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3

Styling and Props

The Art of Presentation

One of the reasons I love food photography is that I truly enjoy styling and crafting the food, and one of the biggest compliments I get from people is that my images made them hungry! When we eat food, all of our senses are at work—we see, smell, touch, and taste the food—but when we look at a photo, we can use our eyes only. Styling food is one way to capture its flavors, aromas, and textures and to communicate them to viewers. Creating an amazing-looking dish is an art, whether you eat it or photograph it, and you can do a lot of little things to enhance the look of the food and (ideally) make people salivate when they view your photographs.

Poring Over the Picture

I added a small plate with a wooden spoon in the background to balance out the scene.

On a trip to Thailand, I discovered a new favorite dish: Khao Soi. It's a spicy, curried noodle dish with tons of spices and aromatics that is traditionally topped with fried noodles. When I got home, I wanted to make the recipe a little bit healthier. So instead of adding fried noodles to the top, I added a handful of micro greens. Not only do they make the dish healthier, they also make it more colorful!

Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 0.5 sec. •
f/5.6 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens



I used a very small bowl to make the elements inside of the bowl look larger.

A piece of white foam board bounces light back in to the side of the dish.

Poring Over the Picture

One thing I love to photograph is any type of pancake or French toast. There is a lot of potential for color, style, and texture, and I find myself photographing (and eating) them quite often! These little pancakes were made with coconut flour, filled with yogurt, and topped with blueberries and huckleberries. The berries add a nice touch of sweetness and color to a healthy breakfast.

I photographed this at eye level to add height to the pancakes.

Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 1/45 sec. •
f/5.6 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens



A small sprig of mint placed on top adds color.

I used white plates and a light tabletop surface to highlight the colors of the food.

Styling Considerations

When we photograph our food, we want it to look beautiful, mouth-watering, and delicious. But there are several issues to consider before you go full speed.

Using a Food Stylist

Food stylists are extremely talented artists, most often with a culinary background. Their job is to make food look fresh and appetizing for the camera, so an understanding of how food acts and behaves is a must. They know all the tricks and techniques to create beautiful-looking dishes and use their skills to make the food look as delicious as it tastes. Does every food photographer need to work with a food stylist? It depends.

If you are the photographer for a big production (one with a large budget or for a high-profile company), having a stylist is a good idea. Even if you have the chops to style the food yourself, doing both the photography and the styling would probably be overwhelming. Hiring a food stylist ensures that your main focus stays where it should be: creating the photographs. Styling food on set is a one- or maybe two-person job, so when you are in an environment where time is limited (or there are several food items to style and photograph), then you are probably better off working with a professional food stylist.

On the other hand, if you're a food blogger or you just want to photograph food for fun, then it's likely you don't have the budget to hire a bona-fide food stylist. In that case, it's up to you to learn how to style your food and present it so that it not only looks appetizing but also looks good on camera. Later in this chapter I will show you some of my favorite tools and techniques that you can use to make food look beautiful all on your own.

Ethical Considerations

When it comes to styling food, there are some ethical restrictions that you must adhere to, mostly when you're photographing food for commercial purposes. The basic guideline is that if you're photographing food for advertisements (such as an ice cream image for a specific brand of ice cream), then you need to photograph the actual product, which in this case would be ice cream. If the advertisement is for a particular brand of ice cream, then you can't photograph fake ice cream and pass it off as the real thing.

But let's say you are hired to photograph sprinkles and toppings that go on top of the ice cream. In this case, the product that is being advertised is *not* the ice cream itself, so you could use fake ice cream because ice cream is, after all, one of the more difficult things to style and photograph. With all that said, I am not a lawyer, so if you find yourself in an unclear situation, it's best to do your own research and also seek legal advice if necessary.

Styled Food vs. Real Food

When you see an advertisement with a photograph of a fast-food hamburger, odds are that a food stylist had a heavy hand in making that hamburger look as juicy, plump, and deliciously messy as it could possibly be. If you go through the drive-through and order that same hamburger, however, you're likely going to be underwhelmed by the looks of the actual food that you receive. Although the beautiful hamburger in the photograph may in fact have been "real" food (with some added stylistic effects), it sure as heck was not *realistic*.

