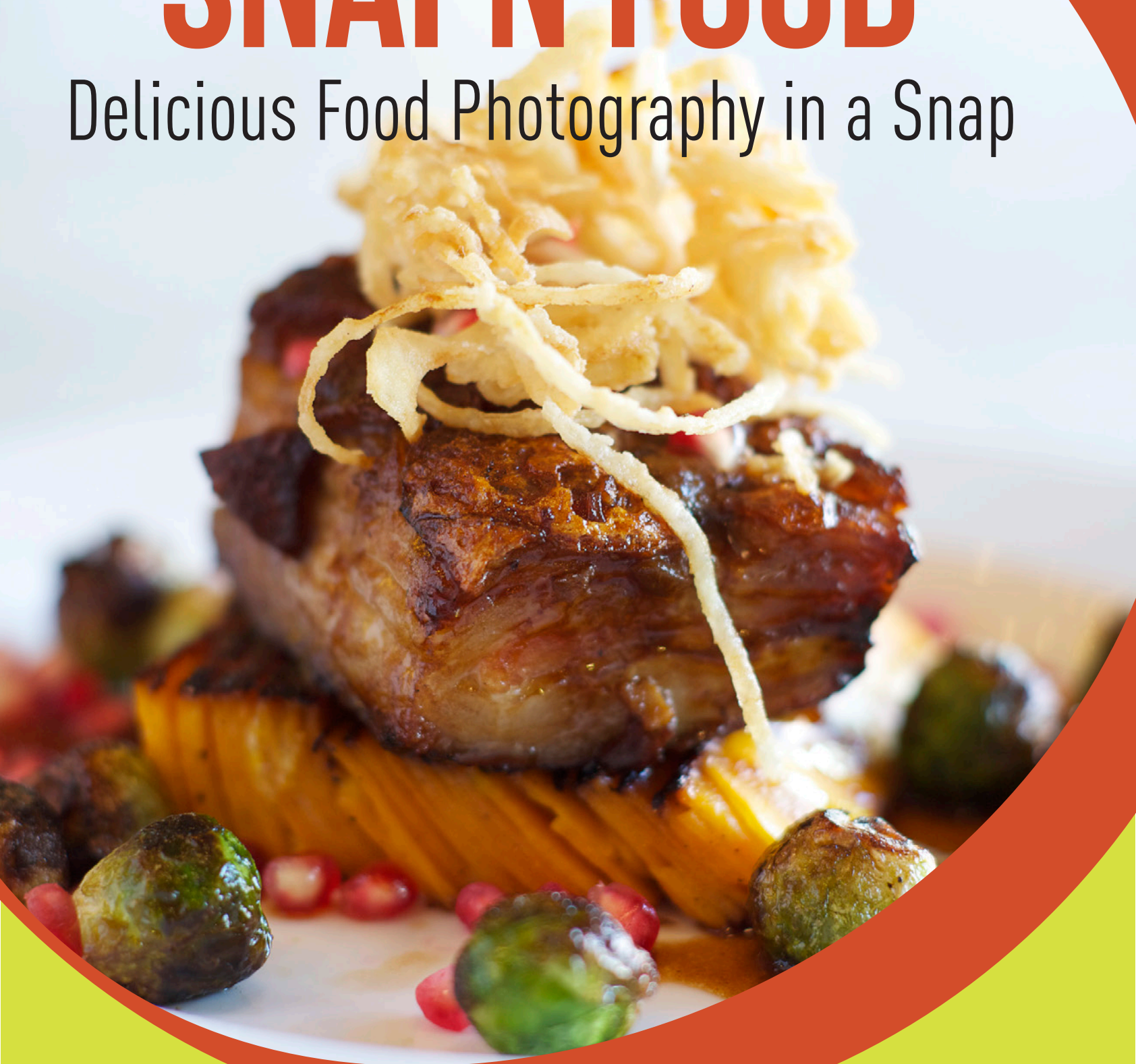




SNAPN FOOD

Delicious Food Photography in a Snap





Paul O'Hanlon has been shooting food and other commercial subjects for 20 years. He's assisted on shoots for Wine Spectator and Wynn Las Vegas, working with celebrity chefs like Daniel Boulud and Charlie Palmer. His work appears regularly in *Edible Hudson Valley*, and he counts local award-winning craft breweries and other publications among his clients—including a new iPad magazine called *Honest Cooking*. He teaches classes on digital photography in the Hudson Valley and online, and you can find out more at [**BeaconLightworks.com**](http://BeaconLightworks.com) or on Facebook ([**facebook.com/ohanlonphoto**](https://facebook.com/ohanlonphoto)).



Food and food photography have long been two of **Kelly Kingman's** many passions. As a photo editor for various magazines and newspapers she produced studio shoots as well as location shoots at world-class restaurants such as the Waldorf-Astoria hotel and WD-50 in New York City. As a writer, Kelly has covered culinary topics for national publications such as *Gourmet* and as a restaurant critic for a newspaper in New York's Hudson Valley. Her favorite assignment was spending three days among the students of the Culinary Institute of America for *American Way* magazine. She also currently consults and writes about content marketing and creativity. Connect with her at [**kellykingmanmedia.com**](http://kellykingmanmedia.com) or via Twitter ([**@kellykingman**](https://twitter.com/kellykingman)).

INTRODUCTION



Humans are the only species to elevate feeding themselves to an art form. Even at its simplest—a few chopped vegetables straight from the garden—how and what we cook, eat and share is a very personal expression. It's little wonder, then, that taking pictures of our food is a natural extension of that expressive instinct.

Food makes a fascinating subject because it appeals to all of our senses and so many emotions. As photographs, the dishes we create and consume become a canvas for stories of tradition, creativity, joy, pride, comfort, nature, flavor. We reach for our cameras to capture a delicious moment, to preserve a work of perishable art.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

Kelly worked for many years as a magazine photo editor and Paul is a commercial photographer—we have both spent many hours planning, styling and shooting food for national publications. This mini-guide will show you how, with just a little bit of planning and preparation, you can recreate professional-looking, mouth-watering food photography in your own home. In fact, most of the photos in this mini-guide were shot in our house in the Hudson Valley with just a good camera and a tripod, and not in a photo studio.

We also know that the urge to take beautiful food shots isn't always planned. You find yourself at a roadside taco stand, or digging into french toast at your favorite brunch spot, and you just want to capture the deliciousness of the moment. In the editorial world, we call this kind of photography “on location”. In this mini-guide, we're also going to talk about tips and tricks for shooting outside of the carefully controlled environment of the studio, including some camera phone apps that will help you get great shots.

Keep in mind you don't have to try everything offered in this mini-guide. Often in photography, just as with cooking, the best results come from finding the best ingredients and then letting them shine. Excellent images can be captured with just a few simple variables: beautiful light, interesting texture, rich colors.

