giving them that just-picked-and-rinsed look).

Photographing Food

Cotton Wool Balls

Which, when soaked and microwaved, perform quite nicely in creating the illusion of steaming-hot foods.

Spray deodorant

Which gives grapes that desirable frosty veneer.

Hairspray

Which can give (the appearance of) new life to a drying-out slab of cake.

Spray fabric protector

To prevent the motor-oil syrup from soaking into the pancake, which has bursting blueberries artfully pinned to it in an aesthetically pleasing, yet random, scattering (still hungry?).



Toothpicks

To hold unruly sandwiches together and tease out perfect crumbs from hot (wink wink) muffins.

Tweezers, for looping noodles in the stir fry and rearranging miniscule yet crucial crumbs.

Large syringe, to emulate the effect of a padded bra by squirting mashed potatoes under the skin of poultry before it is torch-cooked to give it a deliciously voluptuous appearance.



Brown shoe polish, so raw meat appears to be just-out-of-the-roaster succulent.

Smoke pellets or incense sticks, which can stand in for steam as long as they are lightly fanned so their smoke disperses, avoiding the appearance of a lit cigarette laying behind the pie.

White glue, used instead of milk for cereal photos and for pie repair (that would be the pie actually filled with mashed potatoes, where a serving-sized piece is cut out, with the resulting opening's edges slathered with lemon custard or rhubarb-strawberry filling).

Paper towels, which, when artistically torn into blob shapes, can make gooey syrups stick to the top of ice cream, which may really be a concoction of powdered sugar and shortening.