So what exactly is food styling? If you ask me, it has a broad range of definitions. Some people may consider food styling to encompass only the "weird" things that can be done to enhance the look of food, such as using aerosol starch and motor oil on pancakes, or soap bubbles in coffee or on bacon. The reason those types of styling options are popular is because they photograph well, look realistic, and also have a longer shelf life on set. My own definition is much more liberal because I think that we all style our food. Every intentional adjustment you make to your dishes, whether it's for food you're going to eat or to photograph, is styling. When chefs prepare meals at restaurants, they also style their dishes. Presentation is extremely important with food, especially when it's going to be photographed; when you can't smell the food, hear it sizzle, or hold it in your hands, its appearance is everything (Figures 3.1 and 3.2).



Figure 3.1 These images show how using something as simple as a cookie cutter to refine the edges of a small cheesecake can make a huge difference in its appearance. The integrity of the food was not compromised in styling this dish; rather, it was just prepared carefully so that it looked more elegant for the camera.

Photographed with an iPhone 6+



Figure 3.2

To style this dish, I used a cookie cutter to shape the cheesecake and then topped it with pomegranates and candied lemon peel.

Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 2 sec. •
f/5.6 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens

You see, styling food doesn't mean you need to compromise the integrity of the dish and contaminate it with nonfood items in order to create a stunning photograph. To me, nothing is more beautiful than real food, but it still takes a bit of work to make that food look good for a photograph. You can also create your entire dish and do a bit of "editing" to the plate, which can be as basic as taking what is in front of you and moving things around to make it look more appealing.

The way you style and present your food is up to you, and the ultimate purpose of your photograph will also play a role in the presentation. If you run a website that showcases recipes and food, you might want to make your dish look as real as possible and only edit or style it to represent the recipe both truthfully and attractively. Or, if you just love food and want to create beautiful dishes for the love of photography, sneaking in a few "tricks" may not be such a bad thing. There's no right or wrong way to style food; just do what fits the purpose of your photography and your own personal style.

Ensuring Food Quality

When you cook a meal, you want to use quality ingredients to get the best flavors possible, right? When photographing food, you want to make sure that you follow the same principle, while ensuring that the way each ingredient *looks* is just as important as its *flavor*. It's simple, really—find only the most beautiful food to photograph.

Using Fresh Ingredients

The key to achieving a high-quality look for the food in your photographs is to use the freshest ingredients possible. Food doesn't last forever, and its beauty usually dissipates before it spoils or loses flavor. Herbs and veggies sitting in a refrigerator have a limited life span, so make sure you plan your photographs in advance and try to buy your food *the day or the day before* it's photographed.

To ensure that the quality of my food is up to par, I tend to shop only at certain grocery stores and markets. I know that some locations will have, for example, a really great selection of seafood, so I go to one of those stores when I'm shopping for that ingredient. I also like to go to the local farmers market to buy seasonal produce and fruit, and sometimes I'll conceive the look of a dish based on the freshest ingredients I can find while I'm shopping.

I also prefer to use fresh food rather than canned food, especially when it comes to vegetables (I will, from time to time, use frozen vegetables because they hold their shape and color well after being cooked). The guideline I use is that if I can buy it fresh (in the produce section of the grocery store), then I stay away from any canned alternatives. This also gives me a lot more control over the shape, color, size, and texture of the food. I make exceptions to this, of course, such as when I want to use something like canned mandarin oranges or water chestnuts. The bottom line is that if the food looks good enough to photograph, whether it's fresh or comes out of the can, bag, or jar, then go ahead and use it.

Shopping Smartly

When purchasing the ingredients for your dish, you need to be extremely selective. Choosing the most attractive ingredients (also referred to as the *hero* food) is essential to a great-looking dish. It's also a good idea to buy more than you need. (You can always eat the leftovers!) Having more than one of each item gives you options for the look of the ingredient, and it's also insurance in case anything goes wrong with your first pick.

When shopping for ingredients, be aware of how they will be handled when they are scanned at the register. If you have a self-checkout lane, then that's a good option if you are purchasing something fragile or easily altered, such as bread or soft fruit. Otherwise, kindly let the clerk know that you are photographing the food and ask if they can handle it with care. Another option is to find a discarded cardboard box and place the items in there so that they are not unintentionally squished at the bottom of a grocery bag. One of my favorite places to shop for produce is the local farmer's market (**Figure 3.3**). Not only is the food beautiful, I get to do all of the handling myself!