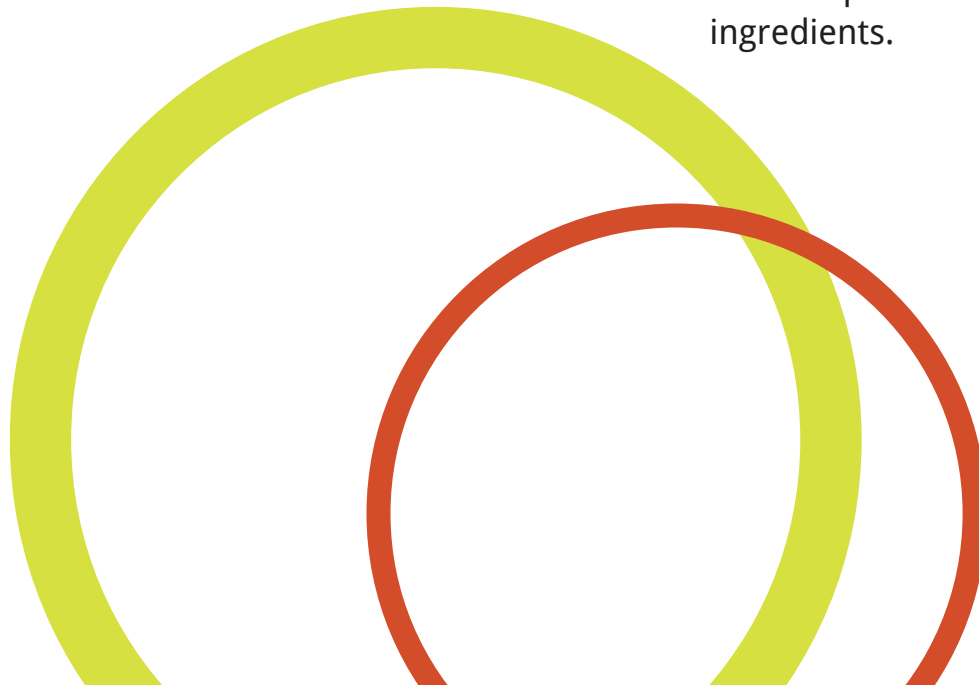
Basic terms

Props and propping

Props are the additional elements in a shot that help build out a composition, and add color and texture. These include surfaces, textiles, dishes, silverware and garnishes. “Propping” is the act of finding and adding props to a shot.

Styling

Food styling could encompass an entire guide on its own. It simply refers to the little adjustments that a photographer, chef or food stylist will make to the food itself to make it look more appetizing or to emphasize color, texture or ingredients.





CHINESE CHICKEN SALAD

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2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14 FLAO DAY	15
16 FATHER'S DAY	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
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10 WAYS TO USE GREAT FOOD PHOTOS

1. Make your friends jealous of all your wonderful eats on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.
2. Start your own food blog and shoot recipes: prologger.net/learn
3. Start a Tumblr for your food photos.
4. [Recipe or seasonal produce calendar](#)
5. Self-publish a cookbook: blurb.com/cookbooks
6. Shoot a photo tutorial to document a cooking process, step-by-step, from preparation to final dish.
7. Volunteer to shoot promotional photos for a catering, baking or restaurant-owning friend for their website or social media.
8. Post gorgeous food shots from your favorite restaurants to their Yelp, Urbanspoon and Google Place page.
9. Create a beautiful "portrait" of a family recipe and share with the original cook.
10. Create a photo essay of a meal from start to finish, mix with portraits of the farmers, cooks and eaters. Turn it into a slideshow or a book.



BASIC GEAR

Camera

No matter what kind of camera you have, when you understand some basic principles of lighting and composition, you can make food look great. It will be much easier to do if you have some control over your settings—at the very least you want a camera that lets you control your aperture.

Lenses

For a full-frame sensor camera, 35-85mm is a good range for your basic lens. On an APS/C sensor camera (also called a 1.6x sensor camera), a 24-50mm lens will be a good place to start, giving you a range from slightly wide-angle to slightly telephoto. We recommend using a “fast” lens—one that can allow a wide aperture at its most open, f2.8 or wider.

Tripod

Any kind of basic tripod is extremely useful when setting up studio-style shots at home. Having a tripod gives you greater flexibility for shooting in all kinds of different lighting conditions. It also allows you to fine tune the arrangement of props within an image since your framing would change slightly for every exposure that was handheld.

Other helpful tools

Gray card

Placing a gray card in your scene will help you get correct exposure and it also gives you a reference for final color correction of your shot.

Reflectors

A reflector can be any surface that bounces light from your key light source into the darker side of your image to adjust the ratio of light and shadow. Reflectors can be purchased or improvised from sheets of white poster board, foam core or pieces of paper.

Flags

A “flag” is the opposite of a reflector; it is typically a matte black surface. Flags are used to block unwanted light, narrow the path of your light source and to deepen shadows.

Remote shutter release

A shutter release will allow you to shoot without touching your camera’s shutter button, which can introduce movement when you’re shooting at very low shutter speeds. You can purchase a wired release for any [almost any] camera ranging from \$20-\$60 U.S., and many have a wireless option as well.

Lens hood

A lens hood blocks stray light from hitting the front of the lens and eliminates lens flare. This is a highly recommended lens accessory, and well worth the small investment. When you block lens flare, your images will be sharper and the colors more saturated.



SHOOTING WITH A CAMERA PHONE

Whether you're using a DSLR or an iPhone, it's always good to explore all the possibilities available. For smart phone cameras, this means looking into different apps and even attachable lenses and filters that help you create interesting shots.

Try a shot from directly above

When you can't play with depth of field, since camera phone lenses usually have just one aperture, then you can often get a dramatic composition from shooting from straight above. It helps minimize the distractions in the background and even out the light.

Snap from several different angles

Since the phone is so easy to move around in space, you can shoot from a variety of vantage points to immediately see which lighting scenario is the most flattering to your subject.



Photo: Kelly Kingman

Experiment with lenses

There are lots of stick-on and magnetic lenses for camera phones available now that will give you more variety in your shots, such as fish-eye, wide-angle and macro looks. photojojo.com/store/awesomeness/cell-phone-lenses

Use apps

Photo editing apps can help boost exposure, brighten and add saturation and contrast.

Improvise a tripod

You don't need to always carry a teeny tripod with you. If light is low and you want to get a good shot, hold your phone so you can brace your hands against the table, or carefully lean the phone against a bottle or other sturdy object on your table.

Camera phone apps we recommend

We chose these apps to offer the most manual-like controls available—all three allow you to choose the point of focus independently from the area it's using to read the exposure. So if your food is heavily backlit, you can focus on the bright area and expose for the darker area of your subject.

For iPhone

Camera Awesome (free)

Camera Awesome offers several compositional guides in addition to rule of thirds—it overlays guides in your “viewfinder” golden spiral and trisection. You can also use the “awesomize” filter which will auto color-correct your images, plus you can fine tune with a range of other color tools.

