



Food photography

By Adam Duckworth







Food photography doesn't get more fresh than the hot sauce being poured over the dish in the final moments of preparation

REAL FOOD CAPTURED THE MOMENT IT'S READY, IN ALL ITS TASTY GLORY //

[Introduction]

Nowadays it seems every time you go to a restaurant, there's somebody shooting a photo of their plate of food to post up onto some social media network to share with their friends. In fact, it's become so widespread that some top restaurants have now banned it!

While taking a quick snap with your phone can be a blast – and can be improved with a little know-how such as a small LED light to boost the lighting – taking professional-quality photos of food can be fun and not as difficult as you'd think. And it's largely thanks to digital SLRs that can work really well at lower light levels due to their amazing high ISO capabilities.

In the times before digital, film was slow and it led to a whole black art of food photography. Lots of ingredients and foodstuffs were faked so they would last longer under hot studio lights. Using engine oil to replace gravy, mashed potato as fake ice cream and varnishing glasses with corn syrup to look like condensation was all part of the pro food photographer's arsenal.

But nowadays, everything is much more authentic and real. Real food is captured the minute it's ready, in all its fresh and tasty glory. Very little is faked. And thanks to instant capture with digital cameras, you can see the results you are getting straight away.

There has never been such high demand for great photographs of food as the cookery industry is booming – both to provide healthy and fresh meals and as entertainment. TV is full of celebrity chefs and there are now hundreds of cookbooks, food magazines, cookery blogs and websites. And with many city centres now being filled with cool coffee shops and restaurants, the need for great images of food is still increasing.

As a creative outlet, shooting images of food and ingredients offers some of



A fresh salad with a few slivers of truffle may look exotic, but can be photographed using relatively simple equipment

SOME OF THE BEST FOOD PHOTOS CAN BE DONE IN YOUR HOME USING PROPS YOU ALREADY HAVE

the most fun and rewarding photographic experiences. And it needn't be too strenuous on equipment or even costs of the food itself. Simple ingredients can, with some thought and very basic equipment, be turned into stunning images using a simple camera.

All you need is a decent camera that allows you to control the exposure, a good tripod and a few ideas! Some of the best food photos can be done in your home using the props you already have - like plates or cutlery. And you don't even need to be a great cook. Colourful shots of fruit or vegetables can be just as alluring as a fine dish of expensive ingredients prepared by a talented chef.

Of course, some professional food photographers have purpose-built studios with pro kitchens and huge refrigerators, massive windows to let in natural light, banks of flash heads and continuous artificial lighting. But with the modern quest for authentic food, then often natural window light can be best. And it's easy to modify using either purpose-built diffusers and reflectors or you can even do some DIY cheap fixes.

In this guide, we'll be telling you about the equipment you'll need and the techniques to use to take some truly great photographs of food.

[Seven quick tips for great food photography]



01.

Use great food

It's often about picking the freshest ingredients, Fresh food just looks better - bright and appetising. When buying ingredients, pick the freshest and best-looking you can. And when arranging the food in your shots, really scrutinise the food in fine detail to make sure you don't see any wrinkled or messy bits



02.

Don't over-cook

In fact, it's best to stop cooking before the food is fully ready as it will continue to cook itself even when removed from the heat. So a medium steak will end up looking well done by the time the photo is taken



03.

Consider the light

Photography is all about light. And great light really transforms your photos. The quality of light is crucial – whether it's hard or soft. Hard sunshine can be dramatic, but softer, more diffuse light is often more suitable for shooting food. And light that comes predominantly from behind the subject shows off the textures better than light from the front



04.

Think about the composition

Don't just plonk the food in the middle of a table and shoot it from head height. Think about the compositional elements in the shot, such as the angle of the food itself on the plates or any props. Don't be afraid to crop out anything unnecessary. And think about your camera viewpoint. Shots from a low angle can work, as well as three-quarter shots and images looking directly down on the subject



05.

Arrange the styling

Different backgrounds, plates, cutlery, dishes and napkins should all work together to tell a story about the dish and in most cases, shouldn't clash. A rustic meal may look better on a more weathered background surface with plain plates, for example. And a haute cuisine dish could work better with angular and modern plates and cutlery



06.

