





THE BASICS OF FOOD STYLING

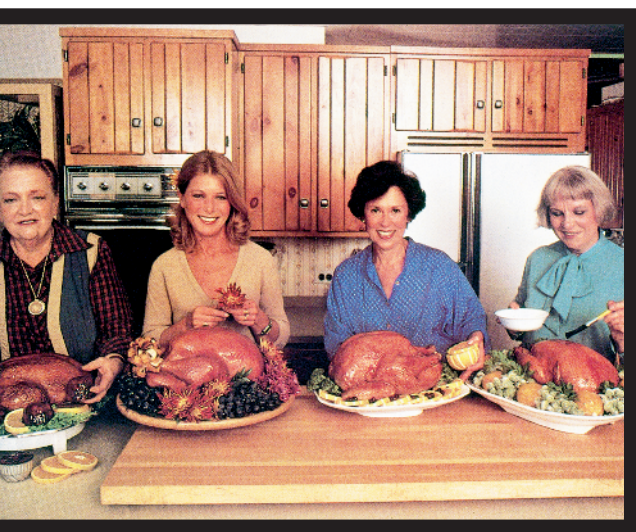


FOOD STYLING

an overview

from HOME ECONOMIST to FOOD STYLIST

A History



The first generation of food stylists. FROM LEFT: Grace Manney, Zenja Cary, Sylvia Schur, and Helen Feingold. Dan Wynn for New York

The term *food stylist* was probably used first in the mid-1950s. Before that, anyone who prepared food for the camera (whether for pictures in magazines, on food packages, in cookbooks, or for other visual purposes) was called a home economist. Home economists were the women with university degrees who worked in the test kitchens of women's magazines and major food companies. Before 1950, but even into the 1960s, food pictures and ads were often illustrated. When the trend shifted from illustration to photography, more food had to be prepared for the camera. Many home economists stepped out of their test kitchens and began working independently as freelancers and calling themselves food stylists. It took a while for the term *food stylist* to catch on. In fact, even today, many television and movie production houses still request a "home ec" when they need a food stylist.

The career of food styling developed in major advertising, television production, and publishing cities such as New York and Los Angeles, as well as in the headquarters locations of major food companies. These jobs were very gender specific. The early food stylists were all women and all home economists. In fact, a major food company would not hire anyone without a home ec degree to style food.

This first wave of food stylists was self-taught. They were good technicians but not necessarily artful culinarians. They were creative, entrepreneurial women who strode with courage into this new profession. Then as now, most of them worked out of their homes, but a few of them established small production centers. They struggled with early live television commercials. You hear about how their refrigerator doors wouldn't open, food would burn or fall on the floor, and ovens would open to reveal the food from the previous day's shoot still there. They worked with hot tungsten lights that wilted lettuce and melted ice cream. All the while, they were creating many of the techniques we use today when working with food. They discovered many of the tools to make styling work, and they trained the next generation. In November 1979, *New York* magazine ran one of the earliest articles on the career of food styling and shared with its audience just what this strange career was all about.

I was working at Cary Kitchens when this article was written. The photograph

female and about one-third of the stylists are male. The number of food magazines and food segments on television has greatly increased. Web sites belonging to food companies, magazines, and other media use large numbers of food photographs. Digital photography has changed the way everyone in the business works and also allows for easy retouching (using software such as Photoshop) of any food shot. Also, vast quantities of food pictures are available as stock photography now. Trends in the look and type of food have changed significantly over the years: Today, our presentations of food are much less controlled and more natural and casual (see pages 345–364 for more on photography and styling trends).

Another change that has occurred over the years is that food styling has become less invisible. Today, because of print articles and television segments about this career, more people know about food styling and, with the explosion of trained culinary professionals, more people are interested in it as a career.

the SMORGASBORD of food styling

When the public thinks of food styling, they often think that what we do is to prepare food for the beautiful photographs in cookbooks and magazines. That is definitely part of what we do, but for me food styling has included assignments such as the following:

PRINT MEDIA (MAGAZINES, NEWSPAPERS, CATALOGS)

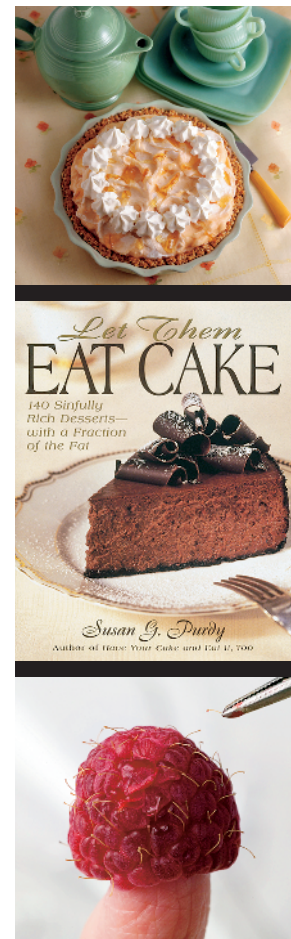
- Getting succulent ribs ready for an article on great grill menus for *Bon Appétit* magazine.
- Decorating a cake to look like the White House for a newspaper article.
- Finding beautiful rhubarb stalks with leaves in December (see the photograph on page 148) for a spring article on cooking with rhubarb, and finding medium-size pumpkins in May for a Halloween magazine story.
- Making a Tweety Bird waffle for a catalog shot, cutting a steak into the shape of Texas, making a whole roasted chicken with three legs, decorating a meat loaf to look like Groucho Marx, shooting an empty salad-dressing jar, and putting the perfect twist of lemon in a martini.