For Android

Camera Zoom FX (\$2.99)

A solid camera app for Android, Camera Zoom FX provides compositional grids like Camera Awesome. A stability indicator helps you take better shots in low light and a wide range of filter effects is available.

Shooting in restaurants: dos and don'ts

We all know the feeling: a beautifully prepared dish arrives at your table, bathed in soft light from the café window and the urge to shoot it strikes. People are snapping photos of their food in restaurants at an unprecedented rate—but unfortunately it's not always a welcome practice. Here are some brief guidelines of when to bring out the camera and when to refrain.

A note for food bloggers:

Most restaurants love publicity of any kind. If you'd like to get nice shots of the food at a restaurant, call during the slow period (3-5pm) and ask for the manager or owner. Explain that you're a blogger, tell them your blog's URL and you'd like to write about their restaurant. Ask if you might come by one afternoon to take pictures of a few dishes. Many owners and chefs will be happy to make a dish or two during the off-peak time in exchange for some blog buzz.

Don't take the shot if:

- The restaurant has white tablecloths, requires reservations or is on the high-end price-wise.
- You wouldn't answer your phone at this restaurant, much less take pictures with it.
- You have to use a flash or otherwise disturb your fellow diners to get the shot.

Do take the shot if:

- The atmosphere is casual and relaxed.
- You can be discreet and use available light.
- You're friends with the owner or the chef.
- You're dining between 3 and 5 in the afternoon, when restaurants are at their slowest, or the place is nearly empty.

WHAT'S YOUR STYLE?

A photograph of a glass of red pomegranate sorbet topped with pomegranate seeds, with another glass and a bottle of pomegranate juice in the background.

In this section we'll break down some of the currently popular styles of food photography and their distinguishing characteristics. These are loose groupings—every photographer has a slightly different approach and there are no hard and fast rules.

Think of these styles as jumping off points. As with all kinds of photography, you should experiment with lots of different techniques and see which elements of a shot are the most compelling to you. The more you shoot, the more you will evolve a style that is subtly unique. Whether it's a particular angle or color palette, a certain depth of field or subject matter, you will eventually gravitate towards the style that is most compelling for you and that captures the allure of a dish in a way that speaks to you.

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

It helps to spend a little time thinking about what kind of shot you want to get. The style informs all kinds of important choices: the color palette of the backgrounds and props like dishes and placemats, the angle and temperature of the light, the depth of field and so on. If you know ahead of time that you want to create a series of images for a blog or cookbook, then thinking about the overall look will help you make consistent choices about the lighting, styling and other elements of each shot.



Product

Product-style shots are typically on white backgrounds (called “sweeps”) or on a glossy white surface to show some reflection. The lighting is artificial, very even and the image has minimal shadows. The arrangement or styling is clean, careful and straightforward. Think of food as it might appear in a textbook, these shots are more about informing and educating than tantalizing.

Documentary or photo essay

The documentary or photo essay style is very photojournalistic and works really well if you plan to show the images as a series, such as in a magazine story or slideshow. The documentary look has very little formal styling, instead focusing on the environment “as is”. Sometimes the only “styling” that is done is to remove distracting objects or obstacles to the shot. Shooting with a higher shutter speed will stop action, like hands chopping or the flash of flame in a pan. These images are as much about the people involved and the context around the food as the food itself. Often, whether it’s one shot or several, the photos build a story about what’s happening.



Tableau

We call this style “tableau” to refer to setting a scene. Tableaus show all or a large part of a dish and utilize lots of props—often a place-setting, a drink or other dishes to complement the food and imply a story around it. This is a really popular style for cookbooks, think Martha Stewart’s—there’s typically a very consciously chosen color scheme, diffused lighting and both foreground and background elements. The styling of props and surfaces can range from sleek and modern with bold, bright colors to warm neutral tones and rustic or vintage items, but at both ends of the spectrum the resulting look is very stylized and is precisely orchestrated.



Hero shot

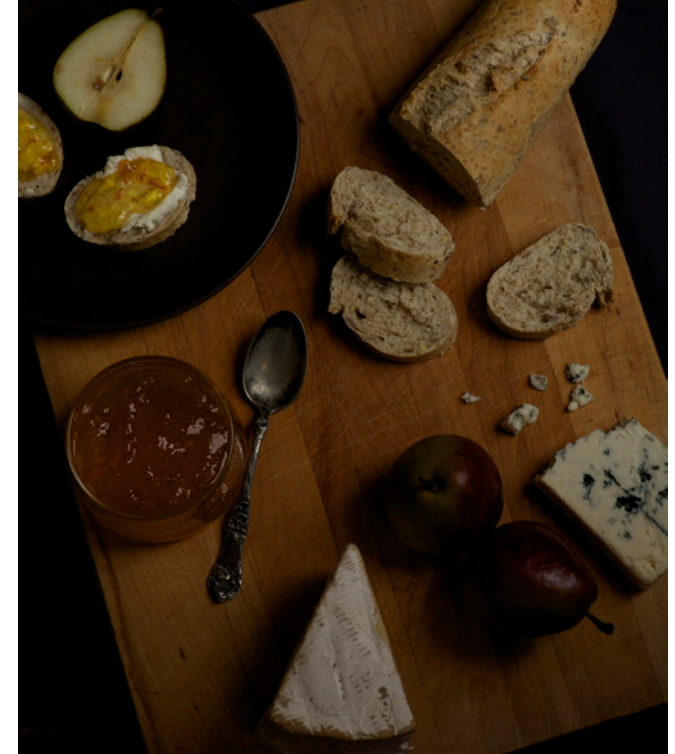
For a hero shot, the food is the star. Hero shots feature very tight framing, shallow depth of field or selective focus. Often the only props are a simple plate or surface. This kind of look is all about creating the most visual interest within the dish itself and not distracting the viewer with peripheral elements. Hero shots feature a strong but diffused light source with a

clear direction, usually from the side or rear of the subject, which provides a nice balance of light and shadow. The camera angle is slightly overhead, angled down. Prop and styling choices are simple or none, with an emphasis on the simple or casual so as not to distract from the food itself. Donna Hay’s cookbooks are great examples of this.



Edgy

The “edgy” look is created using a bright flash which flattens out the subject, heightens saturation and gives it a peripheral shadow. It’s the opposite of the homey, comforting look—bringing to mind harsh artificial lighting and urban settings. To get this effect you’ll need a light source as close to the lens as possible. Ring lights and macro flashes, both originally designed for scientific photography, give a very distinct look, but any artificial light source directed at your subject from very close to your lens will give a similar feel.



