

gastrostoria

The Essential Guide to Food Styling



INTRODUCTION

Whether you're a food blogger or a photographer venturing into the world of food photography, you need food styling skills. There is no separation of styling from photography. They work together to create a stunning image.

Audiences are becoming more and more visually literate, and never has the demand for visual collateral been so high. This is great news for us photographers, but to stand out in the crowd, we have to bring our "A game". This means developing our food styling skills.

As a blogger or Instagrammer, you're a one-person show. You have to do it all. When you're new to professional food photography, you need to develop a portfolio to show potential clients. Food stylists charge hundreds of dollars a day. Most likely, you'll need to style your images yourself.

But that's okay. You will need those skills on set when you work with your stylist and often, a creative director. At the end of the day, professional food photography is a collaborative process, with each team member bringing their best.

I've put together this guide to help you gather some vital tools together and start improving your food styling skills.



Tools of the Trade

YOUR FOOD STYLING KIT

You will need to put together a styling kit to have on hand when you shoot at home, or to take with you when you shoot on location for jobs where you might have to do some tweaking to the food, like a restaurant shoot

TWEEZERS

One of the most important tools in your arsenal, tweezers are crucial for strategically placing garnishes or nudging your food into exactly the right place. Fingers are usually too inefficient for this. Aim to have at least two pairs--ones with a short handle, as well as some long-handled ones. Keep them in your kit and only use them for food.

COTTON SWABS

Cotton swabs are perfect for cleaning up small drips and fingerprints or other marks on dishes and props.

PAPER TOWELS

Besides being useful for wiping your hands and picking up spills, paper towels can be useful to prop up salads or placed hidden under dishes to protect your linens or surfaces.

GLASS CLEANER

Before plating food, give your props a good wipe down with glass cleaner to ensure they look as pristine as possible. Fingerprints or smears of grease on dishes can be difficult and time-consuming to edit out.

TEA TOWELS

Put a couple of tea towels in your kit to periodically wipe your hands as you work, or after you wash them. They're also handy to spread on your work surface. I use a tea towel to lay my styling tools on, so I can keep them clean while conveniently having them on hand.

PAINT BRUSHES

Have a variety of paint brushes ready to brush a bit of olive oil on meat or any unwanted crumbs off your set. A fan brush is particularly good for brushing off your surfaces. Spend a bit more on good artist's brushes, as the bristles typically fall out of the cheaper ones, which can annoyingly stick to your food.

GLYCERIN

Want those water droplets on the fruit to last? Spray it with a 50/50 mixture of glycerin and water. It will simulate water droplets but will not evaporate quickly like pure water will. Glycerin can be found in most drugstores in the beauty section.

SQUEEZE BOTTLES

Several squeeze bottles with different size openings are a great to have when working with sauces for both savory and sweet dishes, as they give you more control than a spoon, or pouring the sauce from a small pitcher.

ASCORBIC ACID

Mixed with water, this powdered form of vitamin C will create a solution to soak fruits and vegetables in to keep them from oxidizing and going brown. Be sure to soak the items for at least fifteen minutes before you need them. A couple of teaspoons dissolved in one cup of water should do the trick. I buy ascorbic acid at my local cook shop. It's also sold in some countries under the brand name "Fruit Fresh". If you can't find ascorbic acid, you can get MSG from an Asian grocery store--it does the same thing.

COOKING SPRAY

Use for spraying onto certain food items like meat to make it gleam, or use it in cooking to prevent food from sticking to pans. Some cooking sprays come in a butter flavor, which gives a nice golden color to baked goods.

COOKING OIL

Use olive oil or any other type of cooking oil to brush on meats, lettuce leaves, or other foods you want to strategically make glisten.

FOOD COLOURING

Red food coloring mixed into water is a surprisingly good substitute for red wine, and a much cheaper one at that. Real red wine usually shoots too dark. You want your red "wine" to look somewhat transparent in photos. Start with a few drops and then take a shot. Keep adding drops until you get a realistic color that you like. You don't want it to look like juice!