COOKBOOKS

- Preparing 150 pies to be photographed for a cookbook on perfect pies.
- Cooking in the basement of the restaurant “21” Club for a press party.
- Shooting a decadent chocolate cheesecake for the cover of a cookbook.
- Rewriting forty different chefs’ recipes and then testing and preparing them to be photographed for a small cookbook on phyllo dough.

ADVERTISING AND FOOD INDUSTRY

- Removing all the hairs from a raspberry to be used as a garnish on a goblet of white chocolate mousse.



FROM TOP: Beth Galton; Dennis Gottlieb; Keith Ferris

fried chicken with diamonds and other stories

I have arranged a platter of fried chicken with diamonds, rubies, and pearls scattered in the arrangement. I have shot an ice cream cone piled high with nineteen scoops of different flavors of ice cream for a commercial. I have shot a “perfect” ice cream cone being held by a hand model wearing a \$250,000 bracelet, with a bodyguard standing just off the set. I have had to make ice cream cones where the color of the ice cream had to match the color of several models’ outfits. I have shaped the word *Jell-O* out of Jell-O and made it wiggle and giggle. I have made an alcoholic drink called the green iguana with a real iguana in a blender next to it.

- Developing recipes to show the versatility of a set of cookware and preparing the recipes to be photographed in the cookware.
- Making a pizza with a perfect stringy cheese pull or shooting a hot dog with just the right squiggle of mustard or a hamburger with a mustard frown (see the photograph on page 205).
- Testing sixty recipes from contestants competing for a trip to New York and having a tasting of each recipe for the client.
- Sorting cereal all day for flakes with “character” or finding Goldfish crackers with the most “smile definition.”
- Grilling chicken in the snow on the street below a photographer’s New York studio.

- Preparing a sandwich for a commercial in a dressing room with the Dallas Cowboys.
- Shopping for two 5-pound lobsters and an eighteen-inch red snapper at 3:30 A.M. at the Fulton Fish Market for a 7:00 A.M. shoot with Paul Newman—who was a hundred miles away (see page 56).
- Arranging the food for a series of package shots of frozen entrées.
- Sitting at a table of executives at an ad agency and being asked if “nooks and cranies” are acceptable food terms to use when describing an English muffin.

TELEVISION AND FILM

- Receiving the winning recipe for America’s Best Pie contest at 3:00 P.M. and showing up with the pie the next morning at 5:30 A.M. for its appearance on *Good Morning America*.

Providing the perfect lemon twist to three colorful martinis



Jim Scherzi

- Preparing six luscious cookbook desserts and setting up the ingredients so that the author could demonstrate making them on the *Today* show.
- Teaching the “butler” on the movie set of *Trading Places* how to flambé crêpes suzette.
- Spreading margarine on slices of bread in a tree house in a Mexican rain forest, in a château in Prague, and on the Brooklyn Bridge at midnight, all for television commercials.



what is FOOD STYLING?

While most people prepare food to eat, the food stylist prepares food to feed the eyes and the imagination. Just as we primp to look our best for the camera, food to be photographed needs to look its best, too, and making it look its best is the job of the food stylist. How that is done is a complex and interesting series of steps.

As a food styling instructor, I have heard many misconceptions about our work. Beginning students often arrive in class thinking that all a food stylist does is show up at the studio, find pretty plates, make an attractive table arrangement, and put food (prepared by someone else) on the plates. Then, the photographer shoots it. Well, one in every thousand assignments might come close to this idea, but the reality is often much different. A food shot is a team effort that takes preplanning, clear communication, thoughtful shopping for food and props, proficiency at food preparation (yes, we cook the food), and a sense of artful presentation. Photo sessions can take hours, and the photographed food must look freshly made and so appetizing that whoever sees it wants to eat it immediately.

Anatomy of a Food Styling Assignment

The first thing a food stylist does when he or she gets a job is to begin to gather information about it. Who is the client? Is the work for print or television? How many days is the shoot and are there prep days? Will an assistant be needed? Are there recipes, a photo outline, layouts, or storyboards and tear sheets? The latter will spell out how the food is to be shot and how it should look. The food stylist must organize all this information and put together a game plan.