Low-key lighting

Low-key lighting is actually a lighting style that can be layered on top of the styles we’ve covered so far. You can create a low-key tableau, a low-key hero shot and low-key documentary-style images. Low-key lighting accentuates contours and controls contrast, with most of the tones falling between mid-tone gray and black. The result is a very painting-like effect with small points of highlight. Low-key images have a lush, dramatic feel and the props are often correspondingly dark, textural and organic. To achieve this look, you’ll need a combination of a small, directional light source and a dark scene or subject.

TIPS FOR BEGINNERS



Shop for your subject

Start with your farmer's market—local, seasonal produce is at peak freshness, color and juiciness and it will be easier to convey that in your final image. Look for colors, shapes and textures that are appealing to your taste and your eyes. Take your time to compare items and look for specimens in peak condition. A blemish here and there looks authentic, but too many and your fruits and vegetables will just look sad.

Start at room temperature with stable foods

Pears quickly brown when cut, salad can wilt in warmer temperatures, hot foods cool—losing steam and sometimes forming an unappetizing skin. When you're just beginning, try foods that don't change much when they sit for long periods of time.

Gather all your gear before you start

Make sure you have everything within arm's reach when you start to shoot. Your camera, lenses, tripod are a given but also have some simple reflectors, a roll of paper towels, extra dishes and props, and a moist sponge or spray bottle of water. Over time you'll develop your own "kit" of favorite tools that you can keep together so they're ready when you need them.

Use what you have

It's easy to get carried away buying unusual dishes and glassware to spice up your food shots, but sometimes you learn more when you start with less. Making that peanut butter and jelly sandwich look delicious on a piece of wax paper might result in a more tantalizing image than a complicated scene with a bunch of dishes and silverware.

Group things in threes

Three is a great number for composing your shots. Limit your props to three (ex: a funky platter, a napkin and a wine glass) and when you're shooting smaller items like cookies, put three on a plate.

Team up with a foodie friend

Food photography loves company. Having a friend on hand as a "second pair of eyes" for the styling and composition of your shot will help you find new and interesting ways of looking at your subject.

Trust your stomach

You'll know when you've nailed the shot when your mouth waters or you get hungry just from looking at your image. When you've made the food look as though it tastes delicious, you'll feel it.

LOOK FOR THE LIGHT

Making food look delicious is all about capturing it in light that makes it look best. When it comes to lighting your food shots, you have two choices: working with available light or using artificial light sources.





AVAILABLE LIGHT

The first option for at-home food photography is to find the best natural light in your home and set up your shot there. What you want is a large light source that stays fairly constant. The ideal scenario is a large window that faces the shady side of your home—in the Northern Hemisphere this would be a north-facing window. Because this window doesn't face direct sunlight, all of the light coming in is reflected so it's soft and even.

Indirect light is soft and beautiful, but it's also a cooler color temperature than direct sunlight, so we'll talk later in this section about how to use white balance to achieve a warmer look which is more flattering for food. The color temperature of the light will also be affected by what it is reflecting off of—so be wary of windows that face colorful surfaces, like a rust-red brick wall or your neighbor's bright pink house next door, or the color of the walls in the room in which you're shooting. The temperature will also fluctuate slightly with the time of day and whether the sky is clear blue or overcast.

Take a walk around your house with your camera and a simple food item, like a block of cheese on a cutting board. Create a similar test shot of this item in different environments. Look at your resulting images and notice where you achieved the best results and the time of day—are there places where the light seems warmer or cooler? Where do you see a clear direction to the light and where is it more diffused?

You might have several places that will work for your temporary “studio” space, but you’ll typically want to avoid direct sunlight or windows near trees with sun filtering in (and changing constantly with every breeze). Once you’ve identified your ideal spot, make sure to minimize artificial light sources in the room by turning off lights or monitors. We’ll discuss using simple reflectors to bounce more light into your shot in the section on shooting.

Adjusting for less-than-ideal available light

Sometimes we just don’t have the ideal conditions when we shoot. Here are some fixes for scenarios in which you don’t have access to a big window facing the shady side of your house.

1. A room with brightly colored walls:

Light that bounces off of the bright blue walls in your kitchen will give your shot a blue overtone. One way to combat this is to hang up a white sheet in front of the colorful wall. If you can’t block the color for some reason, you’ll definitely want to do test shots using a gray card that you can then use to calibrate the color of your final image.

2. Direct sunlight: If you want to work near a window that’s getting a lot of direct sunlight, you’ll want to find a way to diffuse it. You can do this by putting up some thin, white fabric such as a cotton gauze or sheets of tracing paper. You can also find static-cling window film that will allow you to temporarily “frost” the window.

3. At night: If you’re shooting at night, then you’ve lost the only source of natural light there is—the sun. Be prepared to work with artificial lighting (we cover some simple set-ups in the next section) or to adjust for the color temperature of whichever light source you have available.

SIMPLE ARTIFICIAL LIGHTING

A basic lighting set-up gives you a lot more flexibility as to where and when you shoot your food. For less than \$100 U.S. you can buy a kit that comes with daylight-balanced fluorescent lights and a light bank which diffuses the light even more.

A light bank that is 20 to 40 inches square will be plenty for a simple tabletop scene. This kind of lighting set-up is perfect for food photography because it works best when very close to the subject.



LIGHTING ON LOCATION

When you're out and about, while you have much less control over the direction and quality of light there are a few things you can do to set yourself up for a great shot:

- Look for somewhere to place your subject where it's bathed in diffused, indirect light.
- Use a nearby white surface or improvised reflectors to bounce light into your shot.
- Experiment with fill flash if your subject is in direct sunlight with deep shadows. Using your camera's flash exposure compensation setting, you can purposefully under-power your flash's output to fill in just the darkest areas.

Low light

If you're in a dark restaurant or bar, you might play around with the kind of "edgy" look using an on-camera flash. If you have a tripod or can brace yourself against something sturdy, you can shoot successfully in lower light using a high ISO setting and a wider aperture (lower f-stop). This is great for shooting twilight picnics or when you're on the farm as the sun sets. If you don't have full manual controls, using exposure compensation settings can help you fine tune the exposure when light is low.



SIMPLE PROPPING

If the food is the star, props are the supporting cast—the surfaces, backgrounds, dishes and other accents play a number of important supporting roles in a great food shot. Props can add color, texture and shape that accentuate the dish and scene you are shooting. They help frame the food, provide a contrasting background, or even give liquids and soft foods shape, height and structure.

To get a feel for the types of props and surfaces you might want to use, spend some time looking through your favorite food magazines. Clip out or make notes about the color combinations, shapes and textures that appeal to you and the kind of foods you like to shoot.

TWO WAYS OF APPROACHING PROPS

When it comes to props, the variables for color, shape and texture are truly endless. We find it useful to take one of two simple approaches to selecting props for your shot: **blend or contrast**.

1. Blend

A “blend” approach to propping is one in which the non-food elements in your shot play a very quiet, background role. By blending in with the food or receding into the background, propping in this way can give your subject structure and dimension without overpowering it.