I am also very selective about the ingredients that I choose for my photographs. If I have one particular ingredient that will stand out, such as an artichoke, then I will search through all of the artichokes until I find a few of them that have the right shape and color for the image I want to create. If I am purchasing something in the meat department, I will usually ask for a specific item and will also ask the butcher to handle it with care because I will be photographing it. And, if you don't find what you are looking for, then either find a different ingredient or go to another store. Never compromise the look of an ingredient if you don't have to.



Figure 3.3

I prefer to shop for produce at the local farmer's market. The produce is fresh, and it's easy to find beautiful items to cook with.

Fuji X-T1 • ISO 400 •
1/800 sec. • f/2.8 •
Zeiss Touit 50mm f/2.8

Food Styling Basics

There is no single right (or wrong) way to style food, but there are some things that many food stylists and photographers do to make the food look its best. Before I get into the how, I'll start with the what. For instance, **Figure 3.4** shows some of the gadgets and tools that I use (and you can use) to make it all happen.

Gadgets and Tools

I use a lot of little gadgets and tools when styling food, but many of them are just everyday kitchen utensils. Here is a list of some of the basic tools I use often and wouldn't want to be without:

- **Tweezers:** I use tweezers to place small items (such as mint leaves or sesame seeds) or to reposition things on the plate.
- **Prep bowls and ramekins:** These are really useful for holding garnishes and sauces near your dish or workspace. You can also place them upside down in bowls to add bulk to foods.
- **Plastic spoons:** These are useful for mixing and stirring, as well as for applying things such as sauces, sour cream, or any kind of liquid. Because they are extremely light and thin, I find that they give me more control than metal spoons.
- **Paper towels:** I always have a full roll of paper towels sitting near my workspace when styling food. They're handy for cleaning drips on plates, and if you're styling food in the spot where it will be photographed, you can place them under the plate to catch accidental spills.
- **Water:** I use canned water to add a fine mist to salad, fresh fruits and vegetables, and the like.
- **Grater and peeler:** These are great for preparing garnishes, such as Parmesan cheese or lemon zest.



Figure 3.4
This is a sampling of some of the tools I use when styling food.

Canon 5D Mark III • ISO 400 • 1/10 sec. • f/6.7 • Canon 100mm f/2.8L Macro lens

Using Stand-ins

If you're familiar with movie or television production, you know that the lights need to be set for each scene, which usually takes quite a while. So, instead of having the main actors sit or stand on the set while the lights are being moved and measured, *stand-ins* (people who have a similar look to the actors) take their place so the actors can relax, have their makeup fixed, memorize their lines, or simply stay in character. A similar method is used in food photography.

When you style and photograph food, you usually have to work quickly so the food stays fresh. All food has a limited life span, which is even more apparent when you're photographing it. Shiny food loses its luster, oils and sauces soak into cooked meats, and foods such as herbs and lettuce wilt away quickly (**Figure 3.5**).

When I photograph food, I always use a stand-in. I do this so I can set the lights, composition, props, and so on, ahead of time and prevent the food from losing its luster by the time everything is ready to go. In fact, I don't even do any cooking, styling, or preparations until the light is ready. That way, once the food is prepared, I can drop it into place, make a few minor adjustments, and start photographing within seconds of the food being placed on set.

A stand-in can be anything. An extra piece of food that doesn't require cooking (such as a hamburger bun) usually makes a good stand-in. Or you could use something totally random that has similar tonal qualities as your prepared food will have (**Figures 3.6 and 3.7**). Try to use something that is the same shape, width, or height so you can set your composition in the camera (this is especially handy if you are using a tripod).



Figure 3.5

This sequence shows how much a simple herb such as basil can change over the course of one hour—it goes from being crisp and green to dull and wilting.

Canon 5D Mark III • ISO 50 • 1/6 sec. • *f*/6.7 • Canon 24–70mm *f*/2.8L lens

Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 1/4 sec. •
f/5.6 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens



Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 0.3 sec. •
f/5.6 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens



Figure 3.6
I used a crumpled-up napkin as a stand-in for the yogurt in this photograph.



Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 0.3 sec. •
f/6.7 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens



Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 0.7 sec. •
f/6.7 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro len

Figure 3.7
A stand-in doesn't need to look identical to your actual food. In this case, I placed a simple knitted cloth on the plate as a stand-in for the pasta.

Maintaining a Clean Environment

A perfectly prepared photo setup can easily be tainted with an unwanted stain. When I'm preparing a plate of food for a photograph, therefore, I try to do most of the work away from the location where it will be photographed, usually on my kitchen counter or at a table that sits nearby. This way I can get close to the dish as well as keep all my tools, food, and garnishes nearby, and it doesn't matter if I make a mess.

Sometimes, however, you won't be able to do all of your plating off set and will need to style the dish as it sits in front of the camera. In those instances, you need to be careful to protect the environment from drips and spills. The simplest solution is to place a few paper towels around the area (**Figure 3.8**), which will likely save you from having to quickly re-create your scene. This also allows you to focus on the look of the food without worrying about making any messes.

Styling from Camera View

When photographing food, the only area of the food that you need to pay attention to is the side that's being photographed. It's always best to put yourself in the position of the camera and style the food from that perspective. If you're photographing the front part of a dish, it doesn't matter what the back of the dish looks like, so long as it's not in the image.

Another useful way to style food (and set up the overall scene, too) is to use the Live View feature on your camera (most of the newer DSLR models have this as a standard feature). Being able to watch what is happening in your scene with Live View makes it so easy to place things in the scene, add garnishes, and even just frame and compose the photo. The downside to Live View is that it drains the battery more quickly than just looking through the viewfinder. It also will sometimes cause interference when you're firing strobes and flashes wirelessly. If you run into that problem, you'll need to turn off Live View temporarily to trip the shutter and create the photograph.

Following Your Instincts

Overall, much of styling food involves using what works for your situation. There is no one way to do everything, and depending on how the food was prepared or how you want it to look, you'll probably have to get creative.

You also need to make sure that you are deliberate in your approach to creating your food and developing its overall appearance. When I style food, everything that ends up in the photograph is there because I want it to be there. A crumb that looks like it landed naturally on the plate may have been placed with small tweezers, or it crumbled off on its own and I just liked the way it landed. Often it's the things that may be considered small and unimportant that can actually take a photo from average to amazing.



Figure 3.8
When working with messy food, such as this berry bruschetta topping, place paper towels over the table's surface to prevent drips and stains.

Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 1/4 sec. •
f/6.7 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens

Figure 3.9

By placing a small upside-down cup in the bowl, I was able to “float” the asparagus tips on the top of the soup. Without the small cup, they would have sunk to the bottom of the soup bowl.



Styling Tips and Tricks

There are a lot of techniques you can use when styling your food to enhance its appearance. Here are some simple tips and tricks to help you make your food look great when it’s being photographed.

Adding Bulk

When you place food in a bowl, often it will sink to the bottom and lie flat (especially with foods like pasta and chunky soups or stews). You can bulk up food in a bowl in a few ways. The first is to set a dome of Styrofoam in the bottom of the bowl and then place the food on top of it. This usually works best for slippery foods that won’t stay put, but one major downside is that if you’re planning to eat the food after it’s photographed, you’re out of luck (unless you want little bits of plastic foam in your meal). Another



method is to place a smaller bowl, such as a prep dish or small ramekin, upside down in the bowl and then pile the food on top (**Figure 3.9**). This keeps your food fresh and does a really good job of adding a little extra bulk. For soups, another good trick is to use clear glass stones at the bottom of the bowl to help bring any added items up to the surface, such as noodles or vegetables.

If you're working with food that is flat, especially when you are stacking more than one item on top of the other, adding something between the layers can help make the food look much more full. In **Figure 3.10**, I placed two tortillas on top of each other before adding the carnitas meat and garnish. However, just having the tortillas lie flat on top of each other made them look lifeless. So I added torn-up tortillas between the layers to help bring up the front edges and make them look more appealing. You can use anything you like between your food to give it more life—cardboard, toothpicks, or even folded-up paper towels.



Figure 3.10

I added torn-up tortilla pieces between the two tortillas to add bulk and texture to the food.