First Steps: Finding the Food and Props and Selecting Equipment

Once the assignment is set, you make a shopping and equipment list. How much you need depends on a number of factors. For example, sometimes you have to make a dish twice—once as a stand-in (not the final food) and once as a hero (the final food). Because the food needs to be not just attractive, but just the right size and color and in the correct amounts, I always get ingredients for twice the recipe and sometimes for up to thirty times, depending on the fragility of the food and the type of assignment. If you are also propping the job, you must shop for plates, glasses, flowers,

tablecloths, flatware, and any other nonfood items that will be shown in the shot—and you must have plenty of options from which the client and the photographer can choose. You also must make sure that all the cooking and styling equipment needed for the job is packed or is at the studio. Then you must transport everything to the studio in perfect condition.

Preparing the Food

After you have unpacked and organized your work space, following a shooting schedule, you prepare the food so that it looks its best just when the photographer needs it. As a food stylist and good cook and baker, it is your ultimate job to make the food look mouthwatering. Depending on the food, it should look fresh and crisp or smooth and soft, grilled or hot and juicy, and so on.

Arranging the Food

Next, the job is to arrange the food so that it looks appealing *to the camera*. Just because it looks good to your eyes, does not mean it will translate well through a lens. You must be aware of how the camera sees the food (how close or far away, the angle, and how the lights hit the food).

Keeping the Food Beautiful and Adding Final Touches

After the food is arranged and put on the set, you must keep it looking gorgeous and fresh until the photographer is ready to shoot. Herein lies the constant challenge of food styling: Food “dies” or changes over time. It is affected by heat and cold, by moisture or dryness, and by light and the air around it. You must know how to control or adjust these conditions so that your food will not “misbehave.” You must also know when to add final touches such as garnishes, sauces, and fragile food just before shooting.

is FOOD STYLING for you?

Most people think of food styling as a possible career choice because they love food and they want to work with food in a creative capacity. Some have strong cooking skills gained from work in restaurants or at a culinary school. Others may have spent time working in advertising or in production, and also have a love of food and are good home cooks and want to combine those interests.

People often approach me for information on just what skills you need to be a successful food stylist. But before you decide on food styling as a career, you should think about where you live or want to live, because you must live near the work—near photographers who shoot food, near book and magazine publishers, near television production companies, or near large food companies with in-house production capabilities. The majority of the work is in major cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Other cities with some food-styling work are Orlando, Miami, Seattle, Atlanta, Boston, Des Moines, St. Louis, Dallas, and San Francisco, to

name a few. Then there are cities with special opportunities, such as Birmingham, Alabama—the home of *Southern Living* and *Cooking Light* magazines. If you have the skills and the work permit, work may also be available in foreign countries.

Next, you should think about the fact that this is almost entirely freelance work and ask yourself whether you have a freelance personality. Just what does this question mean? Are you a self-motivator? Do you feel comfortable not knowing when or where the next job is? Do you have financial support (income from another source, such as a flexible second job, a rich and giving parent, a husband or wife with a secure job, savings, or the ability to live on almost nothing) while you assist experienced food stylists on your way to establishing this new career? You will be working in many different settings (not going to the same office). You will have to put together your own savings and retirement plans and take care of your own health and disability insurance. You will need to put together materials to promote yourself and get out there and look for job opportunities.

These are some of the challenges of the freelancer, but let's look at some of the pluses of the freelance world: *not* having to go to the same office every day, working for yourself, setting your own goals and going for them. I like the fact that the jobs have a beginning and an end (often in two to three days). Then I am off to the next new and interesting job. The work itself calls for a tremendous variety of skills. No two days are the same, and no two jobs are alike. You need to be able to “go with the flow” and enjoy the ride.

The Attributes of a Good Food Stylist

Following is a list of skills and attributes that will be most helpful to you as a food stylist. No one starts out with all of these skills, and you may need to fill in the gaps by strengthening certain areas. Although this list may seem daunting, you will gain knowledge as you work; the stronger your foundation and knowledge in these areas, the better. Because what is the most important skill on one job may not be on the next job, the list is *not* necessarily in order of importance.

You'll need to be:

- **Well organized.** You will need to be a good communicator and ask pertinent questions. You will need to collect information and be able to get a grasp on the job, figuring out who, what, when, where, and

food styling's main rule: it all depends

One thing in food styling that is consistent is that nothing is consistent. There are general “rules,” but each day and each assignment is different from the previous one. I'm often asked such questions as How much food will you need to get? or How many shots do you do in a day? My answer is typically, “It all depends.” Knowing how to figure out what it depends on takes experience and practice.

Let me give you one example: If we are shooting a turkey, I may be able to do that job with two turkeys—one for the stand-in and one for the hero. However, let's look at a few of the possible questions and job options that can become “it all depends” issues:

Is this a close-up of the turkey or is the turkey part of a larger setting and therefore less significant?