CHOPSTICKS

Besides being a necessary prop when shooting Asian food, chopsticks will help you adjust some larger items easier than tweezers can. They can be particularly helpful when dealing with noodles.

WATER SPRITZERS

Buy a few little water spritzer bottles to have on hand during shoots. You can buy empty travel bottles from the drug store. A spritz of water on produce can make fruit look freshly picked. It can also give new life to certain food items when they start to look a little dry or lifeless. Different sizes will provide a different mist, so it's good to have a few sizes.

FUNNELS

Having a couple of plastic funnels on hand will help you make smooth pours into glasses and bottles. Splashes on the side of your glassware can look distracting and messy.

SMALL BOWLS

A variety of small glass bowls are perfect for holding your garnishes, lemon wedges, and other bits of ingredients that you should have prepared and ready for shooting.

SMALL SPOONS

Can be used to drizzle sauces or stir together ingredients in other liquids, like dressings. They do double duty as props alongside coffee or tea or certain desserts.

PASTRY TORCH

A small kitchen torch such as those used by pastry chefs has a wide variety of uses and is a crucial tool for browning food like poultry or pastries to make them look like they were just pulled from the oven. Most of them are powered by butane and take a little bit of practice to use effectively. Make sure to bring the bottle of butane with you in case your torch runs out.

SYRINGES

Syringes can give you the control you need when applying mayonnaise or ketchup to the edge of a burger bun or sandwich.

EYEDROPPERS

Use eyedroppers to give you greater control when dabbing or dotting sauces or other liquids onto your plate.

TOOTHPICKS

Toothpicks can help you anchor items together, especially with tall dishes like burgers or stacks of pancakes. They can be hidden from view or edited out later in post-processing.

BABY BLOCKS

This may seem like a strange one, but I regularly use baby blocks to mark the position of certain items on my set. If I move my dish to plate my food once my lights are set-up, it can be difficult to put it back the exact way.



A WORD ABOUT ICE

If you are doing any kind of professional photography involving beverages, you will need to get some fake ice--both cubes and shards. Trengrove Studios in the US is a trusted source for high quality fake ice.

It's expensive, but cheap fake ice will not look realistic. Once you invest in it, you'll have it forever.

Depending on the job, you may not need all of these items in your food styling kit, but it's best to be prepared so you can work as efficiently as possible.

Food styling is about problem solving and thinking creatively on your feet. Having the right tools at your disposal can go a long way in ensuring that your shoots are stress-free and that you get the best out of your food subjects.

MOUNTING PUTTY

This is a sticky, rubbery product that looks like chewed up blue bubble gum. It's quite sticky and is also used to prop up smaller pieces of food that won't stay where you want them. Because the color is so bright, you need to be careful that it doesn't show to the camera. It is also called "Fun Tak" and can be bought at stationary stores or on sites like Amazon.

DULLING SPRAY

Dulling Spray is a product that can be used to spray on items like glassware and utensils to reduce the reflections and glare caused by shiny items. It's sold under the brand name Krylon and can also be purchased on Amazon or found in craft stores. It can be used on metal, glass, plastic, and ceramic. It's removable, but not safe to ingest, so I would not eat from any dishes or utensils that have come in contact with this spray. If you can't find Dulling Spray, an aerosol hairspray will work similarly, though not quite as well.

OFFSET SPATULA

This type of spatula is very useful when styling desserts involving whipped cream, frosting, or even ice cream. It can be used to reapply or smooth out icing or fill in any unwanted cracks.

PASTRY BAG AND TIPS

Although you might not be decorating a cake, having a pastry bag and a few tips can be helpful to have on hand when you need to do a quick repair job on frosting.





In order to look appealing, the food you shoot needs to be as fresh as possible.