Highlight the ingredients

If your finished dish uses various spices or raw ingredients, then it's great to show these alongside the dish as it tells a story about what's in the food. This can be as simple as some carrots next to a bowl of carrot soup, or some grated chocolate next to a yummy chocolate pudding



07.

Use the right camera kit

A modern DSLR is an ideal camera, fitted with a lens that can focus close enough to get the shot you want. This may mean a specific macro lens, or a zoom lens that offers macro capability. A solid tripod is an essential piece of equipment, too. As are a few reflectors or diffusers to modify the natural light. And a cable release can be a great buy, too

[Choosing and using the right kit]



A full-frame DSLR, macro lens, solid tripod and a reflector can give truly professional-quality food images

Photo equipment

For the ultimate in flexibility and cost, then a modern digital SLR camera is ideal. The image quality is great, the performance at high ISO is wonderful and many cameras have a Live View option where you can see your composition on the screen before you take the shot. If your camera has a screen that tilts or swivels, this can be a great aid in getting the exact composition of your photo spot on. Often the camera can be at a high angle so if your screen articulates and can be angled down, it can be a great help.

More expensive cameras from manufacturers' semi-pro ranges or above may have what's called a full-frame sensor. This is a larger sensor than in the more common APS-C size "crop sensor" cameras that most enthusiasts own. They are usually significantly more expensive and take more costly and bigger full-frame lenses, but can give superior results especially in low light.

Top professionals sometimes use medium format cameras which have huge sensors, and some use tilt and shift lenses or "technical" cameras which marry up medium format digital backs to lenses that offer tilt and shift movements. This means the plane of focus can be placed precisely where it's wanted. But they are vastly expensive and difficult bits of kit to master, and really are the realms of the well-heeled, full-time food photographer.

Of course, you can use a basic compact camera or CSC camera. That's a Compact System Camera, sometimes called a Mirrorless camera. These can





Top: A macro lens lets you capture close detail.
Below: An electronic cable release is a useful accessory

give great image quality and are smaller and lighter than DSLRs. They can also offer image stabilisation or vibration reduction, too. But the choice of lenses for some of the CSC cameras can be a bit limiting, especially when it comes to shooting close up. And often, top CSCs and their lenses are more expensive than DSLRs.

Compacts can be used, too. Especially if they are one of the top-end enthusiast models that have large image sensors, can shoot in Raw and can be adjusted manually. In all cases, it's not the camera that makes the photo but the eye and skill of the photographer. But it's a tough break if you've carefully set up a lovely food shot and you're let down by a camera that can't focus close enough or you can't adjust.

If you really do get hooked on food photography and are using a DSLR, then one option is to shoot it "tethered" to a laptop. This usually involves running a cable between your camera and laptop. Then using a program like Adobe Lightroom or Capture One, the images you take are instantly stored on the computer's hard drive and displayed full-size on the laptop screen. This means you can see the image you've shot far better than on the camera's much smaller LCD screen. It can be great for checking precise focus and framing.

For lenses, a purpose-made macro telephoto of between 60mm for crop-sensor cameras and 105mm for full-frame cameras is an ideal lens for shooting food. They focus incredibly close and let you keep a decent working distance between the food and the camera. They are available from your camera manufacturer or, usually more cheaply, from independent lens manufacturers too.

Of course, you can use your standard or kit lens if it focuses close enough – and many do. Lots of telephoto zooms have a macro facility which means

'IT'S NOT THE CAMERA THAT MAKES THE PHOTO BUT THE EYE AND SKILL OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER/

they can focus closely, too - although you may find you are a bit distant from the food. A wideangle-to-short telephoto zoom, like a 24-70mm lens, can give a variety of options if you don't need to get too close to the subject. And a fast-aperture prime like a 50mm f/1.8 or 85mm f/1.8 can be a bonus, too. Especially if you like the effect of very shallow depth of field.

You can also buy close-up lenses that screw onto your lenses' filter threads, or close-up tubes that go between your lens and camera body. These methods can work well but have largely fallen out of favour in recent times. Most food photographers like the convenience of a prime macro lens.

Of course, precise framing of the camera in lots of different positions, and making sure it's held firmly in place is a key requirement for anyone shooting food. Look for a solid tripod from a well-known manufacturer like Manfrotto. Carbon fibre tubes are lighter and can damp vibration better than the more sturdy aluminium tripods. In either case, ensure you get a tripod that's sturdy enough for the weight of your camera and lens.

