

Exploring Food Photography

In This Chapter

- ▶ Introducing food styling basics
 - ▶ Finding where to set your focus
 - ▶ Taking a peek at camera and lighting gear
 - ▶ Backing up and saving your photos
 - ▶ Starting your food photography business
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Maybe you picked up this book because you've started a food blog and are interested in creating more interesting photos, or perhaps you're looking to grow your budding food photography business. Or could it be that you want to create a pictorial cookbook to showcase your delicious recipes? Or maybe it's close to lunchtime and you're getting a little hungry!

Whatever the reason, welcome to the wonderful world of food styling and photography! Like most types of photography, food photography is a complementary blend of the artistic and technical, with a pinch of extra styling to make the food images look scrumptious.

In this book, I provide a robust look at food styling and photography to help you capture the deliciousness of your food subjects. I include helpful information on equipment and settings, composition and focus, managing your images, and growing your business, among other subjects.

Some folks insist that food photography is far more difficult than other types of photography, but with a little know-how under your belt, I think you'll find it's a piece of cake!



Styling Food for Delicious Photos

Food styling is all about making foods look appetizing and interesting for the camera. At its core, styling involves choosing backgrounds and settings for a shoot. That is, you pick (and place) the dishes, linens, unique surfaces, and utensils. Check out everything that's involved in Figure 1-1.

For this photo, I placed the cupcakes on a green milk glass cake plate, with a wrinkled white fabric set behind the food. The arrangement of the cupcakes may look natural and effortless, but it took a lot of experimenting to get just the right look for the shot.

You may notice a small riser hidden under the center cupcake to lift it up from the bunch. I also put one tiny plastic block under one side of the green-frosted cupcake at the back to make that cupcake lean slightly off-kilter.



85mm, 1/40 sec., f/3.2, 200

Figure 1-1: These cupcakes are carefully arranged on a green cake plate.

Getting into a little more detail, you also have the garnishes and accents, or the little something extras, that increase interest and deliciousness in a photo. You can add so many different types of accents to a food dish, such as the large sprig of dill and the cream-colored sauce in Figure 1-2. Creativity reigns with accents, so don't limit yourself to that conventional piece of parsley!

Pull it all together by placing these elements, which I discuss further in the following sections, in a pleasing composition, and shoot *a lot* of images!



The food you're photographing may look good for only a short period of time, so use the time wisely and approach your subject from various tilts, angles, and distances (see Chapter 10 for details). If you have time, try some different backgrounds and settings as well. You can also change up the garnishes for a slightly different look. The more images and options you have to choose from, the better.



70mm, 1/40 sec., f/7.1, 200

Figure 1-2: A couple of well-placed accents can enhance any dish.

In Figure 1-2, my chef provided the lovely grilled salmon and vegetables dish on a clean white plate. For this part of the shoot, I decided to use a dark background to really make the colors of the dish stand out. I steamed away the wrinkles of a dark brown cloth napkin and then placed it under the plate to use as a background. I tweaked the vegetables slightly to make the arrangement look a little more natural. I also wanted to make sure the veggies picked up the highlights from the lights.

Speaking of lights, for the image in Figure 1-2, I had three lights going on at the shoot: a *key light*, or main light; a *fill light* (a weaker light source) to help shape the light and shadows; and a small light shooting across the back of the scene as a background light. (See the later section “Looking at lighting” and Chapter 9 for details on lighting your food subjects.)

Starting with backgrounds

Backgrounds are an integral part of a food image's overall look, even if you don't actually see more than a hint of them. Backgrounds often set the mood for the image and either blend in or contrast with the food subject. Whatever look you go for, the idea is to really make the food the star of the show. A

clean, beautifully lit white background, as shown in Figure 1-3, creates a light, whitewashed setting that can be a lovely and appetizing look for a food shot.



85mm, 1/50 sec., f/3.5, 400

Figure 1-3: An all-white background lets the food shine.

And on the other extreme, a rustic, southwestern type of background can provide a bold and colorful counterpoint to the food subject, as the rusty, well-worn painted metal chair does in Figure 1-4.