Color

If you’re taking a blend approach to color, the props you choose will be inspired by the colors within the food itself. This is matching your color choices to the colors in the dish, using analogous colors—ones that are near each other on the color wheel—or even simply using all warm or all cool colors according to the dish.

Shape and texture

The blend approach to shape and texture is to echo the shapes and textures present in your food. For example, displaying a rustic stew in a cast-iron pot or simple ramekin on top of weathered wood or torn newspaper—there’s an aesthetic match between subject and prop, as opposed to putting the same stew in a very modern-looking dish.



2. Contrast

Another way to approach props is to use them to help your subject “pop”. You can use colors, shades of the same color, or even textures to help your dish stand out through contrast.

Color

As you might have guessed, this approach takes the opposite tack. Instead of choosing colors that coordinate with those in your food, look for a color scheme that “pops”. So if you’re shooting a blueberry smoothie that is cool and light purple, you might find a pale yellow or orange backdrop or accent. You might tie that color into the shot by garnishing your smoothie with a twist of orange rind.

Shape and texture

To contrast shape and texture, think of unexpected combinations.

A homey mac and cheese in a sleek, sophisticated angled bowl and an elegant micro-green garnish. Splashes, crumbs or drips against otherwise sleek clean lines, or unusual serving ideas—like spaghetti and meatballs in a tall parfait glass.



Mix and match your approaches

Using blend and contrast as your principles, what happens if you blend the colors but contrast the shapes? If you contrast textures and colors but blend the shapes? Thinking about which items blend and which contrast ahead of time, you can have some items in both categories on hand to experiment with. Some combinations might look a little weird, but many will be surprising, playful and create visual interest. Be willing to experiment and see what happens.

Stack your lights and darks

If you study those food magazines a bit more, you might start to see a pattern: a dark chocolate cake on a white cake stand on a dark slate counter top. Each layer of color stands out from the next. There are exceptions of course, especially in images that use low key lighting in which the contrast is very low, but normally you will get good results by stacking a light against a dark and so on.

Be conscious of color

Colors have a big impact on each other when they're side by side and will look different depending on the lighting. Do a test shot using a gray card with each new exposure setting to make sure you can color balance all of your shots, especially if you're doing a series and repeat surfaces and props. This way, if that blue tablecloth you're using starts to look more green as the afternoon light changes, you can re-balance each shot to the neutral gray of the card.

Choosing a basic palette for your shots is a great way to make them look consistent. This will help guide you in sourcing and selecting your props for a shoot. This great tool from Adobe makes it easy to explore different color combinations: kuler.adobe.com

SOURCING PROPS

Props don't have to be expensive—you can use just about anything to add color, shape and texture. You probably have plenty to start with in your own kitchen. You can also find interesting surfaces in your backyard (slabs of wood), in your closet (sheets, napkins, tablecloths) and at garage sales and thrift stores.

Surfaces

Surfaces are basically the canvas for the rest of your shot, and they can be just about anything. You can set a sheet of plywood on a couple of sawhorses and cover it with a couple of yards of inexpensive fabric, burlap or even brown kraft paper for a rustic look. If you keep your eye out at hardware stores and garage sales, you might find interesting pieces of stone, weathered wood, slate, stretches of formica countertop and even metal that you can use in your shots. Having a range of sizes is good—2 x 3 feet is a good start, 4 x 5 feet will be plenty for most shots.

Textiles and papers

A good stash of fabrics is one of the best things to have on hand when you're propping a shoot. They're inexpensive, can add color to a surface or be hung in the background of a shot. They add texture and are easy to layer on top of each other.

Placemats, napkins and tablecloths can be found inexpensively at department, discount and thrift stores—look for clearance textiles. IKEA is also a great source for fun and interesting patterns, offering fabric by the yard in addition to the typical kitchen textiles like tea towels and linens. Quilting stores offer a myriad of fun patterns to add a little more personality to your shot. If you can, store them rolled when possible to minimize the ironing you'll need to do.

Paper can also double as table surface and background—newsprint, wrapping papers and art papers all work. Parchment, wax paper and craft papers can also add interesting texture and lines to a shot when softly crumpled and used on top of or in lieu of plates.



Food as props

The food itself is often a great place to start when it comes to prop. You can have the simplest backdrop imaginable and create a lot of visual interest with a sprig of rosemary, a wedge of lemon or a little dish of salt off to one side.

Here are some ideas for using food as prop:

- The raw or whole form of an ingredient that's used in the dish. Examples: ginger root, potatoes, whole carrots, berries.
- Additional quantities of the garnish used. Example: bunches of parsley or other herbs, small dishes of salt or olive oil, whole lemons or limes.
- The same dish as the one you're shooting off to the side or in soft focus in the background.
- The larger dish that your main dish is taken from. Examples: A single serving of a casserole in the foreground, the rest of the casserole used in the background.
- For baked goods, dishes of flour, sugar and sticks of butter make great props.



Dishes, glasses and utensils

As you do more food shots at home, you'll begin to become aware of dishes, utensils and glassware you'd like to add to your collection. Start with what you have and see if you like using your everyday dishes, and look for inexpensive ones at thrift stores, garage sales and in clearance sections. Restaurant supply stores are also great for inspiration and unusual items.



Here are some ideas of props you might use, depending on your style:

- Different sizes of Mason jars
- Individual serving dishes and ramekins
- Very small bowls that can hold a pinch of herbs, a condiment or salt
- Bottles of various shapes
- Pitchers of different sizes—good for milk, lemonade, syrups
- Cutting boards—bamboo, oak, butcher block, new, weathered
- Different shapes of plates—square, oblong, other
- Wine and beer glasses specific to the varietal or style of beer
- Utensils with interesting handles, vintage or antique

People as props

Finally, adding a human element to the shot is a type of propping. Using people as a compositional element instead of the main subject is a popular way to frame the food and give it some context. Hands holding a dish, making food or digging in with a fork or other utensils can give the shot an element of immediacy and motion.

GET SET

Our recipe for a tabletop food shoot

1. Choose your subject. Prep your dish and if you can, make two. If using ingredients like whole vegetables, shop for the best-looking specimens of your subject you can find. Buy extra ingredients to use as garnish and props.
2. Gather all your props and materials and have them handy when you're going to shoot. Make sure dishes and glasses are clean and spot-free, and textiles are ironed so you don't lose time if you want to add them to the shot.
3. Set up your surface and background (if using) near your best light source, considering which direction you want your light to come from.
4. Set up your tripod and camera roughly where you think they should be.
5. Place any props or stable items (food that won't melt or discolor or otherwise deteriorate) on your set, and adjust so they're in-frame and roughly the composition you're looking for. If you're not using the food yet, use crumpled paper as a stand-in for composition and focus.
6. With a tabletop shoot, shutter speed is not as critical as depth of field. Either use aperture priority or manual settings and try a few sample shots with different apertures to look at the difference in depth of field you get and see what works for that shot.
7. Adjust your lighting. Experiment with some reflectors—30x40 inch white foam core boards work well—and try reflecting light back onto the set to enhance the shot. If you have mini-blinds, you can use them to tilt light towards or away from your set. You're experimenting to find the amount of contrast and the direction of the light that works best.
8. Plate and style your final food.
9. Shoot your gray card for white balance, then shoot several exposures of this composition.
10. Change up your props and styling to try different looks and compositions, shooting a few different exposures for each new combination. Make sure to use your gray card before each new set-up.
11. Adjust the angle and height of your camera and try different lenses to further experiment with the composition.



