

Food Photography

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Your mission: Play with your food! Step up your game from the quickie cell phone shots we are all fond of grabbing in the restaurant. Think and plan. Be creative. Make it look amazing.

EQUIPMENT

Equipment needs are simple – a 50 mm lens, a reflector (or a piece of white foam board, a sheet, or a white tablecloth), background material, and your styling props will get you started. A gray card or other white balance tool and a tripod are very useful. If you plan to do “dramatic/moody” images, you will probably also want a flash or other artificial light source.

CAMERA SETTINGS

Your settings will depend somewhat on your style, but the simplest setup is to use a shallow depth of field, with your focus point on the food, and let the background fade out of focus. Choose your aperture first (f/5.6 or wider) and then set your shutter speed and ISO to give you a proper exposure.

LIGHT

When deciding on lighting, first determine how you want your image to feel – light/airy, which is flattering for most foods, or a darker dramatic/moody feel.

Light/Airy – This is easily accomplished with natural light. Find an area with diffuse/indirect side light or backlight – a window, doorway, even a porch will work fine. Use a reflector to add light and minimize shadows on the opposite side. Here is a pullback of my natural light setup:



Dramatic/Moody – This can be done with natural light, or artificial light such as off-camera flash/strobe, a worklight, flashlight, or other light source. I usually stage food on a dark background for this look. Here is a pullback of my dramatic/moody setup:



Lightpainting – It's really fun to lightpaint food. Your room does not need to be completely dark, but it should be dark enough to get a completely (or nearly completely) dark image using ISO 100, f/8-11, and a 5-15 second shutter speed. Use a tripod, and "paint" the subject with a penlight or small flashlight while the shutter is open. It will take some time and patience to get the right look/lighting, but once you get the hang of it, I'll bet you'll be hooked on this technique.

Avoid fluorescent, tungsten, or other lighting that makes your food look lifeless and yucky. If you must shoot in bad light, you will need to correct the white balance in post-processing.

SHOOTING ANGLES

When determining the best angle to photograph from, think about how to show off your food's "best side".

Overhead/top-down – works well for "flat" foods with no dimension (pizza), and food where you want to show off graphic designs, patterns, etc. In order to get directly above your food, you may need to use a ladder or stool. Or you can place the food on the floor.

45 degrees – this is a more "normal" view, and is good for showing more texture, or when you want to include more than just the food (props, table settings, etc.).

Eye-level/side-view – this works well for showing off food with dimension or layers (things in stacks like cake layers, sandwiches/burgers, etc.). It can also be more interesting to the viewer because we don't usually look at food from this perspective.

Close-up/detail – get close when you want to show off something really fun (sprinkles!), unique, or special. If you have a macro lens, use a tripod and get super close. Otherwise, get as close as you can, and then crop as needed in post-processing.

COMPOSITION AND STYLING

When choosing props, look for dishes, serving pieces, and other items with interesting shapes and textures – baskets, trays, plates and platters, mugs and bowls, cutting boards, cake servers, placemats and table linens, etc. Be careful 😊, once you start “seeing” things that make good props for food photos, accumulating props can be addictive!

Similarly, look for things that make fun backgrounds – foam board, wall paper, wrapping paper, tablecloth, cool floors/walls, tile and floor samples, etc. make great backgrounds. A mirror can be a fun background, as can bokeh (Christmas or other lights), grill surfaces, granite, etc. Be creative!

The main thing to remember in composing food images is to keep it simple and uncluttered – make your food the star of the show. Make sure that the colors, textures, and patterns of your props and backgrounds don’t clash with your food, and that they don’t blend too much (e.g., white food may get “lost” on a white background). Don’t limit yourself to just the food itself though; showing food during preparation, serving, or eating can make interesting images.

Make sure you have your props figured out and your camera settings and composition close before you add the actual food into the shot, especially if you have sauces, whipped cream, ice cream, or other foods that may not hold long.

POST-PROCESSING

Most food images don’t need much processing – white balance correction, crop/straightening, and basic adjustments (exposure, contrast, vibrance) are usually all that is needed. Of course, if you are creating a fine art or enhanced image, add textures, use creative apps/filters, make composites, etc. to your heart’s content.

WANT MORE?

For more food photography image ideas, pinterest is a great resource. Food photography magazines are also a great place to look for inspiration.

If you are interesting in learning more about food photography, there are plenty of free videos on you tube. There are also some great courses available from Creative Live (creativelive.com) and Bryan Peterson School of Photography (bpsop.com), and many other places as well.