Is this for the cover of a magazine or for a story on Thanksgiving foods?

Are we showing leftover ideas, such as turkey hash?

Is this an advertisement for a particular brand of turkey?

Is this a television commercial?

Do we need to show the turkey being sliced?

Is this a test shot with a photographer?

Are we showing a turkey TV dinner?

Is there a large budget or a small one?

Will the client be supplying the turkeys?

Any one or more of these factors will determine how many turkeys I need for the job. For the test shot with the photographer, one turkey breast may be sufficient; for the magazine cover, two to three handpicked fresh turkeys may be necessary.

Now let's look at advertising for a specific brand (and a larger budget). Usually, the client would send the turkeys and may ask how many you need. Again, it all depends on the shot. You may need five to ten for a print ad. If you are slicing a whole turkey for a TV commercial, though, you may need up to twenty-five turkeys, just for the perfect slice shot alone. Each assignment is a unique job.

in which order things will need to be done. When you arrive at the shoot, you will need to be able to set up your work space so that you can work comfortably and efficiently. Often the photographer will take your lead as to the order of the shooting schedule.

- **A good cook and a good baker.** I can't stress enough the importance of being able to prepare foods correctly (making adjustments, if necessary) and to make the food look as good as it possibly can. Your food knowledge and skills are extremely important. Of the two skills, cooking and baking, the one you can't "fudge" is being a good baker. Understanding the science of baking is invaluable, because baking is chemistry in action. If you need to develop that knowledge, read cookbooks and bake, bake, bake; take private lessons; or go back to school. That may mean going to cooking school for a degree or taking courses at a local cooking school or community college. You can't take a pie job, for example, and learn how to make pie dough the night before your shoot (see page 149 and Resources, page 378, for valuable information on food science).

A fellow food stylist and one of my mentors, Helen Feingold, once said as we taught a class in food styling together, "Food is like children. It doesn't like to behave in front of company." The longer I've been in the business, the more I've come to appreciate that statement.

- **A problem solver.** While food is out there not "behaving," you need to be able to figure out how you can take control and whip it into submission. Just what kind of food mischief are we talking about? Ice cream that melts and cheeses that congeal (once they are melted) are two common problems that come to mind. But then there's cereal that gets soggy when milk is added, and lettuce and fresh herbs that wilt while waiting for the photographer to shoot or the art director to make decisions. There are also slices of fruit pie that collapse, salad dressings that separate, and sauces that are too thick or thin or get a skin as they cool. Meat that looks dry, not juicy, or too rare or not rare enough are other problems. Syrups soak into pancakes, brownies stick to the pan, chocolate blooms, muffins won't dome, bread dries and curls, whipped cream weeps (and you will want to join in the weeping as well). How do you deal with these problems, and also figure out how to build a sandwich that is fifteen inches tall without the weight of the food pressing down all those lovely cold-cut folds? How do you crack a coconut with just the "right look" or make a walnut explode on cue for a commercial? Each day has its challenges. If you have assisted a food stylist for a while, many of the "problem" foods may already have been handled by him or her, and you can apply this knowledge. However, you can't know everything, and you need to know where or to whom to go for information if you need it. Just remember that all these challenges don't come at once and that you will, I hope, have a team of problem solvers to work with you.
- **A good team player.** A photo shoot, television commercial, or movie is never a solo undertaking. You will always work with at least one other person. More often you will work with a team of at least four people: an art director, a photographer, the client, and a prop stylist. The list of players can get longer with more clients or agency people, the talent, or the model. When you get into television or movies, you will notice that the list crediting the team players can go on and on. Your major contri-

tribution to this team will be your skills and knowledge about food. However, you can be called upon or may want to share nonfood-related information that you have found helpful from previous jobs which will make this job work better.

- **Someone who knows when to lead and when to take direction.** Helpful suggestions are almost always welcome. However, there are some jobs (mostly in television) where there are already a few egos in the room, and adding yours just prolongs the job. When you do see problems or blatant mistakes—such as directors who want to shoot baking powder biscuits being baked in a muffin tin rather than on a cookie sheet (see page 12), or the wrong spoon or wineglass being used—you should step forward. The important thing is to know to whom to make your suggestions and to make them tactfully.
- **Confident.** Confidence is something we each have in varying degrees, and we may have more or less of it depending on the day. You will be hired for a job because the photographer is confident that you will be able to find beautiful food and prepare and arrange it attractively. The client is confident that you will be able to produce the desired results. You'll become more comfortable and confident with experience. A beginning assistant food stylist should value his or her time assisting. The time spent working with a lead food stylist will give you invaluable knowledge and experience, which eventually will allow you to work confidently on your own.
- **Able to deal with stress.** Yes, even though you may have lots of experience, there will always be stressful days. You may be asked to make food do things it doesn't like to do, or you may have difficulty finding the food required for the job. There may be times when everyone is waiting for you to produce the food and the clock is ticking. Or you may have an audience watching you do a difficult swirl, dollop, pour, or scoop. (It is helpful to get used to having people watch you work, because often your work is the most interesting thing happening in the studio—and then there are the aromas that draw people around.) You have come to this career because you have found your passion—food. Don't let your work spoil your joy and love of food. Love what you do, and it won't feel like work (most of the time).