There is a misconception out there that food stylists have some very strange tricks up their sleeves, like basting turkeys with motor oil. Although a food stylist might soak some artichokes in ascorbic acid to keep them from browning, or brush olive oil onto steak to make it glisten, in general, natural products are used to enhance food items. Most food needs a bit of doctoring to make it look presentable for the camera, which is why employing a food stylist is so important. A food stylist has intimate knowledge of how food behaves in front of the camera.

USE THE FRESHEST FOOD POSSIBLE

In order to look appealing, the food you shoot needs to be as fresh as possible. When shopping for ingredients, take care to buy the freshest and nicest looking items available. Take your time and pick through that pile of apples to find the roundest one without dents or bruises. Get that steak from the butcher just before you shoot so it doesn't go brown by the time it hits the set. You should also have your scene, lighting, and camera ready before you place your food down. When you're playing with your lighting and camera settings, use a substitute in a similar colour and shape as your food as a stand-in. Replace it with your "hero" (your main food subject) at the last moment, so that it looks as fresh and appetizing as possible.



BUY MORE THAN YOU THINK YOU WILL NEED

When shopping for groceries, be sure to buy more than you think you will need. Food dries out, melts, goes brown or otherwise begins to look unappealing within a short time in front of the camera. It needs to be replaced with fresher items.

Depending on the item, you may also need a lot of the items to fill the frame. This typically happens when shooting fruits and vegetables. Unless you're doing a macro shot, you'll need a lot of produce to fill up a baking tray or the vessel you're shooting it in.

It's really frustrating to cook a dish to find that it doesn't fill up the crockery or plate that you want to shoot it in. Avoid this by buying extra. You can always eat the leftovers!

GARNISHES

Herbs and spices, and items such as croutons, can enhance your food shots. You can elevate a plain bowl of soup with a drizzle of cream and a sprinkling of chopped chives.

Sprigs of various herbs like rosemary can be tied together with kitchen string to make little bouquets you can use to add context to your food story.

Colourful peppercorns can be strewn randomly on the surface, along with a smattering of coarse salt to add texture and interest. It might not be one-hundred-percent realistic, but it can give a candid and honest feel that has become popular in food photography in recent years.

The key is that whatever garnishes you choose, they must make sense within the wider context of your scene. If you're shooting salmon with a lemon dill sauce, then don't garnish it with basil.

When using herbs, use the freshest possible and replace them as you shoot. They wilt or oxidise quickly. Cut herbs can be kept fresh in the refrigerator much longer when placed in a jar of cold water and covered with a plastic bag. Changing the water every day will ensure they will keep for several days.

While you're shooting, you can keep herbs in a bowl of ice water until they are ready to use. Simply pat them dry and place them onto your scene when you are ready. Check your composition to make sure they are not looking bent or misplaced.

PRO TIP

You can also wrap herbs in wet paper towel and place in the fridge to extend their freshness.

UNDERCOOK AND UNDERDRESS

A lot of the food you see in photographs is undercooked. The poultry that looks so delicious in that advertisement would probably poison you if you ate it. The reason is that if you cooked it until properly done, the skin would wrinkle a few minutes after you took it out of the oven. Fresh vegetables are often blanched--cooked and then dunked in an ice bath--to bring out and preserve their vibrant colours. Once you add a dressing to a salad, it will start to wilt immediately, due to the acidity; it's best to add it at the last minute, and to add just enough to make it glisten. You might even want to strategically brush it onto some of the leaves instead. Similarly, sauces will also dry out or coagulate and start to look unappetizing quickly. Add them only when you are ready to shoot and have decided on the placement of your composition. Make sure they're not still too hot, though, or that will affect your hero.

FRUITS & VEGETABLES

Some of the funnest shoots to do involve fruits and vegetables. They burst with vivid colour and their interesting shapes and textures add a lot of dimension and vibrancy to a food scene.