To trigger the camera, it's best to use a remote release. That way you're not having to physically push the shutter release on the camera body which can cause unwanted vibration. Some cameras can be controlled remotely via a plug-in receiver, or even via wifi or smartphone app. You can also remotely fire tethered cameras by the tethering software.

Using natural light and some reflectors, it's possible to get fantastic images of food inside and outdoors





PHOTOGRAPHIC REFLECTORS COME IN A VARIETY OF SIZES AND FINISHES/

Lighting equipment

Shooting great images of food is one area of photography where manipulating natural light can be a key skill. Diffuser panels to cut out harsh sunlight, and reflector panels to reflect light back in to shady areas on the subject, are key bits of equipment that most food photographers would find invaluable.

A diffuser panel can simply be made by hanging up a clean white bedsheet over a window, for example. This will cut light down significantly, so a better option is a purpose-built photographic diffuser as made by Lastolite. They are available in a variety of grades, which refers to how much light they cut out.

Reflectors can be made by using bits of white card or even large polystyrene panels from DIY shops. But again photographic reflectors come in a variety of sizes and finishes so can be easily tailored to each individual shot.

Some reflectors come with a variety of slip-on covers that range from white to silver, gold, silver/gold and even black. This allows you to change the look of the shot by trying different panels quickly. And real photo reflectors can easily be fitted to lighting stands to hold them in precisely the right position.



A large softbox mimics window light in a studio environment

An incident flash meter will tell you what aperture to set your camera to



Other bits of kit can be an incident light meter, which is vital if you are going to use flash. Flash – either from speedlights or studio lights – needs to be modified and usually made softer if it is to work for shooting food. Large softboxes or panels of diffusion material can be key accessories.

In recent years, LED lights have largely taken over from the very hot-running tungsten and very expensive HMI daylight-balanced continuous lights. LEDs can be really useful in lighting food photography.

FLASH USUALLY NEEDS TO BE MADE SOFTER IF IT IS TO WORK FOR SHOOTING FOOD



[Mastering your camera's settings]

If you are the sort of photographer that simply sets their camera to auto-everything and hopes for the best, then shooting food photographs using natural light will actually give decent results in many situations. However, with backlighting, white tablecloths and plates, dark food and lots more factors, this can easily combine to fool your camera into getting it hopelessly wrong. It is far better to take control of the settings either using aperture or shutter priority, or even better – fully manual. That way you have full creative control and consistency through your shoots.

The first thing you should really do is to shoot in Raw format instead of Jpeg. Many people start off with Jpegs as they just seem easier to use and can be read by any computer. But if you use a Raw file, then the image quality will be higher, it's far easier to control any blown highlights or recover shadow detail, too. And changing white balance is far more accurate. Of course, Raw files take up more space on your camera's card and on your computer hard drive and there is an extra step in processing the files via a program like Adobe Lightroom. But for the control and improvement in quality, it's definitely worthwhile.

IT'S BEST TO TAKE YOUR CAMERA'S WHITE BALANCE SETTING OFF AUTO

For ISO, it is best to set your camera to its lowest native ISO setting which is usually 100 or 200. This will give the best image quality and highest dynamic range, too. Of course, unless it's very bright this may mean your shutter speeds are low, so you will need that sturdy tripod!

While on a tripod, most manufacturers recommend your turn off any vibration reduction (VR) or image stabilisation (IS) technology, or use a special tripod mode if your camera's VR or IS settings have it.

It's also best if you take your camera's white balance setting off auto, too. The best thing to do is use a white balance target to take a custom white balance reading for every shot. Or take a photo of a white balance target, in the same light as your subject so you can correct it in your Raw converter later. Alternatively, pick one of the settings that most closely matches your scene, such as cloudy or daylight.

For focusing, it's best to use manual focus so you can really nail the point of focus precisely on the area you want it. At such close distances between the subject and camera, focusing is critical. It can be good to use Live View and zoom in to make sure you've got it perfect. Alternatively, set your autofocus to single shot and move the AF selection point over the part of the



Setting your camera to its base ISO, such as 100 or 200, will give the best quality results possible



Shallow depth of field from wide apertures means accurate focusing is essential

subject you want in sharp focus. Multi-point AF or Auto-AF can easily pick on the wrong part of the image and you may be left with a shot that's out of focus.