typical challenges: from melting margarine to a mango search

There was the time I was in a *warm* tropical rain forest in Mexico, shooting a commercial for heat-sensitive margarine. Beforehand, I had requested three refrigerators. I was provided with one Coca-Cola machine. When I turned on my hot plate to sauté some food, it blew the fuse to everything. Thus, no refrigerator, no stove, and no one to help me schlep the sixty pounds of melting margarine and all my equipment to a hotel restaurant. At the hotel, my "refrigerator" was the machine in which they stored ice for sale. Then there was the time a job required mangoes, and all of them (in the whole world) had been destroyed by a hurricane. Of course, the client couldn't believe there were *no* mangoes, so he had his office staff calling everywhere. No mangoes! So we shot a basket of other fruits. Another time, I brought in beautiful cookies with heart-shaped centers, but the photographer didn't like the hearts. I had to carve the hearts into circles.

- **Patient and tolerant.** Patience and tolerance are sneaky little attributes that may seem insignificant, but they are very important. I can't begin to tell you the number of times someone has said to me at the end of the day, "I could never do what you do; I don't have the patience for it." There have been jobs where I might spend hours sorting for just the right cereal flakes or moving rice grains in certain directions (because "those two grains are parallel" or "this one is sticking out just a little too much" or "the two here are too close together"). You may work for an hour developing a certain texture on the side of a cake slice or getting just the right design of mustard on a hot dog or the correct arrangement of ice in a glass. Also, everyone has his or her idea of how food should be arranged. I have learned that if someone asks, "What if?" it really means, "Can we change that?" Be prepared to make changes or even start over again. As I said before, learn to go with the flow (or, in some situations, the flood) and think on your feet. Then there is the patience required to develop your skills

making baking powder biscuits in muffin tins: lessons learned the hard way

I was fairly new to food styling, and it was the first time I had worked with this director. We were shooting a commercial for a strawberry jam product. The director asked me to meet with him the day before the shoot. He wanted to look at as many different muffins or biscuits as I could come up with to determine which he would like for the "break open and steam" shot and the "spread the jam on the surface of said items" shot. I brought in fifteen different kinds of muffins, as well as some baking powder biscuits. He loved the biscuits. I'm sure that in his mind's eye he could see the glistening red jam gliding over the steaming white and beautifully textured just-broken-open biscuit.

That decided, it was now time for me to go home and bake 250 biscuits for the job the next day. On my way out of his office, however, he mentioned that he had some beautiful antique muffin tins that he wanted to use in the commercial. I told him that baking powder biscuits are not made in muffin tins; instead, the dough is patted out on a floured surface, cut with a biscuit cutter into circles, and then placed on baking sheets and baked. I said I had some new, unscratched baking sheets that I would bring with me. But we were not listening to each other.

At 6 A.M. the next morning, the crew, food, and equipment were gathered into vans and we headed for the house two hours out of New York City where we would shoot the commercial. I was able to use the location kitchen because we were not scheduled to shoot in it. I organized my space and began gathering the items I needed for the first shot. When I walked into the dining room where they were setting up that shot, I was shocked to see my biscuits stuffed into the director's antique muffin tins. I blurted out, "But you don't make baking powder biscuits in muffin tins!"

Lesson 1: Even in shock, you walk up to the director and *quietly* discuss any issue between the two of you. As a food professional, it is your responsibility to be a food adviser on critical food-related issues. This is important because any home cook who makes biscuits will know that something such as baking biscuits in muffin tins is wrong. If the director does not understand, however, then you should quietly bring the problem to the attention of the client. If the client says it is fine, then you step back.

What actually happened was that several people heard my concern. Now we had a big issue. The client called the test kitchen and the legal department. The director, furious, of course, refused to give up his preconceived vision of biscuits cooling in antique muffin tins by the grandma's-style kitchen windowsill, sunlight shining through wafting cottage curtains. After an hour of discussion and decision making, the verdict was that I would bake biscuits in muffin tins, and we would use those for the shot. You can imagine this was not a happy moment. Nonetheless, I began making biscuits in muffin tins—not very pretty biscuits, I am afraid.

Lesson 2: The director normally rules, but it is important that the client, who is paying for everything, be informed of food issues that occur, because you are the food expert on the set.