PICK YOUR LIGHT

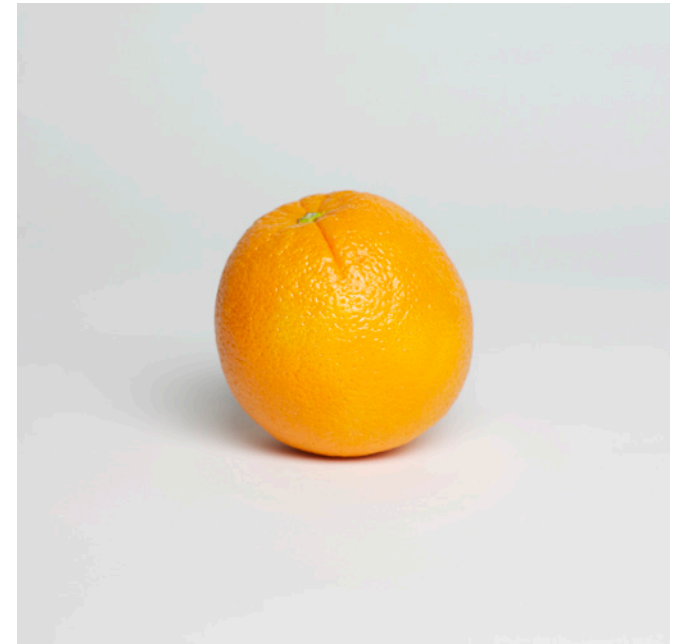
Direction

The first consideration when you're setting up your photo is your light source and the direction of light that you want for your shot. If you're shooting with available window light, you might consider whether you want direct sunlight or indirect, diffused light. The direction of light and the intensity will have a lot to do with the final look and feel of your image.

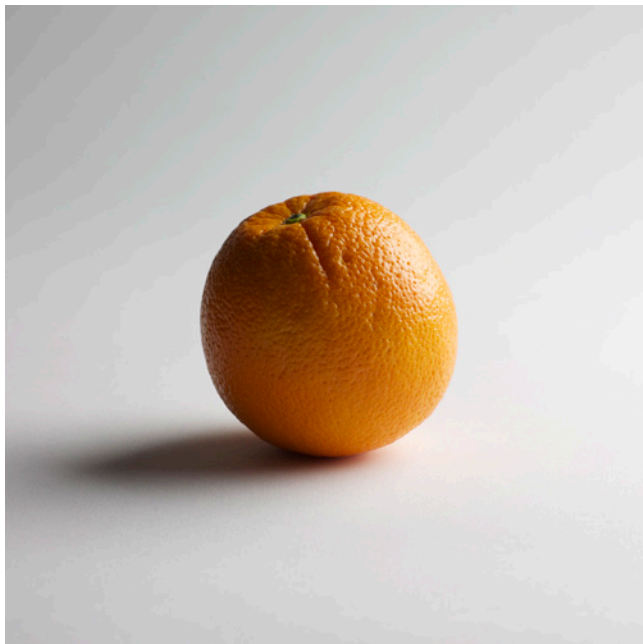
With available or natural light, your challenge will be to get the look you want despite whatever is happening with the weather. Artificial lighting, such as the light kit we recommended earlier, gives you more control over the specific direction and consistency of light.



Large soft light source, [2' x 3'], from the right.



Large soft source, front lighting, source next to lens.



Large soft source, backlighting from right rear side.



Small specular source from left.

Direct sunlight can give you beautiful results, but keep in mind that things like passing clouds, filtering through leaves that blow in the breeze and other factors you can't control means the light shifts frequently and fast. This series of images was created in a 10-minute period, with quickly shifting light conditions. In this kind of setting, you'll need to feel comfortable adjusting your camera settings quickly—in this instance the shutter speed was used to compensate for more or less available light.



Use reflectors

Reflectors help you control the way light interacts with your subject. You can buy basic professional reflectors that have metallic gold and silver surfaces for less than \$50 U.S., or simply pick up a sheet or two of white foam core board at a local craft supply store. Hold the reflector near your food scene, and move it around the periphery—watch closely for how the highlights and shadows shift with this movement. It can be helpful to have a friend hold the reflector in place once you've found an angle that you like—or you can clamp them to photo stands if you have them.



Size and softness

Generally, the larger the light source the more the light will essentially wrap around and reflect back towards your subject. The larger the light source the softer and more evenly lit your food will look. When you're dealing with a smaller light source, it's the opposite—a small light will pick out highlights in its path. By narrowing the path of a light source using flags (see Basic Gear), you can achieve a very controlled, Chiarascuro effect with your light.

ANGLES

Now you have chosen where your light is coming from, you can set up your camera accordingly. At this point you want to consider the angle of your lens to your subject that will create the look you want—the angle will also determine the final settings for your exposure. If you can, use a tripod so that you can leave your camera in one place while you adjust other variables.

Overhead

- If you use a 50mm lens, you will need to be a few feet above your subject to shoot at this angle. You may need to shoot on a lower than normal surface to make this comfortable.
- A 50mm lens works well for this angle.
- Shoot using the aperture priority setting on your camera, starting at an aperture of f5.6, which will allow you to keep much of the picture plane in focus.



Eye level

An 85mm lens is helpful here, as the compression of the image helps isolate the subject and narrows the angle of view which reduces the amount of background you need. It gives your subject a lot of impact since we're used to seeing our food and drink from above. It's great for times when you don't need to see down into a dish—it's great for drinks because their transparency allows you to get enough information.



Downward 30-45° angle

This angle is a good compromise between the direct-overhead view and the eye-level view. It's popular for food photography because we can see into the bowl, casserole or other vessel and still see some of the surrounding context. For the 45-degree angle, you may want a little more depth of field if you want to carry focus from the front of the dish to whatever is inside or on top—for example you want to see all of the details in a bowl of soup but also see a piece of bread that is placed in front of it.

ROUGH COMPOSITION

Composition is all about creating a path for the eye to follow and is one of the most important elements in creating a successful image. It's important that the positive and negative spaces in your image create a feeling of harmony and balance. If your shot isn't feeling "quite right" usually there's a way to make the composition stronger.

Ways to make your composition more dynamic:



Zig and zag

Lines and shapes within an image that "zig and zag" through the picture plane create a feeling of movement. Generally, you can achieve this effect by positioning props, dishes and edges at angles to the sides of your shot.