When it comes to setting the exposure, the camera's built-in lightmeter can work well, especially if it's an advanced camera with multi-matrix metering. But with lots of backlighting around, more often than not any automatic mode will involve some tweaking of the exposure. If the scene is predominantly white, for example a white cake on a white plate on a white table, the camera will be fooled into underexposing as it tries to make the scene an average 18% grey. So you would have to dial in some + exposure compensation. Just take a test shot, check out the image on the histogram and tweak the exposure compensation until the shot has a full range of tones.

IF THE LIGHT CHANGES YOU HAVE TO ALTER THE SPEED OR APERTURE/

The main two modes are aperture priority and shutter priority. In aperture priority you dial in the aperture you want, and the camera works out and sets a shutter speed that's right for the light conditions. You then fine tune using exposure compensation. Similarly for shutter priority, where you set a speed and the camera calculates an aperture. Of course, you could use program mode where the camera sets both which is far from ideal as you relinquish any control.

But if you are using aperture or shutter priority then dialling in exposure compensation to get the exposure right, you may as well use fully manual. Pick either an aperture you want or shutter speed, then change the other variable until the exposure is right. Of course, if the light changes then you'll have to alter the speed or aperture.



The mid tones of a subject like these potatoes usually means your camera's exposure will be accurate

THE CAMERA'S BUILT-IN LIGHTMETER CAN OFTEN WORK WELL BUT YOU MAY NEED SOME COMPENSATION



A narrow aperture like f/22 means most of the macarons are in sharp focus.



At f/2.8, only a small selection of the food is sharp

Choose the right aperture

The aperture or f-stop governs the depth of field of the shot and is usually the governing factor in food photography. Depth of field is how much front-to-back sharpness there is. A wide aperture is a small f-stop number, typically something like f/2.8. At a wide aperture like this, the depth of field is very small. So the part of the image you have focused on will be sharp, but everything further away or nearer to the lens will be out of focus. This is a good way to really highlight a part of an image and can be very creative but it must be used with care. Too shallow a depth of field can make a shot just too blurry to recognise, if you're not careful.

At a narrow aperture – a large f-stop number like f/22 – then the depth of field is wide. So everything from near the camera to much further away is in focus. This can lead to the subject having no clear point of focus, though. So selecting the right aperture for the creative effect you want is a key part of photography.

One other consideration is diffraction, as at very small apertures like f/32 there will be some image softness. Similarly, lenses are not at their sharpest wide open. So an f-stop that's within two stops of the maximum and minimum f-stop is a good place to be if you want maximum image quality.



At an exposure of 2sec, the moving stream of water is blurred.



At 1/1000sec the water jet is largely frozen

Choose the right shutter speed

With the camera locked down on a tripod and a subject that isn't moving, then shutter speed isn't a huge issue. Especially if you use a cable release and your camera has Mirror Lock-Up to reduce any vibrations.

But if there is some movement in the shot, such as water pouring over strawberries like in the examples here, then shutter speed can be a factor.

Very long shutter speeds, like two seconds on one of these images, has turned the cascade of water into a long, blurry line that a much more dreamy effect than the pin-sharp water taken at 1/1000sec. Experiment with shutter speed to get the desired effect.

Of course shutter speed does affect aperture, and you may wish to set a certain aperture for a specific depth of field. In that case your only real option is to change the camera's ISO, use Neutral Density filters or increase the light on the subject.

[Styling the shot]



One of the guiding principles of food photography is that it should make you want to eat the subject of the photos! By using light and carefully styling the shot, the aim is to set a mood or tell a visual story about the food that simply makes it more appetising. That can be by including various ingredients around the finished dish or using props to set a scene. So a home-made pork pie with some coarsely-ground mustard and artisan bread on a rustic background, bathed in late-afternoon sunlight, for example. Or a plate of breakfast pastries with jams and a coffee.

A wooden chopping board on a wooden table with a country tablecloth matches the rustic nature of the food



WOODEN CHOPPING BOARDS OR A KITCHEN TABLE CAN BE IDEAL BACKGROUNDS

Everything should work together harmoniously to tell the story. The background, the table, the plates, the cutlery, the napkins, the ingredients – everything – should fit together. Of course, rules are meant to be broken. So the juxtaposition of a rustic pie on a mirror-finished platter on a high-tech kitchen work surface could be made to work, to highlight the contrast of styles. But generally, sticking to one style tends to work more harmoniously.