Lesson 3: You will probably never work for that director again. (Many years later, I did get a call from that production company for a job—I guess everyone had forgotten, or it had been a client request. The next issue is, do you take the job?)

and career. In the book *Becoming a Chef*, there is a quote by Michel Richard that is pertinent to food stylists: “You need time and dedication. Be patient (and persistent). Don’t take the elevator—take the stairs.”

- **Personable.** A food stylist usually gets hired for a job because he or she is a good cook and baker, a good problem solver, and has a certain “artful” flair with presentation. If all these things are equal, then one stylist is hired over another because he or she is fun to be around, calm, has a positive attitude, and is a team player. Wouldn’t you rather spend your day with someone like that?
- **Professional.** Every job deserves a 150 percent effort, and anyone who hires you expects that you have the skills to accomplish the job. Even if you are best friends with the photographer or client, treat each assignment with the care and expertise it deserves.
- **Creative and artistic.** Many food stylists have an art background or have an interest in the arts. However, you will be hired for your presentation skills. Some people style in a very formal, controlled way, while others style in a looser and more casual manner. For some jobs, one style works better than the other. (Often, in advertising, the look is more controlled and precise, while in magazines, the food should look natural and doable.) Being able to interpret the client’s desire for a particular style is an important skill, and being able to produce a variety of styles is an asset.
- **Physically healthy.** As food stylists, we spend most of the day on our feet. You’ll schlep (lift and carry) a lot of heavy things, such as groceries, cooking equipment, props, and tools, to new locations all the time. You can find yourself deep-frying chicken for ten hours. When you work on a set, you may be standing or kneeling in awkward positions. (A photographer, while lighting the set, may make it almost impossible for you to reach the food, placing stands, reflector boards, lights, and cameras in your way.) Giving the food its final touch-up can therefore be a backbreaking experience. It is very important to have comfortable shoes, physical stamina, supporting equipment, and assistants.
- **Able to see the humor.** As in every job, you need to be able to step back and take a look at the big picture. This is just one day, and you are not doing open-heart surgery or solving the problems of the universe. Some people around you may think you are, but I assure you, you are not. So if someone is requesting the almost impossible, or the stupid, or if you will be two hours later than you had hoped in getting home, it is best to try to relax and find perspective. Some of the strangest or “worst” days become the ones we remember with humor later on.
- **Versatile.** As a food stylist, I have been asked to work on assignments that were not specifically related to food styling. I have developed recipes for many clients. I’ve been asked to help prepare and set up food presentations for press parties or food shows. I’ve written magazine and newspaper articles, and taught classes and seminars from Norway and Japan to the Disney Institute in Florida and the prison cells of New York’s Rikers Island. I’ve worked on restaurant menus and helped restaurants in their food presentations. I’ve taught professional recipe writing skills to the sales staff of food-service companies. I’ve demonstrated recipes at a national garden show and developed a cooking class for the American Heart Association. All of these assignments were food related and sometimes food styling related, but because of a variety

of learned skills, I was able to say yes to all of them. And that led to many interesting assignments. It is important to have strong food styling skills, but it is also helpful to know how to develop and write clear and delicious recipes. Good communication, management, and marketing skills are an asset as well.

This brings me to another topic—careers and educational experiences that are useful in our business. Just remember that having a variety of skills can allow you to say yes to a variety of jobs.

Education, Formal and Informal

Do you need to be a graduate of a culinary school to be a food stylist? No, and many stylists are not, but you do need to be a very good cook and baker for this career. The very first food stylists were home economists who worked in the test kitchens of major food companies or magazines, and it was imperative to have a home economics degree to get those jobs. I have a degree in foods and nutrition and have found that many of the courses I took were extremely helpful: for example, food science, organic chemistry, nutrition, sensory evaluation of foods, food demonstration, culinary communications, and recipe writing and development. I do wish that I had had the opportunity to attend a culinary school, though. Most schools now offer a two-year program. Some schools and continuing education programs will allow you to put together your own class list so you can work on areas where you are the weakest. For myself, I would have taken professional baking classes.

Along the way I did take many cooking classes and avidly watched every segment of Julia Child's *The French Chef* with my then-infant daughter. (Thank you, Julia, from both of us.) Life's lessons and formal and informal classes have all come in handy at one time or another, even Josef Albers's theory of color, which was a class I took at the Rhode Island School of Design, just for the fun of it, long before I became a food stylist. I learned the principles of how colors affect each other, either in a positive or negative manner. Today, courses in food styling are beginning to be offered throughout the country and in some culinary schools. These are a helpful way to gain a lot of information about techniques used in the field, because food styling techniques differ from some culinary techniques. Courses are a wise investment if they are taught by practicing food stylists.

