

Learn the best
ways to compose
your pictures!

Food Photography

From Snapshots to Great Shots

Get great detail
in your subjects!

Nicole S. Young

Food Photography: From Snapshots to Great Shots

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DEDICATION

To foodies, food bloggers, home cooks, and chefs...and to anyone who craves a delicious meal, chases beauty, and wants to make people hungry with their photographs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The process of writing, editing, and publishing a book is, at times, overwhelming. It's a creative challenge to make the content work within the pages, teach the reader (as clearly as possible) about technique, skill, vision, and creativity, and also stay true to the layout, flow, and structure of the book itself. My name may be on the cover of the book, but I'm really only a part of the process, and there's no way that this book would be what it is without the guidance, hard work, dedication, inspiration, and motivation of so many other people.

I wouldn't be where I am today without the support and love from my family. They have always believed in me and never doubted my ability to succeed at whatever I set my mind and heart to do, and because of that I will be forever grateful. I love you guys!

I am blessed with an amazing group of friends, mentors, and colleagues. You all have opened my eyes to things I couldn't see without your guidance, and you have also been the voice of reason when I stumbled. Thank you for your never-ending dedication, loyalty, and patience. Thank you also for your wisdom, advice, and knowledge, and, even more importantly, thank you for giving me hope and inspiring confidence.

I truly want to thank the Peachpit crew and the team involved in producing this book, and especially my editor, Valerie. This road was a little bumpier than with previous projects, but we all seemed to make it through unscathed. Thank you for your patience, flexibility, and teamwork while working on this book.

I am extremely thankful to my readers. It means so much to me when I get a note from someone thanking me for a book, a blog post, or a bit of knowledge that helped him or her become a better photographer. You, my readers, are the reason I wrote this book, and I, in turn, have learned so much from being a part of an amazing, worldwide, kind, and generous community of creative and talented people.

And lastly, my faith has always been a very big part of my life. My passion for art and my talent for teaching and sharing my knowledge with others are gifts that I have been extremely blessed with, and I am so grateful for having God in my life, which keeps my heart alive and refreshed each day.

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Introduction

I had this book in my brain long before I started writing it. I love food and I love photography, and it was just natural to blend the two together and evolve into becoming a food photographer. I also know there are a lot of other photographers and foodies who want to make their food look gorgeous, too. Because of this, I felt a strong desire to write a book that would help food lovers create images that truly expressed the beauty of the food they wanted to photograph.

We all develop our own style of photography, but one thing rings true when photographing food: It needs to look delicious. The purpose of this book is to guide photographers at all levels to make their food look as good as it tastes, and to do so as naturally, organically, and simply as possible.

Here is a quick Q&A about the book to help you understand what you'll see in the following pages:

Q: WHAT CAN I EXPECT TO LEARN FROM THIS BOOK?

A: This book starts with the basics of photography (photographic fundamentals and equipment) and works through the steps of lighting, styling, composing, and editing the photographs. It shows how to present the food that you've cooked and prepared and turn it into a mouthwatering photograph.

Q: WHO IS THIS BOOK WRITTEN FOR?

A: Ultimately, this book is for anyone who wants to create beautiful food photographs. I wrote it with food bloggers and home cooks in mind, but all of the techniques can be used by photographers, cooks, or chefs of any type or skill level in any situation or environment.

Q: DO I NEED A FANCY CAMERA AND LIGHTING EQUIPMENT TO GET GOOD FOOD PHOTOGRAPHS?

A: No! You can get great photographs by using a minimal amount of gear, and the last thing you should do before learning any type of photography is to overspend and buy gear that you *think* you will need. You will, of course, need a camera to work with, but use what you have for now before running out and buying new equipment. As you develop your photographic style and your skills evolve, it will be easy to narrow down the gear that will help share your vision. This book does teach how to light food with strobe (artificial) light, and I do think that it's a very important skill to learn, since you may not always be able to find the right light to use for a photograph. But if you have God-given, beautiful, diffused window light nearby, there's no need to spend money on strobe lights or flashes immediately. You'll end up saving money, and you can buy the proper gear later.

Q: WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES ALL ABOUT?

A: At the end of most chapters, I list a few exercises that will help you practice and solidify some of the techniques and settings you learned about. Feel free to try them out if you like, and if you do, be sure to check out the Flickr group and share your photographs!