When preparing the shot, the first thing to do is gather your ideas and then get shopping for the props you need. Of course, there are specific food photography props available such as plastic ice cubes that never melt! But in the sprit of authenticity, it's best to keep it real whenever you can.

One of the most crucial parts of the shot is the background, and if you are serious about getting in to shooting food then you would ideally want a range of backgrounds.

One of the most popular is to buy some wooden planks and simply paint them in various different colours, then usually distress them slightly. These planks can be transported and stored easily then set up on a work surface or floor quickly and easily. It's an easy solution and one that works wonders.

Of course, large wooden chopping boards can work, too. As can your kitchen table. Natural or distressed surfaces can really look good. A trip to your local builder's supply merchant could turn up all sorts in terms of tiles or even vinyl flooring.

One of the best and most beautiful surfaces is natural stone. This can be expensive, but often flooring supply houses will sell off odd samples very





A slate tile makes a great background. Adding ingredients around the food helps is a great styling tip

cheaply. Natural stone is good, but ceramic version can be just as good, too. When choosing, it's best to go for something with a matt rather than shiny finish as it helps keep reflections down.

Reflections are also a key element when looking for plates and crockery to use in your sets. Slightly matt or even age-worn plates can work really well. It can be worthwhile investing in a full set of plain white tablewear as it will always have its uses.

Of course, vintage plates and old crockery can have lots of fantastic uses in food photography and they don't have to be too expensive. Car boot sales and flea markets can be full of unwanted and unmatched crockery that can be bought very cheaply. You can often borrow from friends or relatives too.

Whites and pastels are ideal for crockery, as they don't take attention away from the food. Dishes with heavy patterns or bold colours can work, but it can be more tricky.

And be on the lookout for rustic-style accessories such as small dishes, terracotta plant pot holders, wickerwork baskets and anything that can be used as a prop. Again, these can be bought new but it's far more cost efficient to hit the flea markets or jumble sales to pick stuff up for a song. Once you start looking for items to use as props in your food photography, you'll always be on the lookout for unusual items.

You should also keep a lookout for cheap table linen, or just offcuts of material. Tablecloths in various colours, tea towels or just bits of linen material can be used as table coverings or be made to look like napkins. Or just fold up bits of material to put underneath a plate.

Rustic twine can be useful for tying up bunches of vegetables, as can bits of ribbon for decorating your set. Old jars can be re-filled with colourful jams or liquids, for example. It's all about being creative and you don't have to spend a fortune on it. The internet is a great place to pick up bargain bits from the comfort of your home.

It's not worth scrimping on good knives and cookware, though. The food's got to look good!



A knife cutting into some runny cheese adds the human element

Simply adding in a fork to a plate of meats can be a simple way of spicing up your shots





The human touch

Food really is made by people for people to eat, so don't forget the inclusion of the human element in some of your shots. This can be as simple as a hand pouring on a sauce, or a pair of serving tongs carefully dropping the last ingredient onto a delicate fine cuisine dish.

It can also work to include a fork or spoon on the plate of food itself. Of course, this can be laid next to the dish to suggest it's ready to eat. Or perhaps try actually spearing some ham with a fork, or cutting into some cheese with a cheese knife. Or remove part of the food as if it's been eaten and have the fork resting next to the next bit of food to be eaten. And why not get a reportage shot of the chef in action, too!


WHY NOT GET A
REPORTAGE SHOT OF
THE CHEF IN ACTION, TOO



Some sun-dried tomatoes, herbs and seeds can add to the styling of a shot

[Spice up your shot]

Using herbs and spices from the recipe can spice up the shot. Using some fresh thyme when the recipe uses ground thyme is a fantastic way of linking the props to the food itself.

Fresh herbs are always best and can be stored next to damp paper in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. When you want to use them, soak them for a short time then dry them carefully with some paper. If your herbs do look a bit secondhand, it's worth buying new as one dodgy herb can ruin your whole shot.

Rock salt can work really well sprinkled on or around your food, as can peppercorns. As long as salt and pepper would work with the recipe of course.

And don't forget bread as the right bit of bread can really add to the scene. A bowl full of artisan-style rolls can look wonderful, as can some freshly-broken bread next to a bowl of soup. And you can always scatter a few crumbs around, too.

