

# PERFECT pictures

ARTS & MEDIA PROFESSIONAL STYLING IS THE SECRET BEHIND MOST GREAT FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY. BUT CHEFS ON A BUDGET CAN BORROW TRUCS FROM THE MASTERS TO ENHANCE THE LOOKS OF THEIR DISHES. AUDRA POOLE GIVES STEP-BY-STEP ADVICE.

"It's so beautifully arranged on the plate—you know someone's fingers have been all over it." This Julia Child quote is especially true in the world of food stylists, where looks trump edibility. The job of a stylist is to translate something that tastes delicious into something that will look irresistible in a mono-sensory picture format. And contrary to common belief, food stylists don't use tricks and rarely faux food but instead rely on techniques and food science.

Delores Custer, a food stylist, culinary educator since 1978, and author of the recently released book *Food Styling: The Art of Preparing Food for the Camera*, says, "Food stylists are people who understand food science. We're good cooks and bakers, and we have to get foods to do things they weren't necessarily meant to do, like making a muffin dome. The camera looks at food differently than our eye. We have to help the camera. The photographer does it with lighting, the prop stylist does it with props, and the food stylist is there to make food look as gorgeous as it can to the camera."

Food stylists have the ability to see through a camera lens and understand angles, which is critical to getting a great food photograph. "Chefs are used to plating at a 45 degree angle, which is what the diner sees at the table and what the chef sees from the counter," explains Custer. "I become the camera when I style the food. I build the food at eye level by stacking up apple boxes or, if it's an

overhead shot, I'm standing looking down at the plate."

Great food images go a long way in marketing your restaurant or your talents as a chef, and hiring a food stylist can often take a good food shot and elevate it to cover-shot status. Unfortunately, many food operations have small budgets, but it shouldn't stop you from utilizing some of the techniques of top food stylists. And it all starts with preparation.

If you know you have a shoot scheduled, take the time to plan, explains Dan Macey, a food stylist who has worked with the likes of **Emeril Lagasse**, **Lidia Bastianich**, **Michael Romano**, and **Nick Stellino**. "Step back from what you do to take a look at food magazines and food photography. See what you like and what's working—if it's your shoot and you hired the photographer, let the photographer know what the goal of the photograph is. Are you promoting a place for romantic meals, fun, a style of cooking?" Good food imagery should tell a story about flavor, temperature, how it was made, or when and where it's enjoyed.

Recognize that you need to prepare more food than is needed for one plate. Shopping is a big part of a food stylist's job, as they are often looking for fruits and vegetables with perfect figures. When it comes to produce, Macey says, "Look for beautiful ends on green beans and curls on red peppers. Smaller is also





**Fromage Blanc Mousse** In this image, captured in *For the Love of Food: Recipes and Stories from the Chefs of the IACP*, the goal was to showcase the different components of the chef's recipe, including a strawberry jelly, lemon curd paint, and blueberry stew. The use of an artist's color chart helped in the selection of a plate color that would best play off the pink of strawberry jelly. The plane of the photo has also been carefully chosen to ensure that your eye goes to the main element of the dish but still allows for some of the elements to fall off, or "break the plate," which adds interest and the look of abundance. Stylist: Dan Macey Photographer: Todd Trice. **The Pizza Pull** Often considered a difficult shot to capture, when successful the results are mouthwatering. Here thumbtacks are adhered to a spatula to hold the pizza in place during the pull. The pizza is also made in stages, i.e. presliced, then sauced and underbaked to make the cheese bridges fatter. A wallpaper steamer is used to brown and melt the cheese on set. Stylist: Dan Macey Photographer: Todd Trice.



**Lemon Basil Salmon (raw)** While this dish was captured in a cooked and plated format, the raw version was also styled and shot. It's an excellent example of looking for the best moment in a recipe's life and how sometimes an uncooked version may provide a stronger image. Stylist: Lisa Golden Schroeder Photographer: Mette Nielsen.





**Bacon Burger** Here Delores Custer uses a needled bottle from an art store filled with glycerin and water to add little droplets of water on tomatoes and lettuce that keeps them looking cool and fresh in front of the camera. The bacon is cooked on a cooling rack to create appetizing curls and visual interest. Stylist: Delores Custer Photographer: Dennis Gottlieb

better than larger. We're trying to let people know what's on the plate. The placement of one loose thing can be used to give a visual signal."