Q: SHOULD I READ THE BOOK STRAIGHT THROUGH OR CAN I SKIP AROUND FROM CHAPTER TO CHAPTER?

A: There's really no set way to read the book. If you're new to photography, however, I recommend that you read the first two chapters to get an understanding of the basics and build a solid foundation of photography before diving in to the lighting and food-specific information. If you're a fairly seasoned photographer who understands your camera and most of the basic techniques, then you can go ahead and jump straight to the more food-specific chapters.

4



Canon 7D
ISO 100
1/125 sec.
f/4
70–200mm lens



Styling & Props

THE ART OF PRESENTATION


One of the reasons I love food photography is that I truly enjoy styling and crafting the food, and one of the biggest compliments I get from people who see my images is that they made them hungry! When we eat food, all of our senses are at work—we see, smell, touch, and taste the food—but when we look at a photo, we can only use our eyes. Styling food is one way to capture its flavors, aromas, and textures and to communicate them to viewers. Creating an amazing-looking dish is an art, whether you eat it or photograph it, and you can do a lot of little things to enhance the look of the food and (hopefully) make people salivate when they view your photographs.

PORING OVER THE PICTURE

The asparagus was blanched in boiling water to bring out its bright-green qualities and add color to the photograph.

One of my favorite breakfast meals is eggs benedict, so I decided to cook it up and photograph it. Instead of using Canadian bacon for this dish, I used traditional bacon, since that is how I like to prepare it. I also added some bright, beautiful asparagus to the background to balance the colors of the eggs benedict in the foreground.

For this photograph, I used a white, textured tabletop, along with a white plate and napkin for a clean look. The white in the scene also balances with the color of the poached egg on the plate.



Canon 7D
ISO 100
1/60 sec.
f/5.6
70–200mm lens

I let the hollandaise sauce drip to the plate and then sprinkled it with coarse-ground black pepper for a finishing touch.


PORING OVER THE PICTURE

Fake ice was added to this out-of-focus glass in the background to make it look like there is water in the glass.

I used a large North-facing window behind the dish to light the photograph, which added highlights over the stew and gave a nice glow to this bay leaf.

To add more texture and color balance to this photograph, I placed a tan napkin under the dish.





Canon 5D Mark II
ISO 100
1/8 sec.
f/8
70-200mm lens

To add color to an otherwise brown and boring meal, I blanched some of the vegetables in boiling water to make their color pop before adding them to the finished dish.

I don't use my slow cooker very often, but I decided to try it out on a simple beef stew that I could photograph for this book. To add color to the dish, I used brightly colored vegetables and placed them in the bowl, and I added some pasta next to the stew to bring it all together.

STYLING CONSIDERATIONS

When we photograph our food, we want it to look beautiful, mouthwatering, and delicious. But there are several issues to consider before you go full speed.

USING A FOOD STYLIST

Food stylists are extremely talented artists, most often with a culinary background. Their job is to make food look fresh and appetizing for the camera, so an understanding of how food acts and behaves is a must. They know all the tricks and techniques to create beautiful-looking dishes and use their skills to make the food look as delicious as it tastes. But do I think that every food photographer needs to work with a food stylist? My answer is: it depends.

If you are the photographer for a big production (one with a very large budget or for a high-profile company), it's necessary to have a stylist. Even if you have the chops to style the food yourself, doing both the photography and the styling would be overwhelming. Styling food on set is a one- or maybe two-person job, so when you are in an environment where time is limited (or there are several food items to style and photograph), then you are probably better off working with a professional food stylist.

On the other hand, if you're a food blogger or you just want to photograph food for fun, then it's likely you don't have the budget to hire a bona fide food stylist. In that case, it's up to you to learn how to style your food and present it so that it not only looks appetizing, but also looks good on camera.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When it comes to styling food, there are some "legal" restrictions that you must adhere to, mostly when you're photographing food for commercial purposes. The basic guideline is that if you're photographing food for advertisements (such as an ice cream image for a specific brand of ice cream), then you need to photograph the actual product, which in this case would be ice cream. You can't photograph fake ice cream and pass it off as the real thing.