32mm, 1/125 sec., f/5.0, 400

Figure 1-4: The background in this shot complements the rustic look of the tomatillos.



Did you notice how each of the tomatillos in Figure 1-4 points in a different direction? The variety of angles in the placement of foods against a background can also increase interest in a food photo. I go into detail about how to place and arrange your food subjects in Chapter 8.

The possibilities are endless for what you can use as a background to add texture to and increase interest in your food shots (just check out Figure 1-5). You can use metals, woods, plastics, papers, and fabrics, as well as cool organic materials, such as leaves or coffee beans. (See Chapters 3 and 4, where I talk about various styles and looks for backgrounds and settings, for more ideas.) When it comes to backgrounds, let your creativity go wild!



55mm, 1/30 sec., f/7.1, 400

Figure 1-5: Seed pods create a unique background.

Foraging for props

Part of the fun of food styling and photography is finding the cool dishes, silverware, trays, and other props to make your food images look their best. I love rummaging through a good antique store, thrift store, or flea market to find those unique items that enhance the artistic appeal of an image. And discount stores are an awesome option for finding everyday wares for your housewares library. Figure 1-6 is a shot of one of my antique store finds: a couple of 1950s' era ramekins.

How did the image come together? Well, to start, I found the pale blue ramekins stacked in the back of a crowded antique store and immediately fell in love with the distinct shape of the cups, not to mention the color is pretty darn beautiful as well.

When baking the soufflés in the ramekins for this shot, I received a nice surprise: A unique black crackle appeared in the glaze of the ramekins as they heated. Bonus! I think the crackle makes the ramekins a little more interesting within the image.

When planning for this shot, I decided I wanted one other pastel color to round out the color palette of the image, so I added the soft yellow plate (also found at an antique store) under the ramekins. The spoon to the left came from a local thrift store. And finally, a white cake plate, which I purchased at one of my favorite discount stores, placed under the whole shebang finishes the look.



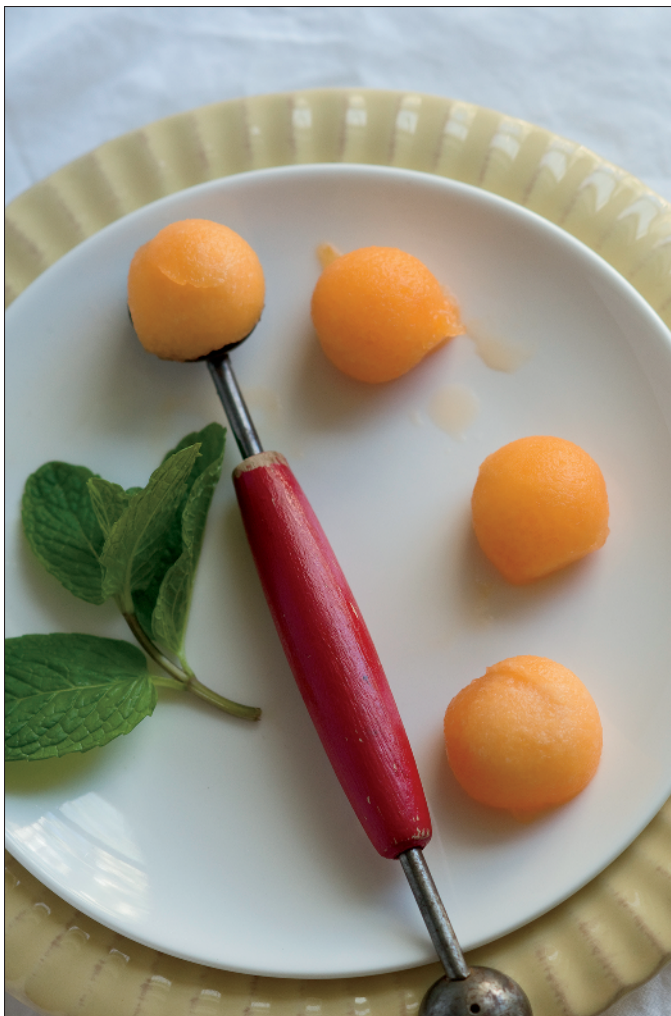
45mm, 1/20 sec., f/5.3, 640

Figure 1-6: Antique blue ramekins frame these soufflés beautifully.