Nuts can also be a great addition to any composition, by just sprinkling them around the plate. A waldorf salad works well with some extra walnuts around the outside of the plate. Even if your recipe doesn't include nuts, if you think that sprinkling on a few toasted pine nuts would add to the recipe as well as looking good, then give it a try. And don't forget that croutons would work not only with soup but also with a Caesar salad, too.

Of course, using whole or sliced fruit or vegetables alongside a dish that includes them as an ingredient is a key part of food photography. Often one sweet tart can look much like another, but by putting some plums next to it you can quickly ascertain it's a plum tart, for example. But fruit and veg can be difficult to photograph, as they can quickly tarnish if cut. And you must always really carefully pick the piece of fruit you want to use as fruit can bruise easily. It may be fine to eat, but can look a little scrappy in a photo. And unless you want to show the vegetable has just been uprooted, make sure it's been cleaned properly to get rid of any dirt.

MAKE SURE VEGETABLES HAVE BEEN CLEANED TO GET RID OF ANY DIRT/

However, you don't need to surround the dish with every bit of ingredient that it contains. Just two or maybe three at most of the key ingredients should suffice to really tell the tale of the dish.

For salads, it's crucial they look full and appetising. So this is one of the few places where a bit of faking it can work wonders. A spritz of water can really give a bit of shine to a wilting bowl of salad, and some photographers use mashed potato hidden underneath the leaves to make sure they don't sink under the pressure of any garnish on top. Just make sure you can't see it. People have even been known to scrunch up some white paper to support the weight of the leaves. And the scrunched-up paper technique is also often used as a base for ice cream, especially when showing it in a cone. That way the base of the cone doesn't get soggy from melted ice cream.



Croutons make great additions to soup, as in this shot of a bowl of carrot soup



Use colour for harmony

Some food photographers swear by using a colour wheel, which shows all the colours and how they relate to each other. Colours near each other on the wheel – such as yellow through orange to red – are complimentary and harmonius. But colour at opposite ends of the wheel – such as green and red – can clash.

One great way of thinking is to pick a main colour that is dominant in your shot, then pick hues that surround it. Like light brown plates and wooden surface with a plate of oranges. Or pinks and pastels with a shot of strawberries, for example. And in that case the inclusion of a sprig of bright green mint really stands out.

But a plate of baked goodies like pastries and croissants can look too monochrome if styled with a light brown plate and surface. So in that case a blue plate could really work well and make the subject stand out.

The red tomatoes and green leaves of their vine add a splash of contrasting colours to this shot of a steak



[It's all about the light]

Great photography really is all about gorgeous light. And using natural light is a great way to get stunning images of food. It's free, and unlike flash, what you see is what you get when you are working with natural light. The challenge is to understand its properties, the effect they have on food and how light changes during the day.

One of the key properties to consider is the quality of light - meaning how hard or soft it is. Hard light typically comes from a smaller or more distant light source and produces hard shadows. Such as light from the sun on a cloudless day.

This sort of light gives contrasty, more dramatic lighting that's great for picking out the texture of a surface and really highlighting bold colours. It has its uses in food photography, but is not the most commonly used sort of light.

Far and away, soft light is the dominant lighting type used in making successful images of food. Soft light tends to come from a relatively large source and is diffuse, wrapping around the subject to give a softer and more gentle appearance. So the light streaming in from a north-facing window on an overcast day is typically soft, as long as the subject is up quite close to the window. If the subject is a long distance from the window, the light will be much harder.

The key to natural light photography is identifying the type of light source you want, and how you can turn the light you have into it. A very common



A window is covered with a diffusion panel to soften the light. A reflector to the right reduces the contrast

use is to use window light, but make it even more diffuse by covering the window with some diffusion material. This can be special photographic diffusion material, or even tracing paper. Some people just cover the window with a thin white bed sheet. But for more convenience and more control, a large photographic diffuser panel such as those made by Lastolite can be a great ally. These can come in different strengths of diffusion so you can easily modify the type of light you have. Experiment with different positions of diffuser as it will affect the quality and intensity of light on the subject.

