

## How to photograph food



### Introduction

The job of a food photographer is to make food "look" as delicious as the food taste. To bring out the best elements; texture, freshness, zest, color and richness. Exceptional food photography may convey feelings of warmth, fond memories, inspiration , and of course, hunger! They can help a restaurant bring in lots of new customers or boost the sales of a food magazine. Capturing that perfect food image requires "out of the box" creativity, a great deal of technical expertise, a good sense of style, the right equipment and great deal of experience. Oh, and of course like any other work of art....passion!

Here is how I approach a food photography shoot.



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### Tips on Food Photography



## Preparation

Like any professional photo shoot, there must be a lot of planning prior to getting to the location and setting up the camera. Food photography should be a team effort between the photographer, chef, manager, stylist anyone else involved in the production. This will ensure that a clear agenda is set in place, allowing for the photographer to concentrate on producing mouth-watering images.

I like to first have a conversation about how the food photography will be used and what type of "look" the client envisions. Food is shot differently for web promotion then it is for a cookbook layout, print or marketing materials which will require graphics and text being added in post production. The "look" of the food photography can vary from hard mood lighting to soft warm light. The way the shot is composed can vary as well; from tight close-ups to wider shots where the props and food are in focus. Each plate requires a different approach. The creative possibilities are endless!

Once there is agreement on how the photos will look, it's then the job of the stylist to gather the props that will be used for the shoot. The types of plates, bowls and dishes including color schemes, table cloths, textures, background items etc. If a restaurant chef is going to be doing the cooking as opposed to the food stylist, then it's important to talk about how the food needs to be prepared for the shot as well. Sometimes meats for example need to be undercooked; giving a more colorful and fresh look while keeping them from drying out.

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## How to photograph food

This might seem like an easy task. Food doesn't move and you have time to "work the shot" unlike taking photos of kids, sports or the family dog. Well....unfortunately, this is not the case. If you are going to try and make the food sparkle and look amazing, it will require a lot of work. Food photography is one of the most difficult tasks in commercial photography. I learn new techniques every time I shoot and have begun to craft my style over time. But it took a long time to learn how to not only shoot food with interesting composition, but also how to light it. That's why most of the food photography you see on restaurant web sites looks so dull and lifeless; sometimes dark and unappetizing. And most of these are shot by commercial photographers. Bad lighting. Do you think people will get excited about that? Nope! Shooting and lighting food is a lot different than shooting head shots or generic product shots. It requires a much different way of thinking than most commercial photographers are used to. So if you are going to hire someone to shoot your food, hire a photographer that specializes in food photography. Like me!

Here are some of the basics in food photography:

- **Composition**



How do you want the shot to look? Tight close-up shots utilizing selective focus is the trend right now. Moving in close to the food and focusing on the most important elements while everything else goes

slightly out of focus. This helps draw the viewer's eye to that one element you most want them to experience and be impressed by. For example, if you are going to shoot a yummy taco paired with beans and rice, you will most likely focus on just one end of the taco; showing how crispy the shell is along with the chunky chicken pieces. And the rice and beans? Well, they will go slightly out of focus...not as important as the taco and its fresh ingredients. Catch my drift? How about a Asian chicken salad? Do you need to show the whole salad on the plate? No. Again, you can just focus on part of the salad; the most interesting part or the part you are selling. Like the chicken! Every restaurant makes a salad but what makes your salad better? That's what you want to focus on. Now, there are times when you do want to show everything sharp and in focus. Usually high angles pointing down towards the food work well for this. An eater's point of view. Or when you want to show off more of the surrounding decor and props.

A handful of lenses are utilized in food photography and each food photographer has his or her preference. Telephoto lenses are used to zoom in tight and throw the background out of focus. A short focal length lenses like the 50mm is commonly used to shoot food giving crisp images even in low light. And when you want to get really close, sometimes you will use a macro lens to make a strawberry look like a giant red island surrounded by an ocean of chocolate. There are no hard set rules to food photography; just make the food look exciting and colorful. That's the goal of any food photographer. Remember. People eat with their eyes first!



- **Lighting for food photography**

Lighting is probably the most important element in food photography; and the most challenging. Sometimes I can spend over 30 minutes lighting a single plate. I continue working the shot until it looks like a beautiful cover model. At one given time, I may be using two strobe lights, a couple reflectors and an additional mirror or two. Remember when I said there are no set rules in food

photography? Well, there is one important one worth mentioning. Don't make the food look dark! Dark food photos make the food look awful and I see this all the time. If you want great photos, then you have to do it right. There is no quick way of getting great food photography. Sorry!