But let's say you are photographing the sprinkles and toppings that go on top of the ice cream, and the product that is being advertised is *not* the ice cream itself. In this case it should be OK to use fake ice cream, since ice cream is, after all, one of the more difficult things to style and photograph. With all that said, I am not a lawyer, so if you find yourself in an unclear situation, it's best to seek legal advice.

STYLING . . . VS. NOT STYLING

So what exactly is food styling? If you ask me, it has a broad range of definitions. Some people may consider food styling to encompass only the “weird” things that can be done to food, such as using motor oil on pancakes or soap bubbles in coffee. My own definition is much more liberal, since I think that we all style our food. Every intentional adjustment you make to your dishes, whether it’s for food you’re going to eat or to photograph, is styling. When chefs prepare meals at restaurants, they also style their dishes. Presentation is extremely important with food, especially when it’s going to be photographed; when you can’t smell the food, hear it sizzle, or hold it in your hands, its appearance is everything.

You see, styling food doesn’t mean you need to compromise the integrity of the dish and contaminate it with non-food items in order to create a stunning photograph. To me, nothing is more beautiful than real food, but it still takes a bit of work to make that food look good for a photograph (**Figures 4.1** and **4.2**). You can also create your entire dish and do a bit of “editing” to the plate, which can be as basic as taking what is in front of you and moving things around to make it look more appealing.



FIGURE 4.1

This food was cooked to be eaten and I did no styling to the dish. While it doesn’t look bad or unappetizing, you can see a clear difference between it and Figure 4.2.

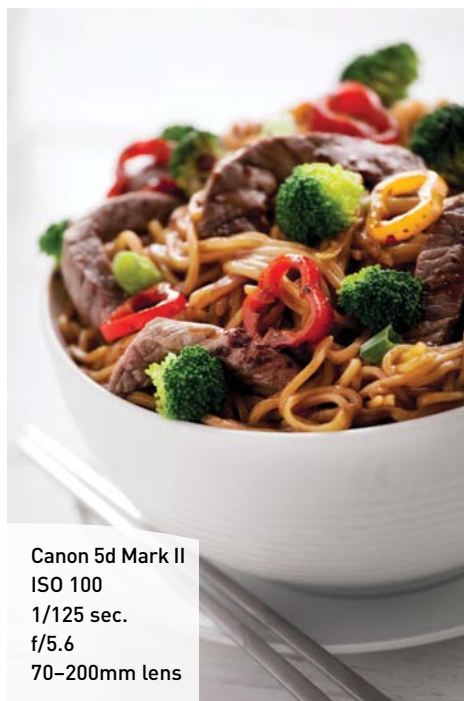


FIGURE 4.2

The food in this photograph was fully cooked, but it was styled and prepared to look bright and colorful.

The way you style and present your food is up to you, and the ultimate purpose of your photograph will also play a role in the presentation. If you run a Web site that showcases recipes and food, you might want to make your dish look as real as possible and only edit or style it so that you represent the recipe as truthfully as possible. Or, if you just love food and want to create beautiful dishes for the love of photography, sneaking in a few “tricks” may not be such a bad thing. There’s no right or wrong way to style food; just do what fits the purpose of your photography and your personal style.

ENSURING FOOD QUALITY

When you cook a meal, you want to use quality ingredients to get the best flavors possible, right? When photographing food, you want to make sure that you follow the same principle, while ensuring that the way each ingredient *looks* is just as important as its *flavor*. It’s simple, really—find only the most beautiful food to photograph.

USING FRESH INGREDIENTS

The key to achieving a high-quality look for the food in your photographs is to use the freshest ingredients possible. Food doesn’t last forever, and its beauty usually dissipates before it spoils or loses flavor. Herbs and veggies sitting in a refrigerator have a very limited lifespan, so make sure you plan your photographs in advance and buy your food *the day of or the day before* it’s photographed.

To ensure that the quality of my food is up to par, I shop only at certain grocery stores and markets. I know that some locations will have, for example, a really great selection of seafood, so I go to one of those stores when I’m shopping for that ingredient. I also like to go to the local farmers market to buy seasonal produce and fruit, and sometimes I’ll conceive the look of a dish based on the freshest ingredients I can find while I’m shopping.