After all the elements were in place, I shot as quickly as possible because the little soufflés were quickly deflating.



Another great way to add character to a photo is to add small, inexpensive, everyday items. Careful scouring at a neighborhood garage sale yielded the retro red melon baller in Figure 1-7.



85mm, 1/80 sec., f/4.5, 400

Figure 1-7: A bit of added character takes shape in the form of an antique melon baller.

Placing the food and accents

Yes, what you've heard is true: Arranging a food subject's composition to make it look natural and effortless for the camera can actually take quite a bit of time and effort.

When composing a food shot, I like to place the majority of the subject within a circular area in or near the middle of the frame. Of course, special cases may occur, such as when shooting for packaging or editorial use where the subject needs to be placed to one side or in a corner.

To make a food subject such as vegetables, for example, appear natural, you need to mix things up a bit. Foods look more realistic when placed at seemingly random angles within a shot (see Chapter 8 for details). These angles convey a more effortless and realistic look for a composition. Figure 1-8 is a good example.



42mm, 1/40 sec., f/8, 250

Figure 1-8: Vary the angles of the food subject for a more realistic look.

And that thought carries over to food accents and garnishes, too. Change up those angles on your accents so the composition looks natural. (I talk more about placing accents in your food subjects in Chapter 6.)

Following Your Focus

Focus is a key element of food photography. With that said, focus trends in the industry sway to and fro, changing with the times.

Twenty-five years ago, food photography images were almost always in complete focus. Currently, one of the more popular styles of focus is *selective focus*, which focuses in on only one appetizing area of an image.

Depending on the subject, you may decide that focusing solely on the front or midsection of the food looks best. Or you can keep most of the food in focus and blow out the background. In other situations, you may decide to have the entire food subject and setting in focus. And, yes, sometimes you may need to have the entire food subject a bit *soft*, or out of focus. In Chapter 11, I present the details of the various focus considerations when shooting foods.

Honing in on that gorgeous little shiny highlight is what the focus is all about sometimes. In Chapter 6, I talk about ways to enhance and capture that shine in an interesting way, which helps it translate to a delicious-looking photo.

Speaking of shiny highlights, Figure 1-9 displays a beautiful one in a brownie's caramel topping. This particular photo was shot by using a super-simple setup. Early one cloudy morning, I noticed that the light outside was lovely and diffused. Because of the available natural light, I made the decision to shoot outdoors that day.

I placed the brownie on a worn, brown wooden stool to complement the dessert's coloring. I placed a wrinkled white paper wrap under the brownie itself to provide a little separation between the brown of the food and the brown of the stool. I used one reflector to bump up the shine of the highlight ever so slightly. I then focused intently on the highlight in the delicious caramel topping. I shot from all angles and distances, and the shot in Figure 1-9 was my favorite by far. Dreamy!



Where to focus is your artistic choice, whether you're shooting for yourself, your own blog or cookbook, or for a stock photo agency. So play around with the focus when shooting foods, as I did in the photo shown in Figure 1-10. However, when working on photo shoots with clients or art directors, although you may have some input, where you focus is primarily their call.



42mm, 1/160 sec., f/8, 400

Figure 1-9: Focusing on the shiny highlight of a caramel rocky road brownie.



40mm, 1/200 sec., f/7.1, 200

Figure 1-10: Selective focus captures the delicious toppings on this Italian pizza.

When shooting for packaging, clients often request that the entire food subject be in focus to provide an accurate representation of the food inside. Food packaging clients can be very particular about how their foods are shot and composed!

Talking about the Technical Bits

As I mention earlier in this chapter, food photography is the joining together of the technical and artistic. In this book, I cover many of the equipment options available for both lighting and camera gear. The following sections serve as a small introduction.