Rule of thirds

Dividing your image into thirds both horizontally and vertically creates a grid, and when you put focal points of your image at the intersection of these gridlines you create interest and asymmetrical balance. Rather than giving the eye something to rest on in the center, which is static, putting the points of interest at the thirds gives the eye a dynamic path to follow.



Golden spiral

The golden spiral is a compositional tool based on the golden ratio, a mathematical principle that originated in ancient Greece to describe aesthetically pleasing proportions. Basically, the spiral is a path of eye movement throughout an image.



Breaking the edges

A simple way to create movement for the eye is to intersect the edge of the frame. You can use this for the same item, even two plates of the same dish, with one offset to the rear of the other, less sharp. This gives the feeling of depth and creates a pattern that is pleasing to look at.

DEPTH OF FIELD

Now that you have a rough idea of your composition, think about the depth of field that will work best for this scene at this angle. You're essentially creating a mini-landscape out of the food and props, and depending on your desired end result you'll want different areas to remain crisply focused while other parts can soften. Your aperture setting controls your depth of field. The larger the aperture (lower f-stop number), the shallower the depth of field.

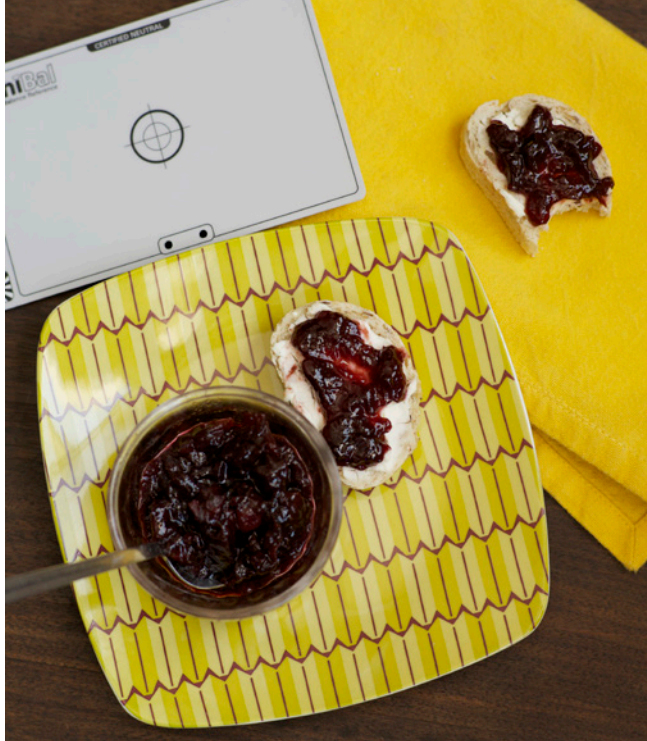
A shallow depth of field can create a pleasantly soft background. This creates something called "selective focus", where one small part of an image is crisp while the rest is soft. This is a popular look in a lot of food photography. Because this effect requires a large aperture, which lets in more light, you can correct your exposure by adjusting your ISO and shutter speed. We suggest that you choose the depth of field that you like for each shot, and then use aperture priority mode so that your camera adjusts your exposure while preserving the aperture setting you've selected.



ADJUST EXPOSURE

If your image is too dark when you shoot using the aperture you've selected, then you'll need to use a slower shutter speed. This will let in more light. If the images are overexposed at your aperture setting, you can increase the shutter speed to reduce light coming into the lens. If you are shooting at a shutter speed slower than 1/60th of a second (60) then you'll need to use a tripod to avoid the slight movement that we make just by holding the camera.

You can also adjust your exposure by changing your ISO. A higher ISO will "stretch" the amount of light you have coming into your lens to create a lighter image. The trade off to increasing your camera's ISO setting is that it will also increase the amount of noise or graininess in the image and you will lose saturation of the colors in your image. There are some instances—shooting without a tripod in low light, for example—when your only option will be to increase your ISO, but whenever possible, keep your ISO on 100 or 200 to keep noise to a minimum and color saturation at its best.



WHITE BALANCE

The color of our food has a large impact on how appetizing it looks, so it's important to get the color right. This is why white balance is so important. In most situations, your camera's auto white balance will be sufficient. But you can fine tune it more accurately using the custom white balance setting. Refer to your camera's manual for instructions on using "custom white balance". Basically what this setting will allow you to do, when your camera angle and lighting are the way you want them, is to take a shot of a gray card filling the frame and use it to set the right white balance.





PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD

Delicious food looks delicious, right? Unfortunately it's not always that simple. Making sure that food looks as good as it tastes is what food styling is all about. Food styling can also help you create different and more interesting compositions by changing the dimensions, appearance or arrangement of the food.

On a professional shoot, a stylist will work closely with the photographer to add, remove or adjust the elements of the food and props as the technical aspects of the exposure—composition, lighting style, depth of field—change.

When shooting on your own, you get to play both roles. Once you have set up your initial shot and created a few exposures, now is a good time to experiment with styling.



Here are some ways that you can change up your shot to get you started:

- Change colors and patterns in your props or surfaces: if you're using cool colors, try warm ones or add a contrasting accent color.
- Change your background texture, color or light it differently.
- Rearrange the elements in your shot using a different compositional principle (rule of thirds, golden spiral, etc.) or simply change the angle of the elements to each other.
- Add a drink, salad or other side dish to your tableau.
- Show your dish with a bite taken out of it.
- Show a hand holding a fork with some of the food on it.
- Show hands holding the dish (works well when shooting from overhead).
- Shoot while sprinkling salt, herbs or pouring a sauce onto the food.