Photo shoots often take place when the restaurant is closed, with the chef preparing several dishes to be photographed and bringing them out at dinner service tempo versus the chef collaborating with the photographer. Veteran food stylist Lisa Golden Schroeder, the founder of Foodesigns.com, an industry resource site, recommends using an assistant as a runner so the chef can focus on working with the photographer. "Ask the photographer to show you what he's looking at." It's not unusual for one food photo to take an hour or even all day. "Realize that each shot will take some time, and you will need to prepare the dish in stages to bring out its best for the camera."

Prepping in stages means building the dish for the camera, and even in front of the camera. It involves placing the focal point first on the plate and then assessing what should be placed next and in what proportion, height, and angle. It means waiting to sauce or garnish until just the right moment so there is no separation of sauces, congealing of fat, or wilting of herbs. And it's why food stylists often use a stand-in to set up the shot before putting the "hero," or real item, in front of the camera. Staging can also be opportunistic and lead to alluring "food-in-motion shots" like a fork full of stew. It also helps to identify the best moment in the food's life to capture, which may not always be its ready-to-serve form.

Another vital technique is composition. Chefs can become rigid, as they are used to plating to menu descriptions, but when you're capturing a signature entrée, Schroeder says, "be flexible and open your mind. Think of the entrée as a piece of artwork versus something that someone will eat. If you have a signature entrée and it's

delicious but monochromatic, move away from it. Sell the entrée, but let the sides add some visual interest, color, and texture."

It's important to think about the shapes of the different elements of the dish and how you can use sides to accent, balance, and guide the eye to the focal point. Also pay close attention to plates; enormous plates and small portions don't typically work, neither do deep plates, as you lose too much height.

In general chefs need to leave a little of their training at the door when cooking for a photo shoot. Vegetables blanched and shocked provide great color even though they might not be cooked enough to eat. Red meat will look redder under the camera, so it may be better to undercook and brush with boiling water until you take the color down or use heated metal skewers to add judiciously placed grill marks. Chicken with skin is best undercooked, as the skin shrinks as it cools down, leaving you with wrinkles. It may be better to brush on a browning agent like Kitchen Bouquet or spot brown with a torch. And crumbs or a drop of sauce on a plate might be something you leave in place for effect.

Sauces can be particularly tricky, especially achieving the perfect viscosity, explains Custer. "If it's too thick, it doesn't flow; if it's too thin, it just spreads out." For tomato sauce she recommends draining it over a paper towel and then spreading it on with brush to avoid translucent "souping" on the plate. Food stylists don't get hung up on temperature. They may use a sauce cold that is typically served hot to get the right effect. And almost always, less is more when it comes to saucing and garnishing.

Pulling together a mini toolkit for the shoot can save time and make your and the photographer's job easier. Some basic stylist tools include: tweezers for detail adjustments; small spritz bottles—one with water to make foods look moist and fresh and one with oil to make cooked foods look hot and juicy; cotton swabs and rubbing alcohol to clean a greasy fingerprint or smudge; and artist brushes and droppers for targeted saucing. Of course, each food stylist also has his or her favorites. Macey's secret weapons: Zap-a-Gap, a super glue that works great with organic material in case you ever need to adhere a tortilla or fix a crust; and mashed potatoes, which he uses invisibly to do everything from elevating an entrée portion to ensuring a garnish will stand at attention.

By drawing on the techniques of food stylists, chefs help ensure that their food looks as good in a picture as it tastes in the real world. But it can't be done without a great photographer who knows how to light and shoot food. Do your homework and ask to see samples of a photographer's food images before hiring one. Then do your part to make sure the photographer can do his best work. Don't restrict the photographer to a certain area to shoot, especially if he has identified better lighting in another spot. Be particularly vigilant of time wasters—know how to dim or control overhead lights in a restaurant, have some extra stemware, cutlery, and perfectly ironed napkins and tablecloths on hand for propping as well as a *mise-en-place* for quick adjustments to the dish.

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**Audra Poole** is a freelance writer and marketing and public relations professional who specializes in hotels, restaurants, and spas.