I also prefer to use fresh food rather than canned food, especially when it comes to vegetables (I will, from time to time, use frozen vegetables, as they hold their shape and color well after being cooked). The guideline I use is that if I can buy it fresh (in the produce section of the grocery store), then I buy it fresh and stay away from anything in a can. This also gives me a lot more control over the shape, color, size, and texture of the food. I make exceptions to this, of course, such as when I want to use something like canned mandarin oranges or water chestnuts. The bottom line is that if the food looks good enough to photograph, whether it's fresh or comes out of the can/bag/jar, then go ahead and use it.

SHOPPING SMARTLY

When purchasing the ingredients for your dish, you need to be extremely selective. Choosing the very best-looking ingredients (also referred to as the “hero” food) is essential to a great-looking dish. It's also a good idea to buy more than you need (you can always eat the leftovers!). Having more than one of each item gives you options for the look of the ingredient, and it's also insurance in case anything goes wrong with your first pick.

I think every department at my local grocery store knows by now that I'm a food photographer. Each time I buy an item that needs to be packaged (like seafood or sliced deli meat), I specifically tell them that the food is going to be photographed. When I recently purchased some shrimp that was going to be the “star” of a photo, I asked for only the shrimp with the most beautifully intact tails. I also spent what felt like ten minutes searching through peppers to look for the perfect one (**Figure 4.3**), and I've shopped at more than one store in one trip because the mint selection at the first was old-looking and too crumply for a photograph. Never compromise the look of an ingredient if you don't have to.

With all of your handpicked ingredients in your basket, you'll also want to be careful when they are being bagged or boxed at the checkout. If you want to be über-gentle, bring a separate box for the items to prevent things squishing together in grocery bags. Or you can do what I do and go through the self-checkout line. I still use bags, but I'm careful with what goes where so nothing gets damaged.

FIGURE 4.3

I spent several minutes in the produce section of the grocery store searching for this chili pepper.



Canon 7D
ISO 100
1/125 sec.
f/5.6
70–200 mm lens

FOOD STYLING BASICS

There is no single right way (or wrong way) to style food, but there are some things that many food stylists and photographers do to make the food look its best. Before I get into the how, I'll start with the what—in other words, some of the gadgets and tools you can use to make it all happen (**Figure 4.4**).

GADGETS AND TOOLS

I use a lot of little gadgets and tools when styling food, and many of them are just everyday kitchen utensils. Here is a list of some of the basic tools I use often and wouldn't want to be without:

- **Tweezers:** I use tweezers to place small items (such as mint leaves or sesame seeds) or to reposition things on the plate.
- **Prep bowls or ramekins:** These are really useful for holding garnishes and sauces near your dish or workspace. You can also place them upside-down in bowls to add bulk to foods.
- **Plastic spoons:** These are useful for mixing and stirring, and also for applying things like sauces, sour cream, or any kind of liquid. Because they are extremely light and thin, I find that they give me more control than using metal spoons.
- **Paper towels:** I always have a full roll of paper towels sitting near my workspace when styling food. They're handy for cleaning drips on plates, and if you're styling food in the spot where it will be photographed, you can place them under the plate to catch accidental spills.



FIGURE 4.4

These are a few of the tools I use regularly when styling food.

- **Brushes:** I often like to add shine to food items such as cooked veggies or meat, so I'll add some oil to a prep dish and use a brush to "paint on" the oil.
- **Spray bottle:** I have a little spray bottle filled with water to add mist to food like salad or fresh fruits and vegetables.
- **Grater and peeler:** These are great for preparing garnishes, such as Parmesan cheese or lemon zest.

USING STAND-INS

If you're familiar with movie or television production, you know that the lights need to be set for each scene, which usually takes quite a while. So, instead of having the main actors sit or stand on the set while the lights are being moved and measured, "stand-ins" (people who have a similar look to the actors) take their place so the actors can relax, have their makeup fixed, memorize their lines, or simply stay in character. A similar method is used in food photography.



FIGURE 4.5

This mint was bought the day it was photographed and is fresh out of the refrigerator.



FIGURE 4.6

This was photographed 30 minutes after I photographed Figure 4.5.

When you style and photograph food, you usually have to work very quickly so the food stays fresh. All food has a limited lifespan, which is even more apparent when you're photographing it. Shiny food loses its luster, oils and sauces soak into cooked meats, and foods such as herbs and lettuce wilt away very quickly (**Figures 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, and 4.8**).