Looking at lighting

As a photographer, you have a full palette of lights, lighting gear, and reflectors to choose from these days. The one constant when shooting food with studio lighting is the need to soften the lights via diffusers for a nice quality of light. In Chapter 9, I go into detail about the different types of lighting and diffusers, but basically the lighting used for food photography boils down to the following three types:

- ✓ **Strobe:** *Strobe lights* are like a flash system that syncs between your camera and your lights. These lights can be strobe lights that work with a stand-alone power source, or they can be *mono lights* — lights that contain their power source within the unit.
- ✓ **Continuous:** *Continuous* or *hot lighting* refers to lights that are always on when shooting. You turn them on, you leave them on, and yes, they get rather hot!
- ✓ **Natural:** Using natural light is an incredibly fitting choice for food photography. Figure 1-11 is a good example. An abundance of filtered natural light falling directly on a subject really caresses the food and shows it off to its fullest. This option requires less technical skill and is a really great look; however, counting on the weather to provide beautiful overcast light isn't the most reliable choice of lighting!

Considering camera equipment

In Chapter 2, I delve into the specifics of cameras and camera gear, including choosing a digital SLR to meet your needs. A lot of options are now available, with newer, better, faster, and higher-megapixel cameras coming out all the time. The key to choosing a camera really depends on what you need, what you can afford, and what you already have (or don't have).



35mm, 1/80 sec., f/4.5, 400

Figure 1-11: Natural light falls on fresh picked peppers.

Choosing a lens for food photography is a little different than choosing a lens for other types of photography. To show off the beauty of a food subject, I find that using a lens within the normal to slightly long range works best. I usually work within the 40 to 70mm range, with an occasional foray up to an 85mm lens. I suggest having two to three lenses (a mixture of fixed and zoom lenses) in your photo arsenal. Each lens provides a slightly different look for your images, so you want to make sure you have options.

Check out the discussion in Chapter 2 to narrow down the criteria for cameras and lenses for your food photography business — or glorified hobby, as it may be.

Uploading, Backing Up, and Naming Photos

After you're done shooting and uploading your images, the real fun begins! The first order of business is to protect your photos. Backing up your work right off the bat gives you a second set of images to work with (just in case).



Sadly, devices can sometimes fail. So to protect your photos, back them up in some way. Whether you back up to an external drive, the cloud, or CDs doesn't matter; just make sure to back up your work so you have duplicate copies of your images in two different places.

The next step is to choose the best images from the shoot. Is the subject in focus? Check. Exposure correct? Check. Is the composition looking absolutely delicious? Check! In Chapter 13, I discuss some simple ways to go about tackling the selection process.



After I select my favorite images, I use an easy naming convention for my photos. Doing so standardizes the names of the photos in my library and is uber-helpful for organizing and finding my images. I start with a four-digit date, such as 0412 (for April 2012), then add a descriptive title, and lastly, I leave the underscore and the original photo number at the end. So the image's file name looks something like 0412AppleCore_6723.

When reviewing your images, you may come across some really nice photos that are 97.3 percent great, but they have a couple of tiny imperfections, such as the image in Figure 1-12. Here's where photo-editing software, such as Photoshop, comes to the rescue! Photoshop has a host of easy-to-use tools that can correct most small flaws in your images. In Chapter 12, I go into detail about the various post-processing tools available and how to use them to perfect your images.



42mm, 1/20 sec., f/5.0, 400

Figure 1-12: Don't be afraid to use post-processing tools when you have a sauce spill that could use a little cleanup.

Working on the Business of Food Photography

Promoting your business begins with pulling together a gorgeous portfolio to show potential clients the magic you can do with a camera.

Once upon a time, portfolios consisted of a folder of selected prints that were carefully carried around town to present ceremoniously to clients. Although this option is still a good choice and is particularly appropriate in some urban markets, these days, a portfolio is more often a digital collection of images.

When you've made your portfolio decisions (such as whether to go digital or print and what photos to include), it's time to consider advertising. As a general rule, advertising your work leads to more work, so get on out there! The types of ads to consider include direct mail, magazine or newspaper ads, or those small Internet ads that display down the side columns of search engines or social sites, just to name a few.

And speaking of social, when it comes to marketing your work, go on and be social! Growing your business goes hand in hand with a large online presence (websites, blogs, social networks, and beyond).

So to get your business engines revving, check out Chapters 14 and 15, which provide a host of info on the business aspects of food photography.