Let's talk a little about how these different lighting elements are used in food photography.

- **Strobe Lights**

Professional food photography shot indoors or outdoors requires high quality strobe lighting. Sure you can get great shots only using the sun coming through a window but you won't have that "sun" for very long. In less than an hour the sun will shift location and the color temperature will change drastically. To mimic the look of the sun, we food photographers use studio strobe lights that get as close as you can to beautiful white sunlight. You never use fluorescent lighting or low color temperature incandescent lighting. This tends to wash out the color of food and give the image a very green or orangish look. Not pretty for food photography.

For great shots, it usually requires one or two strobe lights. One light will be your main light source or key light and other will be used as either a fill light or a strong backlight. It will depend on how you want the shots to look. Sometimes I like a very hard high contrast backlight which gives the feeling of strong sunlight coming in through a window. Or sometimes the shot calls for very soft lighting; hitting the food from an angle with a little fill light to reduce shadows. This usually requires a large soft box and/or the use of studio umbrellas.



- **Reflectors**

All kinds of reflectors are used in food photography. I use an assortment of white foam board in different shapes and sizes; from large to small depending on how much light reflection I need. Other reflectors have a shiny silver coating which creates high contrast and increased light intensity. These are good for shooting steaks and pastas. I sometimes also use a gold coated board that not only bounces light like any other reflector, but also warms up the light giving a golden feel. This might be good for shooting bread or tequila. Notice the silver reflector in the shot to the right. It's bouncing light back from the large soft box you don't see just out of frame right.

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### **Mirrors**

I love mirrors. All kinds of mirrors in different shapes and sizes. I may put mirrors on my Christmas list this year! A good food photographer can never had enough; that's for sure. The right mirror can help point the light in a specific direction which allows you to intensify one particular element of the food. For example, say you want to brighten up just the carrots a little more to show off their beautiful orange color. A mirror can be used this way for directional lighting or, what I call spot lighting. See the little mirror in the photo to the right? I used it to brighten up a little spot behind the plate. Mirrors help food sparkle!

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### **Natural**

### **Sunlight**

Ahhh...Good ol' sunlight. The most beautiful light in the world. I love to use sunlight whenever I can but unfortunately, it's hardly ever around when I need or want it. As soon as the light coming through the window looks gorgeous, its gone. So, if you are going to do professional food photography and take your time setting up these shots, then you have to use artificial light. Sorry. No way around it. But a great food photographer can fool the viewer into thinking the light really did come from the sun! I love to hear people say, "wow, I love the sunlight hitting the food. Bright and beautiful."

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• **Food and Prop**

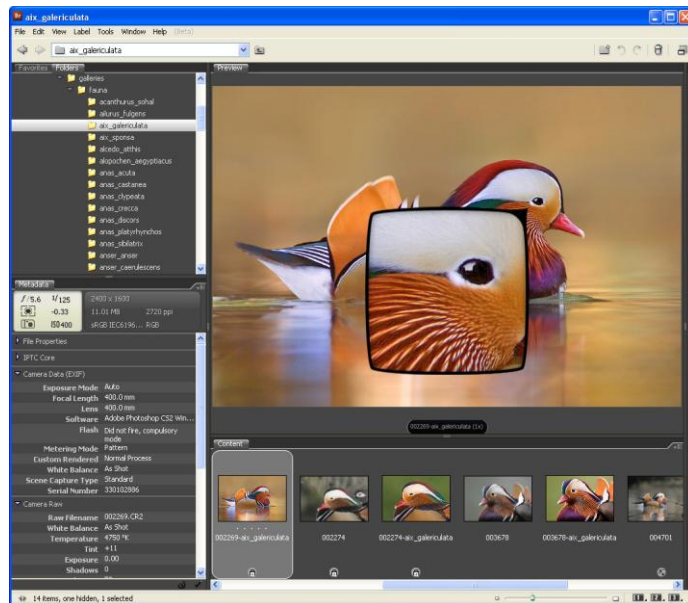
## **Styling**

I've saved the best for last. I love food styling. When I first got into food photography, I hated it. I had no idea what was going to look good or not and had no experience in food styling. With most of the restaurants I shot in the beginning, the manager would just leave me alone in a dark hot room underneath the building to fend for myself. I was in charge of everything. No help. Nobody else wanted the responsibility of figuring out things like: what type and color of plates to use? What to put in the background? White table cloth or a colored one? There are a million different ways to dress up the shot and a million different ways to screw it all up and make the photo look bad. Well, I didn't want all my great lighting and composition to go to waste so I was forced to learn some basics in food styling. But believe me...I am no professional food stylist. Nor do I ever want to be. I leave that to the pros. But sometimes the food photographer or someone other than a professional food stylist has to do this to save money. That is where I recommend the entire team get involved in the planning and execution, allowing for a much more successful shoot. The food photographer has to many other things to worry about.