When I photograph food, I always use a stand-in. I do this so I can set the lights, composition, props, and so on ahead of time so the food doesn't lose its luster by the time everything is ready to go. I don't even do any cooking, styling, or preparations until the light is ready. That way, once the food is prepared I can drop it into place, make a few minor adjustments, and start photographing within seconds of the food being placed on set.

A stand-in can be anything. An extra piece of food that doesn't require cooking (such as a hamburger bun) usually makes a good stand-in. Or you could use something



FIGURE 4.7

This was photographed 45 minutes after I photographed Figure 4.5.



FIGURE 4.8

This was photographed 1 hour after I photographed Figure 4.5.

totally random that has similar tonal qualities as your prepared food will have (Figure 4.9). Try to use something that is the same shape, width, or height so you can set your composition in the camera (especially handy if you are using a tripod).

FIGURE 4.9

Because their color is similar to the “hero” food, I used a pile of small sweet peppers as the stand-ins for this scene.



Canon 7D
ISO 100
1/250 sec.
f/5.6
70–200mm lens



Canon 7D
ISO 100
1/250 sec.
f/5.6
70–200mm lens

MAINTAINING A CLEAN ENVIRONMENT

When I'm preparing a plate of food for a photograph, I do most of the work away from the location where it will be photographed, usually on my kitchen counter or at a table that sits nearby. This is so I can get very close to the dish and have all of my tools, food, and garnishes nearby, and it doesn't matter if I make a mess.

There will be times, however, that you won't be able to do all of your plating off set and will need to style the dish as it sits in front of the camera. In those instances, you need to be very careful to protect the environment from drips and spills. A perfectly prepared photo setup can easily be tainted with an unwanted stain. The simplest solution is to place a few paper towels around the area, which will likely save you from having to quickly re-create your scene (**Figure 4.10**). This also allows you to focus on the look of the food without worrying about making any messes.



FIGURE 4.10

Before adding the final touches to these dishes, I placed paper towels under and around the plates to catch any spills that would stain the tabletop and napkin.

STYLING FROM CAMERA VIEW

When photographing food, the only area of the food that you need to really pay attention to is the side that's being photographed. It's always best to put yourself in the position of the camera and style the food from that perspective. If you're photographing the front part of a dish, it doesn't matter what the back of the dish looks like, so long as it's not in the image.

Another useful way to style food (and set up the overall scene, too) is to use the Live View feature on your camera (most of the newer DSLR models will have this as a standard feature). Using Live View makes it so easy to place things in the scene, add garnishes, and even just frame and compose the photo. The downside to Live View

is that it drains the battery more quickly than just looking through the viewfinder. It also will sometimes cause interference when firing strobes and flashes wirelessly. If you run into that problem, you'll need to turn off Live View temporarily to trip the shutter and create the photograph.

FOLLOWING YOUR INSTINCTS

Overall, much of styling food involves using what works for your situation. There is no one way to do everything, and, depending on how the food was prepared or how you want it to look, you'll probably have to get creative.

You also need to make sure that you are deliberate in your approach to creating your food and developing its overall appearance. When I style food, everything that ends up in the photograph is there because I want it to be there. A crumb that looks like it landed naturally on the plate may have been placed with small tweezers, or it crumbled off on its own and I just liked the way it looked. Often it's the things that may be considered small and unimportant that can actually take a photo from average to amazing.

STYLING TIPS AND TRICKS

There are a lot of techniques you can use when styling your food to enhance its appearance. Here are some simple tips and tricks to help you make your food look great when it's being photographed.

ADDING BULK

When you place food in a bowl, often it will sink to the bottom and lie flat (especially with foods like pasta and chunky soups or stews). There are a few ways that you can bulk up food in a bowl. The first is to take a dome of Styrofoam, set it in the bottom of the bowl, and then place the food on top of it (**Figure 4.11**). This usually works best for slippery foods that won't stay put, but one downside is that if you're planning to eat the food after it's photographed, you're out of luck (unless you want little bits of plastic foam in your meal). Another method is to take a smaller bowl, such as a prep dish or small ramekin, and place it upside-down in the bowl and then pile the food on top. This keeps your food fresh and does a really good job of adding a little extra bulk.