FOOD STYLING BASICS

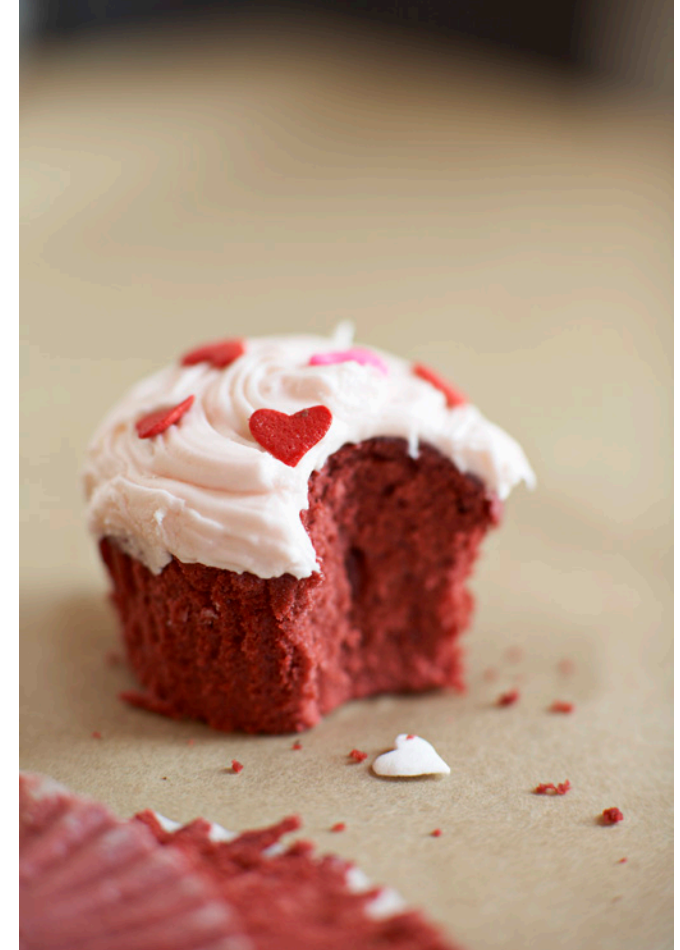
Styling begins at the grocery store

If you're preparing the food for your shot, then as you shop for ingredients be on the lookout for particularly appealing ingredients. It's always a good idea to use ingredients which are in season because they will be at their most colorful (and flavorsome). Buy more than you'll need, because extra food can be used as props. For example with a strawberry smoothie, you could also have a bowl of strawberries in the shot and some for the garnish.



Look for ways to give food dimension and height

Once you've set up a few food shots, you start to realize that one of the most challenging things is to vary the height and dimension of the items in the photo. Shooting food on a single surface, like a table, creates a compositional challenge. To vary your composition, it helps to have different elements in your shot at different heights. You can create levels of background and foreground by resting food or dishes on small blocks hidden underneath, or by using props like cake stands to add height. Another way to do this is to stack or pile foods—think of a plate of cookies piled high—or place objects underneath the food to create dimension. A bottle of ketchup, a pitcher of tea or a beverage placed in the background can also help draw the eye upward in your image.



Make a beautiful mess

Drips, crumbs and spills give a sense of motion and immediacy to your shot, so have a large enough quantity of the food you're shooting so you can mess some of it up by crumbling, melting, or in some other way destroying it. If you're cooking, you can easily incorporate some of the detritus—citrus peels, scraps of dough—into the scene. It's best if the mess looks fresh—no one wants to see dried-up drips or crusted dough stuck to a spoon.

Add moisture

Certain types of foods—like a steak, Thanksgiving turkey or a slice of fruit—really need a sheen of moisture to look appetizing. This is hard to maintain if you're shooting for a long time. One trick is to keep an atomizer of water nearby so you can give your food a spritz, it's also helpful to brush it lightly with oil to add a bit of glossiness.

Create surface interest

Sometimes you look at your photo and there's just too much of one color or texture. It's great to think ahead so you can have items on hand to add contrast and visual variety. Here are some ideas:

- Sprinkles or colored sugars
- Sprinklings of cinnamon, red pepper flakes, pepper, salt, etc
- Syrups
- Sauces
- Crumbles of bacon or cheese
- Minced fresh herbs
- Edible flowers
- Curls of chocolate or citrus zest

Timing tricky foods

When you're working with foods that have a timing element it's all about planning. You want to have everything set up in advance and your settings ready to go so that when the food takes the stage you can work quickly. It can also help to have a friend assist you so you can focus on getting the right exposure instead of pouring, scooping or otherwise handling the food. These are foods that will take special preparation so you can get the shot you want.

Frozen foods melt

Ice cream actually can look great when it's a bit melted, so shoot right from the freezer and then let it sit for a few minutes to get a softer look. Be ready to go with additional garnishes or props, though, since it will go quickly from crisply scooped to soupy mess.

Airy foods deflate

Whipped cream, foams and meringues will begin to lose their height and shape the longer they sit on set. When possible, have extra quantities that you can keep in your refrigerator in case you need backup. Keeping the temperature low in the room where you're shooting is also helpful.

Sauces separate and bleed

Gravies and other sauces can start to lose their sheen and separate. If this happens you might need to start over, re-plating and re-saucing your food. Don't be afraid to wipe the gravy off that steak and start again, reheating your sauce to help it emulsify.

Meats lose their juiciness

Cuts of meat quickly look dry after being on set for awhile. Have a little dish of oil and a brush handy so you can add back some of that succulent sheen.

Foamy or carbonated liquids go flat

Carbonated or sudsy drinks like beer and sodas only give you minutes to shoot them. Be prepared with backup quantities so you can shoot several pours.

Tips for styling drinks

- Remove bubbles from a pour with a Q-tip.
- Use a funnel to fill a glass to avoid splashing up the sides.
- Wait until the last possible second to pour a carbonated drink if you want to capture the foaminess.
- If your carbonated drink has gone flat, sprinkle some salt or sugar into it to get the bubbles going again.
- Add water to dark drinks like red wine, certain fruit juices and colas to make it easier to see their color.

Tips for styling meat

- Use salads or slaws to jazz up otherwise brown foods like steaks and burgers.
- When shooting a stew or chunky soup, use tweezers to bring distinct, identifiable chunks of meat and vegetables to the top. Use garnishes to add some color contrast.



Don't try this at home! *Styling secrets of a pro food shoot*

Here are some secrets that professional food stylists use—if you do decide to try them, make sure you warn unsuspecting onlookers not to sample the food.

Ice cream: scoop when soft, then place in a cooler with dry ice to harden prior to shooting. Alternatively, use vegetable shortening instead of ice cream.

Adding bubbles to drinks: Mix a little Elmer's glue with some water and then use a pipette or eyedropper to blow bubbles into the mixture and spoon the suds into your final beverage.

Fake food: Explore the range of replica fruit, ice, ice cream and simulated ice, frost and water splashes available from Trengrove Studios: www.trengrovestudios.com

BASIC FOOD STYLING KIT

If you plan to shoot food on a regular basis, keeping these tools on hand will make styling on set easier.

- Small funnels, various sizes—helps when pouring liquids into dishes and glasses with minimal splash.
- Eye dropper or pipette for adding or removing liquids.
- Q-tips are handy for removing unwanted air bubbles and mopping up small drips or applying oils.
- Tweezers or chopsticks help you rearrange delicate ingredients and precisely place your garnishes.
- Squeeze bottles allow you to precisely drizzle sauces, condiments and apply ketchup and mustard.
- Disposable gloves are great when you are handling lots of glassware and want to avoid fingerprints.
- Damp cloth and paper towels for wiping edges of dishes and in case of spills.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this mini-guide has given you everything you need to shoot delicious food photos with confidence. As with all kinds of photography, the more you experiment the faster you'll find your own style and the subjects that most inspire you. The principles we've outlined here are meant to be jumping off points for your own explorations, not hard and fast rules. Ultimately great food photography, as with great food, is about appreciating each moment and bringing out the best in your ingredients. Here's to the many delicious moments of shooting ahead of you!



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