REFLECTORS BOUNCE SOME LIGHT BACK IN TO FILL IN THE SHADOWS/

It's often best to have this main light coming from behind your subject. This soft light really picks up the texture of the food and if there are any shiny parts on the food, such as onion skin, then they can reflect the shape of the diffuser panel. This gives a lovely highlight that can work really well.

However, with the light coming from behind, this can easily lead to too much contrast on the part of the food that's nearest the camera. In this case, it's prudent to use reflectors to bounce some light back in to fill the shadows and hence reduce the contrast.

Reflectors can be as simple as bits of white or silver card or paper, or polystyrene panels bought from a DIY store and painted white. But for far more options, it's wise to invest in a large reflector or even two, and various covers to go with them. You can use a white reflector cover for a subtle effect, or a silver for a more punchy and efficient reflector. Gold covers really add warmth, while hybrid silver/ gold covers add punch and slight warmth. You can even get black covers to increase the contrast. Or a diffuser panel that can be put into service as a second main diffuser.

With just a couple of reflectors like this, you can really experiment with the look and feel of your photos.

Outdoor natural lighting

It pays dividends to look around your location to see how the natural light falls, and changes at different times during the day as the sun moves across the sky. Light spilling in through doorways or reflected off bright walls can be fabulous. Or you could even go outside and use a diffuser overhead to cut harsh sun down into a soft, even top light.

As the sun gets lower in the sky, it can give a real warmth and have a really useful low angle that can work well with reflectors. Or you could use it with a diffuser to make it less harsh but keep its warmth and direction.

An outdoor patio, with a translucent roof, can also act as a natural diffuser, too. So you can use that as your main light source and reflectors to fill in any shadows that might exist.

The result of the set-up shot from the previous page shows the natural backlighting combines with a reflector for lovely, soft light





Backlighting also works well with glass containers, but watch for reflections from any reflectors you may have used



NATURAL LIGHT FROM A LARGE WINDOW IS A VERY POPULAR WAY TO LIGHT FOOD SHOTS

[Choose the right viewpoint]

You may have the lighting and styling all done, but it's your viewpoint plus what you leave in or out of the shot that makes the difference. A low angle can show the height of food – such as a huge hamburger or stack of fruit.

A close-up shot with a wide-angle lens can really exaggerate the perspective of the food nearest the camera. Moving back and trying different lenses can show either just the food, or a wider shot of the food in context of the table setting – as in our shot of the typical English breakfast.













A low-angle shot of the hamburger and pile of peaches is very different to the overhead shot of the carrots, but can be equally effective

BY CHANGING YOUR VIEWPOINT, YOUR SHOT CAN BECOME FAR MORE DRAMATIC/

Many photos of food are taken at roughly a 45-degree angle from above as this gives the most normal view of a plate of food that we would see. But by changing your viewpoint, the shot can become more dramatic.

Shots taken from totally overhead are often used as there is the symmetry of the plate in the frame of the shot, which contrasts completely with the organic nature of the food within the frame. So that's exactly the technique used to shoot the overhead shot of the carrots, on top of a ceramic tile, on top of some grass. The initial feeling was to crop all the grass out, so just the carrots and tile were visible. But the green border around the tile became a frame-within-a-frame and really added to the symmetry of the photo. And the relatively harsh sunlight on a hazy but bright day means the shadows are quite distinct, but not deep as they would have been if the day was totally cloudless.

It's compositions like this that can work well, despite them not being the original intention. Like any shoot, the first picture is often not the one that ends up being the best.






OFTEN IT'S A CASE OF TRIAL AND ERROR TO SEE WHAT WORKS BEST/

Take the shot of our simple raspberry and lemon desert in a small glass container – almost like a big shot glass. The original plan was to have it on a white napkin on top of a shiny silver platter, complete with spoon. But the shot looked too plain, and the shiny platter was just too distracting.

Shot two was to replace the napkin and platter with some organic stone, and change the spoon for a more vintage one to go with the new background. Some raspberries were scattered along the right of the frame.

Take three was to remove the spoon, and reduce the number of raspberries to just two, this time on the other side of the main desert. It was a more simple composition, but didn't quite work. The final shot was to use more raspberries, and use them at the bottom of the frame as lead-in lines to take you eye on a journey up to the desert itself. Often it's a case of trial and error to see what works.

The food photographer's toolkit

It may seem more like a first aid kit but a few sets of tweezers, a bottle to spritz water or oil, some scissors, some earbuds, drinking straws, various paint brushes, squeezy bottles and some palette knives can be a great asset in taking great shots of food.