Canon 7D
ISO 100
1/100 sec.
f/4
70–200mm lens



FIGURE 4.11

For these pasta dishes I used a dome of Styrofoam to bulk up the food. Pasta can be slippery, so Styrofoam works well if I'm using the food only for photography (and not to eat afterward).

Another quick tip is that if you're photographing a bowl of soup with ingredients such as noodles, veggies, or meat, try adding a handful of decorative rocks to the bottom of the bowl to push up all the tasty ingredients to the top. I prefer to use clear rocks to avoid any potential colorcast in the image, especially in a clear or broth-based soup. That way instead of being sunk to the bottom, they're hanging out at the top of the bowl in clear view of the camera (**Figure 4.12**).

FIGURE 4.12

I used some clear decorative rocks at the bottom of this bowl to push the noodles and vegetables to the top of the dish.



Canon 7D
ISO 100
1/160 sec.
f/5.6
70-200mm lens

If you're photographing a sandwich, one easy way to keep the sandwich from looking flat is to place small pieces of cardboard or foam board between each layer. You can also stick pieces of toothpicks into the cardboard to push up and heighten the sandwich even more (Figure 4.13).



FIGURE 4.13
By adding small pieces of cardboard and toothpicks inside the sandwich, I was able to bulk it up and give it fullness so that it looks more appetizing.



USING GARNISHES

Adding a touch of color to a dish can do wonders, and I often do this by adding garnishes such as fresh basil, cilantro, or any herb that is appropriate to the food and its ingredients (**Figure 4.14**). This can make it look livelier and more appealing, just as adding herbs and spices will enhance flavor when cooking the food.

FIGURE 4.14

I used basil in this dish when it was cooked, but I wanted to make the colors more pronounced. Adding small basil leaves to the bowl added a color and vibrancy that didn't show through in the original photo.

Canon 5D Mark II
ISO 100
1/30 sec.
f/8
70–200mm lens



This technique also helps create your point of focus. By adding a bright, colorful food item to the dish, you will draw the viewer's eyes to that location. And it's the perfect spot to focus on with your camera (there'll be more on focus and composition in Chapter 5).

KEEPING IT REAL

One thing to keep in mind when you're creating your dishes is that they don't always have to look perfect. A few crumbs or drips to the side of the food, or even a dish where the food has already had a fork dig into it, makes the food look more real and attainable to the viewer (**Figure 4.15**). It can also add balance to the composition of the photograph. A little mess is OK; just pay attention to your crumb placement so that it still looks appealing and delicious.



Canon 5D Mark II
ISO 100
1/50 sec.
f/5.6
70–200mm
lens +1.4x

FIGURE 4.15

I added a few crumbs and berries to the side of this yogurt parfait to balance the dish and give it a more natural look.

PUTTING IT ON ICE

I use fake ice in many of my photographs (**Figure 4.16**). In fact, any time there's a water glass in the frame (often in the out-of-focus background), I've also added some fake ice to the cup, usually without even adding water. The reason that I use fake ice so frequently is that real ice has two major flaws: it melts quickly, and it can look very foggy when photographed (**Figure 4.17**). Fake ice, on the other hand, will hold its shape and stay shiny and crystal clear (**Figure 4.18**).

FIGURE 4.16

I used a drinking glass with fake ice in the background of this photo.



Canon 5D Mark II
ISO 100
1/30 sec.
f/5.6
TS-E 90mm lens



FIGURE 4.17

For this photo I used **real** ice, backlit with diffused sunlight coming through a window.



FIGURE 4.18

For this photo I used **fake** ice, backlit with diffused sunlight coming through a window.

While there are some places that create custom, very realistic (and expensive) acrylic ice cubes, the ice I use is relatively inexpensive and purchased through an online retailer. If you are creating photographs that require ice and you don't have a big budget, this is probably a good option for you as well.

FAKING GRILL MARKS AND CHARRING FOOD

If you want to add realistic grill marks on cooked food but don't have the luxury of owning a grill (or you just want the grill marks to look really good), another option is to add them after the food is cooked. I like to use an electric charcoal starter, which is a handheld device that has a big loop of metal attached to a handle (**Figures 4.19** and **4.20**). You could also use a grill pan with a ribbed bottom to get a similar effect.



FIGURE 4.19

By using a charcoal starter, I was able to add grill marks to this already-cooked chicken breast.