Whenever I visit a foreign country, one of my best learning experiences is to go to a grocery store. I consider groceries to be cultural museums because they tell me so much about the country and its people. I look at what foods are popular, and how they are displayed and packaged. When I teach my food styling classes, I have students do some shopping in the hope that they will begin to look at food from the perspective of a food stylist. What is seasonal and beautiful (or not) in produce and which stores have the best? Are there new fruits or vegetables to be aware of? What new products have become available recently—is there a trend developing? What new colors are being used in packaging and who has changed their packaging? As a stylist, you'll need to notice which bakery has a certain shape of bread in dark rye or where to find dried chickpea flour, for instance. If you prop as well, you should always be aware of what interesting and useful props could be utilized in your work.

Other educational experiences that can prove useful are courses in design, art, photography, publishing, communications, business, and marketing. Continue to

grow and learn: Read (books, newspapers, and magazines), take classes, and always try new foods in restaurants (a hard assignment!), as well as at home. Travel and volunteer to work in interesting food environments. The food stylist's world is a visual world. If you are like me, you are drawn to visual beauty. I have found that one of the best ways to improve my skills is to look, look, look. Look at inspiring magazines, books, movies, art shows, nature, fashion, and architecture. (Notice that I didn't say only food magazines and cookbooks.) Look at the results of what you have just cooked or baked. Compare photographs or advertisements of similar foods and think about what makes one work better than another. Pay attention to current chefs' presentation techniques. Identify trendy colors in fashion. You can and should always teach yourself.

Work Experience: Versatility Helps

Several food stylists I have talked to have said that they find their best assistants have had other work experience before entering the field of food styling.

Restaurant kitchen work is wonderful training for food styling. Not only do you gain hands-on experience with a variety of foods, but you learn to be organized (often in small spaces), work as part of a team, and deal with stress. You also learn to deal with long hours, hot kitchens, and being on your feet all day.

Previous work with food companies or in marketing and advertising can be very helpful in understanding the job from the client's viewpoint. Many freelance food stylists started by working in the test kitchens of food companies. There they learned about the various branches of the company and the responsibilities of each branch. They learned to develop products and recipes for their target audience. They learned presentation techniques and may have done some food styling as well. They attended shoots for print or television to give helpful advice and make sure a product was properly represented. All of this gives these professionals a strong background for food styling and an understanding of product marketing.

Jobs in publishing and photography or with a production company give you valuable insight into how these parts of the business work. Food stylists are hired by both food magazines and cookbook publishers. If you have worked in the test kitchen of a magazine, you will have a greater understanding of how to develop recipes that will look good when photographed. Shooting commercials or sitcoms with food in them and working on home shopping shows or news shows

five pieces of advice for the food stylist

I was recently asked, If you could give just five pieces of advice to beginning and advanced food stylists, what would they be? Being forced to condense my thoughts on the subject was a good thing. My advice is as follows:

1. **Have good cooking and baking skills.** You can't fake these skills, and you will need to be knowledgeable, as well as have hands-on experience in the kitchen.
2. **Be resourceful.** Develop a good source list and a good network of fellow "foodies." You can't know everything, so you need to know where or to whom to go for information when you need it.
3. **Be flexible.** The greater your knowledge base in a variety of related fields, the greater variety of jobs you will be able to accept or develop (and as an entrepreneur, it can be important to create jobs). Be flexible on the job as well. You are working with a team. It is often important to think outside the box. Adapt to new situations. Gather as much information as you can pertaining to a job, but keep in mind that there will always be a few surprises, so learn to go with the flow and think on your feet.
4. **Build a knowledge base.** I have mixed feelings about this advice. It is important to push yourself, but it is also essential to have the knowledge and skills to be able to do the job well. I began working as an assistant at the age of thirty-eight. This was not my first career, and I had also taken off six years to be a mother. I went back to school, and then I patiently worked as an assistant for five years before I began working on my own. I found the knowledge I gained as an assistant invaluable.
5. **Enjoy your work.** You have come to this career because food is your passion. Again, don't let your work spoil your joy and love of food.

that have food segments, for companies that produce satellite media tours or for TV's Food Network all have connections to what we do.

Finally, whatever career you choose, take the advice offered in Jack and Suzy Welch's book *Winning*. In the book, the Welches suggest that you keep asking the questions: Does this job allow me to be myself? Does it make me smarter? Does it open doors? Does it represent a compromise I accept? Does it touch my inner being? The authors feel that if you listen closely enough, with time, patience, and the courage to act, the answers will lead you to the very place you were always meant to be (see also pages 323–334).

business ETHICS

To Enhance, Stretch, or Cheat?

It does happen, both in print and film, that we are asked to “improve” the look of a particular food. If we are shooting prebaked packaged chocolate chip cookies, we may produce cookies for the shoot by sorting through many packages of product to find the best-looking cookies. We could brush off any crumbs and shoot them. Or we may be asked to warm the chocolate chips slightly before shooting to give them a little glisten (enhance). If the chocolate chips are broken or not showing, we may be asked to add new or more chocolate chips, using either the client's product or purchased chocolate chips (stretch). We may be asked to make fresh cookies using either dough prepared by the client or a recipe and raw ingredients sent to us by the client (stretch). We may be asked to make the best-looking chocolate chip cookies we can using our own recipe and adding chips in just the right places partway through the baking process so they will not blister (cheat). Any of these things can happen on a chocolate chip cookie shoot.