**Here are some things you need to think about when it comes to styling food for the shot:**

1. What type of plate would go best with the food? White or color? For restaurants, usually you are shooting on white plates and bowls.
  2. Table cloth or wood table? Again, white table cloths are the norm in restaurants but the shot might look better if you add some color or patterns?
  3. Props? What's going to be in the shot along with the food? Utensils, other plates of food, flowers, drinks, bread, the restaurant out of focus etc. These items can make or break your shot. Or..perhaps you shoot really tight and don't see anything beyond the plate?
  4. How to make the food look best? Under cook the meat so it doesn't look dried out perhaps. Adding some cooking oil to meats will help as well. Spraying lettuce with water makes it look much more fresh than dry lifeless lettuce. How is the food positioned? Moving a carrot half an inch or stacking the food a little higher than usual can help a shot as well. Think presentation!
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## Post production

Okay. Once all the planning, preparation, lighting, composition, cooking and styling are complete, the job of a food photographer is not finished. Time for Photoshop! Every photo needs either a little or a lot of tweaking in a good photo editing program. I use Photoshop because it's the best. And I shoot in camera RAW because it's the best. What is that you ask? It's a larger file size image format that is unprocessed. Kind of like a film negative waiting to be processed. Which means you can go into Photoshop and process every little element of the photo just how you want it. You are not stuck with what your camera processed like in the JPEG format. With no loss in quality, you can go back and tweak individual colors, highlights, shadows, color temperature, focus points etc. A good run through in Photoshop can make all the difference.

Here is how I approach the post processing of my images. After the shoot is done, I like to go through all the photos either myself or with the client, and decide which shots turned out best. Then, I go in and individually edit each of those photos slightly adjusting the color, contrast, sharpness, light temperature, brightness, composition etc. Once they are finished, I save the edited files into a separate folder and save the originals; un-altered. Then these files can be downsized for web or set up for print. Each photo can take between a minute and 15 minutes to edit.

Here is another example of how this works. Just think of a photo out of the camera, as a freshly washed automobile. Looks great right? Well, imagine if you then waxed it, dressed the tires and polished up the chrome. Now we're talking sparkle!

Here are some examples of food photography right out of the camera and then edited in Photoshop.



**ORIGINAL**



**EDITED**



**ORIGINAL**



**EDITED**

Orange  
Alan De Herrera

County

Food

Photographer

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## More about shooting professional photos in Camera RAW

A camera **raw image file** contains minimally processed data from the image sensor of either a [digital camera](#), [image](#) or [motion picture film scanner](#). Raw files are so named because they are not yet processed and therefore are not ready to be used with a [bitmap graphics editor](#) or [printed](#). Normally, the image is processed by a raw converter in a wide-[gamut](#) internal [colorspace](#) where

precise adjustments can be made before conversion to a "positive" file format such as [TIFF](#) or [JPEG](#) for storage, printing, or further manipulation, which often encodes the image in a device-dependent colorspace. These images are often described as "RAW image files" based on the erroneous belief that they represent a single file format. In fact there are dozens if not hundreds of raw image formats in use by different models of digital equipment (like cameras or film scanners).

Raw image files are sometimes called **digital negatives**, as they fulfill the same role as [negatives](#) in film photography: that is, the negative is not directly usable as an image, but has all of the information needed to create an image. Likewise, the process of converting a raw image file into a viewable format is sometimes called developing a raw image, by analogy with the [film development](#) process used to convert [photographic film](#) into viewable prints. The selection of the final choice of image rendering is part of the process of [white balancing](#) and [color grading](#).

Like a photographic negative, a raw digital image may have a wider [dynamic range](#) or color gamut than the eventual final image format, and it preserves most of the information of the captured image. Raw image formats' purpose is to save with minimum loss of information the data that are obtained from the sensor, and the conditions surrounding the capturing of the image (the [metadata](#)).