FIGURE 4.20

I used the same method as in Figure 4.19 to add grill marks to this piece of steak.

If you have food that is already cooked but needs a little more visible cooking to be done on the surface, you can use a crème brûlée torch to “cook” specific areas of the food (**Figure 4.21**). This is also handy if you want to add charring to a food item to give it the appearance of being cooked, as I did to the asparagus in **Figure 4.22**.

Canon 5D Mark II
ISO 100
1/125 sec.
f/8
70-200mm lens



FIGURE 4.21
This Cornish hen was fully cooked, but it needed just a bit more browning on the side that was being photographed.



FIGURE 4.22

I used the crème brûlée torch to char the asparagus to make it look as if it had been grilled.



Canon 7D
ISO 100
1/125 sec.
f/8
70-200mm lens

ADDING STEAM

Food looks tastier when it's fresh, and if it's hot, it is more appealing if you can see that it's hot. Food that is fresh out of the oven or right off the pan usually has steam rising from it, but once it sits for a minute or two the steam dissipates. If you want to keep that “freshly cooked” look, you can always add the steam yourself.

A fun (and easy) way to add steam to a food item is to use a hand steamer. They are typically used for steaming and straightening clothes, but they work very well with food photography. In **Figure 4.23** (left), I show how I used a hand steamer to give this shrimp the appearance that it is still hot and fresh, and after a few attempts I got the perfect “steamy” look (**Figure 4.23**, right). (See Chapter 7 for a behind-the-scenes on creating a similar “steam” photograph).



Canon 7D
ISO 100
1/125 sec.
f/8
70-200mm lens

FIGURE 4.23

I used a portable hand steamer to add steam to this shrimp on a fork.

Canon 5D Mark II
ISO 100
1/8 sec.
f/8
70–200mm lens



FIGURE 4.24

On its own, this beef stew was colorless, since the meat and vegetables had turned brown during the cooking process. To liven it up, I blanched some of the ingredients separately and placed them in the dish to add color to an otherwise boring-looking dish of food.

MAKING VEGETABLES BRIGHT

If you want to give your vegetables a burst of color, the best way to prepare them for a photograph is to blanch them in boiling water immediately before you photograph them. Blanching is a cooking method wherein food is boiled very briefly (30 seconds to a minute or maybe more) and then cooled in cold water to stop the cooking process. When you blanch vegetables, you will end up with very bright colors that photograph beautifully. This is also a good way to add color to an otherwise boring-looking dish (**Figure 4.24**).

PROP STYLING

In really big food photography productions, along with a food stylist there is likely to be a prop stylist. This person is in charge of the plates, napkins, tablecloth, and anything else added to the scene that is not food. If you're styling and photographing your own food, then this job falls on your shoulders. And though it might not seem important at first, the props you use can really make or break a food photograph.

How you style the area around your food can greatly affect the mood and overall impression of the photograph (**Figure 4.25**).

The props can suggest the location, time of day, season, and perhaps even who might be about to enjoy the meal. All of this can be achieved through the colors, textures, and shapes of your dishes, textiles, and props. The possibilities are endless.



FIGURE 4.25
To make this dish appear as if it were on a table at a fancy restaurant (or outdoors in a romantic setting), I added large string-lights to a black background to convey the sense of a darkened room.

RELEVANCE AND SIMPLICITY

When adding props to a scene, imagine yourself sitting down at the table to eat the meal you are photographing. Picture the utensils, food, and dishes that might be set around you, things that you would actually use in real life. Then, take that information and apply it to your photograph.

Just remember, if it doesn't *add value* to your image, it's likely that it's *taking away* from your image. You want the props to be relevant, but you don't want them to draw attention *away* from your main subject. Keeping the scene uncluttered and simple is usually a good start, since you want to showcase your main dish. Some examples of appropriate props and additions to your scene might include silverware, prepared food (such as side dishes or ingredients from the main dish), drink glasses, and napkins. Also, when photographing a finished, prepared meal it's also best to avoid placing in your scene unprepared food items, such as whole peppers, potatoes or onions. If it's something you wouldn't normally eat in its entirety (or in an uncooked state), then it's probably not going to seem very appetizing in a photograph.



FIGURE 4.26

Here is a sampling of some of the dishes I use for food photography. As you can see, I prefer white or light-colored dishes.