Some of the techniques we call editing, some enhancing, some stretching, and some cheating. Before you begin your career as a food stylist, it is important that you think about where you stand on such issues. Some food companies and magazines want only the real food or recipe shown. Other companies feel perfectly free to “cheat.” Over the years, I have watched as the accepted rules regarding truth in advertising have become both tighter and looser. If a major company is sued for false advertising, things tend to tighten for a while. Currently, it seems that many companies are quite liberal with the rules, but because of the trend toward the natural look, many may not need to enhance as often either.

As food stylists, we naturally want food to look great and be presented as beautifully as possible. If they are to be used, enhancements are generally requested by an art director, photographer, or director. I feel that the food stylist should get permission from the client for any enhancements, since if a problem does occur, such as consumers complaining or competitors suing, the client is the one who has to deal with it. Most large companies have a legal department to consult. Usually we will be told one of four things: we cannot enhance, we can enhance to a limited extent, we can do whatever is necessary, or “I am not in the room.” The last I don't like to hear because it puts all the responsibility on me.

Magazine or cookbook publishers will want the food to represent the recipes. We will not add multicolored bell peppers in place of a single-color pepper because they look prettier or make muffins larger or smaller unless the recipes are revised to reflect these changes. We can, however, suggest changes as long as they do not alter the integrity of the recipe. Each publisher has their own standard of naturalness: Some prefer the more perfect look, some want everything to look real. Some will use garnishes liberally and some will not.

As food stylists and as good cooks and bakers, we will still make food as beautiful as possible, but if we make it impossibly beautiful, the consumer may feel defeated or think that the recipe doesn't look doable. I cannot tell you the number of times I have heard someone comment that his or her food never looks as good as the picture. There are many reasons for this: The carefully chosen props we use to present our food enhance its appearance. Also, there is magic in the camera and the photographer's lighting. Most people have never looked at their food from a camera's point of view, without the distractions of peripheral vision. Try it sometime. Either cup your hand over one eye and look at your salad or cut a small square hole in a piece of paper and look at the salad through the hole. You may be surprised at how appealing your homemade salad looks when that is all you see.

Some magazines do choose to stretch by producing the perfect (undercooked and painted) turkey or by putting freshly cooked cranberries on top of a cranberry upside-down cake. But if they overstretch, consumers do call or write in to complain.

As the Photographer Sees It

With the development of digital photography, it has become increasingly possible to produce the "perfect" picture. No longer do we stylists have to find a totally unblemished banana. We still try, but if the banana has a bruise or is not quite the right shade of yellow, that can be easily corrected. If we need a drink to be a little darker or we want to add a splash coming from the glass, that can be done in Photoshop. If we liked the garnish on the stand-in better than on the final dish, we can cut it from the stand-in photo and paste it onto the hero photo. In the past, expensive and lengthy retouching would have been required to make these changes. Not with digital. With this ease in manipulation, however, come ethical questions for both the photographer and the client. Making a prettier picture is one thing; changing the product is another. As my dear friend photographer Jim Scherzi says, "It is important that we are responsible with our power."

Shooting Food We Don't Endorse, and Other Ethical Conflicts

Some ethical questions that come up for food stylists include the following: Do you accept assignments for food that you would not eat? Vegetarian food stylists cannot keep busy without shooting some meat products. You may personally choose not to eat some processed foods, but do you accept assignments promoting them? If another stylist refers you for a job and then you are asked to do another job for that client, do you suggest that the client call the stylist who recommended you first? What do

you do if you have accepted a one-day editorial shoot and a three-day advertising job (much more money) comes up for the same date? As an assistant, do you pass out your card at shoots or talk to photographers about working for them? (These are both considered very bad form. Most of my assistants have been very good about approaching only photographers I have not worked with. However, I will suggest that a photographer work with one of my assistants if I am booked when he or she needs me and if I feel that the assistant is up to the assignment.) Do you take an assignment if you don't feel your skills are up to the job? If you have come up with a concept and provided the food and your time for a test shot and the photographer sells the shot, should the photographer share the income? If you send your invoice to the photographer and you later learn that the photographer raised your fee but did not pay you the increased amount, should you bring this up? (Keep in mind that if the photographer raises your fee on the invoice, the client may choose not to work with you again, preferring to hire someone who charges less.) What is a reasonable amount of time to wait to get paid? When should you get credit for your work?

I have chosen only to bring up these issues and not to answer them. It is important to know that you will have to decide for yourself how you will deal with them.