Canon 5D Mark III • ISO 100 • 0.5 sec. • *f*/5.6 • Canon 100mm *f*/2.8L Macro lens

Using Garnishes

Adding a touch of color to a dish can do wonders, and I often do this by adding garnishes, such as fresh basil, cilantro, or any herb that is appropriate to the food and its ingredients (Figure 3.11). Just as adding herbs and spices will enhance flavor when cooking the food, adding them to your photograph can make it look livelier and more appealing.

This technique also helps create your point of focus. By adding a bright, colorful food item to the dish, you will draw the viewer's eyes to that location. And it's the perfect spot to focus on with your camera. (Chapter 5 offers more suggestions on focus and composition.)

Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 1/6 sec. •
f/8 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens



Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 1/4 sec. •
f/8 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens



Figure 3.11

Adding green onions and cilantro as a garnish helped give this photo a boost of color.

A Little Mess Is Okay

One thing to keep in mind when you're creating your dishes is that they don't always have to look perfect. A few crumbs or drips to the side of the food, or even a dish with a fork already dug into the food, makes the food look more real and attainable to the viewer (**Figure 3.12**). It can also add balance to the composition of the photograph. A little mess is okay; just pay attention to your crumb or drip placement so that it still looks appealing and delicious.

Figure 3.12
Adding a little bit of mess, like these drips coming off of the peaches, helps add realism to the photo.

Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 3 sec. •
f/5.6 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens



Real Ice vs. Fake Ice

Tip

When adding ice to a glass, be sure to fill it all the way up to the top so that the ice is peeking slightly above the liquid's surface. Real ice floats, but fake ice does not, so filling to the brim is a "sneaky" way to make it look more realistic!

I use fake ice in many of my photographs. In fact, any time there's a water glass in the frame (usually in the out-of-focus background), I've probably added some fake ice to the cup, usually without even adding water (**Figure 3.13**). I use fake ice so frequently because real ice has two major flaws: It melts quickly, and it can look very foggy when photographed. Fake ice, on the other hand, will hold its shape and stay shiny and crystal clear (**Figure 3.14**).



Figure 3.13

For this plate of pasta, I wanted to add something to the background. So I filled a glass with fake ice and placed it in the top left corner of the frame, knowing that it would end up blurred and slightly unrecognizable. The ice adds depth and a bit of sparkle to the background without being overpowering.

.....
Canon 5D Mark III • ISO 100 • 0.7 sec. • $f/4.5$ •
Canon 100mm $f/2.8L$ Macro lens



Figure 3.14

These two images show the difference between fake ice (left) and real ice (right).

.....
Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 1/10 sec. •
 $f/8$ • Canon 100mm
 $f/2.8L$ Macro lens

Although there are places that create custom, realistic (and expensive) acrylic ice cubes, the ice I use is relatively inexpensive and purchased through an online retailer. If you are creating photographs that require ice and you don't have a big budget, this is probably a good option for you as well.

Adding Movement

Another way to add to your image is to give the photo a sense of movement. You could do this by photographing the act of drizzling syrup onto French toast, sprinkling cheese over pasta, or even adding a utensil that is taking a scoop from the food itself (Figure 3.15). One of my tricks for adding movement is to use a Manfrotto Magic Arm (www.manfrotto.com). By placing a spoon or fork in the jaws of this adjustable arm-like clamp I can mimic the act of someone taking a bite (Figures 3.16 and 3.17). The Magic Arm's flexibility allows me a lot of control when styling and framing my scene while keeping the utensil firmly in place (Figure 3.18).



Figure 3.15
Drizzling syrup over French toast is a great way to add movement to an image.

Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 400 • 1/125 sec. •
f/5.6 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens



Figure 3.16

I used a Manfrotto Magic Arm to set up this shot as if someone was holding a fork off camera.

Canon 5D Mark II •
ISO 100 • 0.3 sec. •
f/8 • Canon 70–200mm
f/4L IS lens



Figure 3.17

The Manfrotto Magic Arm was used to create this image of honey dripping from a honey dipper.

Canon 5D Mark III •
ISO 100 • 1/4 sec. •
f/5.6 • Canon 100mm
f/2.8L Macro lens



Figure 3.18

This is a behind-the-scenes image showing how the Manfrotto Magic Arm was positioned to create the image in Figure 3.17.

Fuji X-T1 • ISO 2500 •
1/125 sec. • f/3.6 •
Zeiss Touit 32mm
f/1.8 lens