It's easy to get creative with produce and there are so many ways to approach it during a shoot. However, whether they are raw or cooked, fruits and vegetables need to be handled with care to preserve their best qualities.

Think about how the fruit or vegetable should appear in the final shot. Are you doing a close up of sautéed asparagus? Or are you shooting a tray of roasted red peppers and want to highlight the cooking method with a coating of olive oil?

You can also use fruits and vegetables as a garnish. For example, placing raspberries on a tart to reflect what is inside, and to add more height and texture to the main subject.

Salad can be tricky to style, though it seems to require nothing more than dumping a bag of mixed greens into a bowl. However, you usually need something to anchor the lettuce leaves and provide a solid base for creating a fluffy-looking mound.

Food stylists often use instant mashed potatoes for this, but some wadded up paper towel will do the trick in a pinch. Just make sure the white colour doesn't show through any gaps in between the lettuce leaves.

Styling a great-looking salad can literally mean placing each leaf onto your plate one by one. Greens are not uniform in texture and size, which can make your composition look disjointed if not dealt with carefully.

At the same time, you can use this to your advantage and create images with dimension and interest.



MEATS & FISH

Meat can be a nightmare to shoot. Inherently brown or beige, it's the one item that has the most potential to look unappetizing and lifeless in front of the camera.

As you may have figured out, brushing a bit of olive oil on that steak can do wonders to make it look more juicy.

Garnishing it with herbs, like a spring of rosemary, can also add colour and texture to your shot.

A neat trick food stylists use to create grill marks on meat and fish is a heating element such as a charcoal starter. You can find this on sites like Amazon or at hardware stores and is used to start a barbecue with charcoal.

It takes a little practice to use it efficiently, but it's great for "grilling" burgers, shrimp, and even vegetables.

When dealing with fish, make sure you get the freshest fish possible. When selecting a whole fish, make sure the eyes look bright and clear, not cloudy and sunken. The skin should be firm and bounce back when you touch it, and the fish should not have any noticeable odour.

Ideally, fillets should be cut-to-order from fresh fish, as they begin to break down once cut. The cut should be clean without ragged skin.

As with a lot of food items, you will need to undercook fish and meat to look good in a photograph.

SAUCES

Sauces can be an appealing way to finish both savoury and sweet foods. You can use them as a garnish or mix them into the food, depending on the subject.

When the sauce is mixed in, I like to set some aside until I'm finished styling and setting up my scene, and then drizzle a bit extra onto my dish just before capture.

I also might put the remainder in an attractive jar or dish and use it as a prop. This helps the viewer identify what type of sauce it is and adds extra interest to the composition.

If you are using sauce as a garnish, think about what will make sense in terms of the recipe. Will chocolate sauce go best with that sundae? Will Hollandaise sauce work better for that salmon fillet than a Bearnaise?

If you are shooting for a client, you may have instructions on what kind of sauce to use and how to present it. If not, don't be afraid to experiment.

Little dots of raspberry coulis on a plate, applied with an eyedropper from your toolkit, can look more visually interesting than simply poured over your cheesecake.

BREAKFAST ITEMS

Breakfast items come with their own set of challenges in the styling department. Many of these challenges can be overcome with supporting ingredients and garnishes, as well as a thought-out approach to composition and propping.

When styling baked items like pancakes, waffles, muffins etc, be sure to make ones that are a nice golden brown--nothing too dark--and are uniform in size. Use the elements that would ordinarily accompany the food you're shooting, like butter and maple syrup with pancakes, or milk with granola. If possible, add some extra color and texture with some berries or other fruit.

Eggs can also be tricky. When frying eggs for your shoots, use a preheated dry, non-stick skillet without oil to make sure you'll get nice edges and bright yolks. Crack the egg through a fine mesh sieve over a small bowl and gently transfer into the pan. This will get rid of any water that can cause uneven edges. Cook the egg slowly, over medium-low heat.