Tweezers are ideal for moving tiny bits of food around without knocking into other bits of food. Drinking straws are great as props in themselves, but can also be used to help you breathe on the outside of ice cream to get the surface melting slightly.

Palette knives mean you can move sticky puddings around, and paintbrushes are ideal for getting rid of crumbs. Squeeze bottles are ideal for carefully applying sauces. And of course, you always have to keep the plates spotlessly clean.





TWEEZERS ARE IDEAL FOR MOVING TINY BITS OF FOOD AROUND





[Artificial light can look natural]

Using artificial light doesn't mean your photographs have to look unnatural

Some photographers run a mile when faced with the idea of using artificial light instead of natural light in their food shots. But it needn't be the case. If you know how to use natural light to its best then you can virtually replicate it with artificial light whenever you need to. This is ideal for days when the natural light just isn't that great.

Artificial light comes in two main sorts – constant or flash. We'll start with constant, as that more closely simulates natural light. The latest crop of constant lights are powered by LED bulbs, which mean they are quiet, daylight-balanced

and generate no heat. Large foot-square lightpanels can be used almost like natural light, and they actually mix in very well with natural sources, too. They are great for putting highlights onto food or reducing contrast, a bit like a reflector.

Other continuous lights are either tungsten or HMIs. Tungsten lights have been around for decades, get very hot and have a very warm orange hue to them. So if you are using solely tungsten lights, you can set a corresponding white balance. If you are mixing them with any other daylight-balanced lights, you need to put a CTB (Colour Temperature Blue) gel on them. HMI lights are very much like tungsten except they are daylight balanced and are far more useful for mixing with daylight, but they are much more expensive.

STUDIO FLASH HAVE MODELLING LIGHTS SO YOU CAN SEE THE EFFECT YOU ARE GOING TO GET/

The majority of artificially-lit food photography is done using flash. You could use a simple speedlight flashgun, especially used off-camera and either in a purpose-made softbox or through a diffuser panel. The only issue is that it's impossible to see the effect until you have taken a photo and checked the results on the camera's LCD screen.

By far a better option is to use proper studio flash, as they can accept all sorts of modifiers like softboxes to make the light very soft. And a huge benefit is they have modelling lights, so you can see the effect you are going to get. This also means you can use your normal reflectors to bounce some of the light back into the subject, too. You can see their effect as soon as you move them in.

With flash, there's usually lots of power on tap, so choosing the exact aperture you want to use is not normally an issue. Just set the aperture you want then alter the power of the flash until you get the right exposure.

Of course, with flash being so fast, you can't use your camera's own light meter to measure it. You have to set your camera manually too, making sure your shutter speed is at or below the maximum sync speed of your camera. Your owner's manual will tell you what it is, but it's likely to be around 1/250th second.

To get the right exposure, you can just take a test shot and check the histogram. A more accurate way is to use an incident light meter that works with flash. This measures the light falling onto the subject. You dial in your ISO and shutter speed, trigger the flash and it tells you what aperture to set your camera to.

The easiest use of studio flash is to fit a big softbox and use it to replace window light. So light mainly from behind, and use a reflector or two to bounce light back into the subject. But with lots of different modifiers available – from gels to strip boxes, honeycomb grids to barn doors and more – then there are lots of different effects you can get. Trial and error is what it's all about.

From left: The original shot was a little flat. A more contrasty shot was better on the crust and plate. The third and final shot is a Photoshop composite of the two







Photoshop can save the day

Getting the shot right in camera should be the goal of every photographer. Manipulating the light to get the right feel, and enough detail in areas where they are needed, is a key skill. But sometimes, post-production can save a shot that would have been virtually impossible to take.

Our shot of the chocolate tart is one example. The main light is window light, and when covered with a diffuser panel gives a nice soft light to the shot. However, removing the panel from our northerly-facing window makes the light much harder and adds a huge amount of reflection and interest to key parts of the shot. Check out the highlights on the plate, the crust of the tart and the slabs of chocolate on the bottom right of the shot. But it left a huge reflection on the major part of the tart itself.

By combining the two shots in Photoshop using layers, the more contrasty shot was predominantly used but the face of the tart was replaced by the less contrasty version.