There are a lot of great places you can find dishes, cups, and utensils for your photographs. I like to shop at stores where I can buy individual items, instead of having to buy an entire set (since I'm typically only using one or two of the same dish in a scene). Thrift stores and yard sales are also good places to score unique dishes and accessories for really great prices. Another place I like to shop is craft stores. They often have interesting glassware and decorative items that are intended for other purposes (candles, for example) but that can be used as cups or bowls in photographs. I'm also learning to create my own dishes, as you can see in **Figure 4.27**.

DISHES AND ACCESSORIES

When selecting the plates and utensils to use in your photograph, you want to match them to your food. My general style is to use a lot of white, clean dishes—the meals I prepare tend to have a lot of color in them, and I don't want to compete with the food with a bright or busy pattern on the plate or bowl (**Figure 4.26**). However, if the food is very basic and simple (like mashed potatoes or a slice of cake), then I would probably use a colored plate, or maybe even something with a simple pattern. There's really no rule to this, though—just go with what you think fits your style and your food.

The size of the dish is also important. I collect a lot of smaller plates and bowls and use them often in my photographs. Putting food on a plate that is a little smaller than one you might normally use to eat on gives the appearance that there is more on the plate and that the food item is larger than it actually is. This also works well with silverware—I will often use salad forks and smaller spoons off to the side of my dishes to give the appearance that the food is bigger than it actually is.



FIGURE 4.27
I've started to create some of my own dishes for food photographs. Here is an example of a few of my pottery creations.

Canon 7D
ISO 100
1/6 sec.
f/5.6
70–200mm lens

TEXTILES AND TEXTURES

Adding texture to a photograph is a good way to lend a sense of depth and realism to the scene, and there are many ways to add texture with food photography. I do this by using textiles, such as napkins and tablecloths, and also creating my own textured tabletops (**Figure 4.28**).

One way to create easy-to-use tablecloths for your scene is to take fabric, iron it out so it's nice and flat, wrap it around foam board, and then secure it with tape in the back. This makes the tablecloths easy to store and transport without wrinkling.



FIGURE 4.28

Creating premade cloth tables is an easy way to keep them ironed and easy to use.



Canon 5D Mark II
ISO 100
1/30 sec.
f/8
50mm lens

FIGURE 4.29

I like to use boards and two-by-fours to paint my own unique tabletops for my food photographs.

If you want to use a textured tabletop, they are pretty easy to make on your own (**Figure 4.29**). You just need a thin piece of wood big enough to cover the table, a few different colors of paint, and some “crackle” paint (you can usually find all of this at hardware or craft stores). Then just follow the instructions on the crackle paint container to get a nice aged/distressed paint finish. You can also scour yard sales and antique stores for old wooden doors, or just use any other type of old wood that you can find lying around the house (**Figure 4.30**).

FIGURE 4.30

These boards are pieces of an old fence a friend was getting rid of. I like to use them for a rustic “picnic table” look in my photographs.



Canon 5D Mark II
ISO 100
1/100 sec.
f/4
50mm lens

Chapter 4 Challenges

There are a lot of different ways you can add to the look of your food photographs through styling and adding props, so here are a few challenges to get you started.

Styled vs. “Ready to Eat”

Cook up one of your favorite meals and prepare two servings. Style one of the servings so that it looks really great (try using some of the tips in this chapter), and then take a photo of it. Next, prepare the second serving in a dish as you would if you were going to eat it. Photograph it in the same light and location as your first image. Compare the two and note the differences.

Fake Ice vs. Real Ice

If you have some fake ice, this exercise is fun to try. Using a clear water glass, create two photographs of the same glass filled with water—one with real ice and one with fake ice. Compare the differences between the two images. Note the fogginess in the real ice compared to the clear shininess of the fake ice.

Creating Your Own Tabletops

If you want to use something other than your existing tabletop, use some of the techniques in this chapter to create your own. Take foam board and a large piece of cloth to make a flat-tened tablecloth, or grab a big, flat piece of wood and some paint and get creative. Try adding texture or using different colors on the same tabletop for a unique look.

Share your results with the book’s Flickr group!

Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/foodphotographyfromsnapshotstogreatshots/](https://www.flickr.com/groups/foodphotographyfromsnapshotstogreatshots/)

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