Once the white is completely set, spray a spatula with a bit of cooking spray and transfer the egg carefully onto your plate.

To cook soft-boiled eggs, undercook them by a minute and then place them directly into a bowl of ice water. This is one case where you definitely want to cook extra--just in case. Once you've set up the shot, spoon some of the runny yolk from an extra egg onto the hero egg. This is a great way to capture that runny yolk drip you see in soft-boiled egg photos.

Sometimes an egg will sit too low in an egg cup. In that case, place a bit of tissue in the bottom of the cup to prop up the egg and ensure that more of the egg is visible.



DESSERTS

Sweet things are my favourite to style. They are inherently pretty and visually appealing. Styling desserts also allows a lot of room for creativity in terms of props and backgrounds, as well as composition. They can be easier to work with, though some items like ice cream can definitely be very challenging.

In fact, some food stylists refuse to work on ice cream shoots! One good tip for working with ice cream is to place several scoops individually on a cookie sheet lined with parchment paper. Put them back in the freezer and take them out when you're ready to shoot. Make sure that your set is ready before you place your ice cream scoop; it won't wait while you are tinkering with your lighting.

Sometimes melted ice cream can actually look appealing, depending on the shot. When working with other items like cakes or pies, plan your composition and any garnishes ahead of time. You can photograph a cake either whole or sliced. The end result will look quite different and should serve the story you're attempting to tell. A whole cake can look beautiful very simply shot and propped, but cake slices may need additional props and garnishes.

For pies, it's best to make them the day before and refrigerate them. They'll be a lot easier to slice. You may go through several slices before you find the one that doesn't fall apart and will look good in front of the camera. Pies are another dessert that can be tough to shoot.

When working on a commercial shoot, the food stylist will often anchor the pie filling with mashed potatoes, similarly the way they would do for a salad, and will often bake several pies as a back up. Pies and tarts look especially good with a dusting of cocoa powder or icing sugar, or otherwise garnished with a sprig of mint or a dollop of whip cream. Choose whichever garnish would work best with the type of pastry you are shooting.



BEVERAGES

Drinks like cocktails can be one of the most difficult items to shoot, as they are often shot in glassware. The reflections can be tough to manage, and this kind of shoot can take much longer than a food shoot. Unless you have fake ice, ice can also present a challenge due to how quickly it melts. On the positive side, you don't have to splash out for real alcohol a lot of the time, because it doesn't show anyway. Instead of vodka, you can just use water!

When shooting coffee or tea, I often favour backlighting. This lighting style really highlights the liquid properties of food and drink, and gives a nice translucent gleam to the surface. Sometimes I add steam in Photoshop when it works with the image. If you're working with a shot on the darker side, you can capture steam in the moment by hiding a small cup or bowl of boiling water behind your main subject. The steam will not show on a lighter background, so keep this in mind.

As I mentioned in the tools section, red food colouring in water can pass for wine. Real red wine often shoots too dark. A bit of Kitchen bouquet or even soy sauce in water can pass for white wine. This little trick will definitely fool the eye. You can keep your Chardonnay for drinking!



PLATING

Plating is a topic that also falls into the area of prop styling, but bears mentioning here. An important consideration when choosing the dishes on which you will present your food is size.

Objects can look very different to the camera than to the eye, and often bigger than we expect. For this reason, it's a good idea to choose smaller dishes than you would ordinarily use. I usually use salad plates or dinner plates for presenting my main subject. Large plates can dwarf the food and dominate the frame, drawing the attention away from the food.

CONCLUSION

IN CONCLUSION

If you have been frustrated with your styling efforts, hopefully this primer on food styling will give you some ideas on how to get the best out of your food. Food styling has a bit of a learning curve, but with some practice and the right tools, you can learn to make your food subjects look their best.

Now that you have some great styling ideas, check out my blog posts on Gastrostoria.com for lots of info on food photography and business.

Thanks for reading!

Darina

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