



## Styling with One Eye on the Prize

As food professionals, we tend to be more critical than the general public when we peruse food magazines and Web sites, but we also can find ourselves guilty of falling into the alluring web of the food stylist's craft.

The pictures we see on the covers of elegant magazines or in the food section of the local paper can be stunning, bordering on breathtaking, and when shot correctly, the food seems to pop off the page. On the best of such occasions, you can practically smell the brownie and taste the warm chocolate sauce that is rolling down the side of the ice cream that sits atop it. This response, no small feat in its own right, is no accident; in fact, it's the anticipated result of the professional team of chef, food stylist, and photographer.

### Professional Tricks

Food styling is anything but whimsical. It's an exciting and challenging career, and it takes a consummate professional who strives for perfection, beauty, and symmetry and who is willing to work until the wee hours of the morning. "We may see food with two eyes, but a camera only sees with one," states Delores Custer, world-renowned food stylist whose career dates back to the *Time Life Cookbooks* series in the late 1970s. "The subject will always look different on film or in print. It thus becomes the job of the food stylist to understand these principles and work hand-in-hand with the chef and photographer to get the shot right."

Considering the process in this manner, we can look at food shots to discern whether the food stylist and photographer are professionals. Take, for example, a hypothetical picture of a Bibb lettuce salad. Custer would ask, "If the shot is of a salad, is it fresh and vibrant? Does it come to life?" Despite its predisposition to washed-out light green tones, we find in this image that the salad greens jump out at us, that we can almost taste the colorful organic tomatoes and fresh vinaigrette. At that moment you can tell that a professional team was involved in the picture.

Armed with a box of tools—syringes, pliers, tweezers, spritz bottles, makeup-style Q-tips, and more—the food stylist

painstakingly sculpts the food that is to be recorded by the photographer. For a hamburger shot, a stylist may have to pick through bags of rolls and then perform the tedious task of gluing sesame seeds strategically in place to make the roll appear perfect. Other tricks of the trade include taking a blowtorch to raw poultry and beef and, with the help of a browning agent, creating a finished product that still looks plump and juicy.

### Styling ROI

Having the budget to afford a food stylist and photographer comes in handy, because the price tag for professional food shots can be hefty. A satisfying payback, however, is landing those golden nuggets in publications that make consumers' mouths water and want to dine in your restaurant. Another reward is to have an arsenal of imagery at your fingertips for a cookbook or an online gallery.

If the pictures don't pop out at the reader, they likely will fail to deliver the necessary pop to your target diners. This failure can be reflected in fewer covers at the restaurant or perhaps in weak cookbook sales. Simply put, if it doesn't look good enough to eat on paper, it doesn't look good enough to buy.

The food stylist must be able to communicate with the photographer and anyone else involved in the production of the food shots. Custer believes that a team approach is critical to success, noting, "Over time, you will work with photographers repetitively, and you will begin to understand and forecast their styles into your work. It's this symbiotic relationship that makes the really long day into just a long day."

It is not unusual for a photo shoot to begin at 7 a.m. and finish at 2 a.m. on the following day, so the more the team understands the overall vision and the members' styles, the better the end product and more sane the team. Short day or long, the time a food stylist spends on a shoot can be measured in the countless pages of food publications and in the photos' ability to make us drool and think about what we are having for dinner tonight.

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#### Resources: [foodesigns.com](http://foodesigns.com)

Basic food-styling training with a shop for tool kits

#### [foodstylingandphotography.org](http://foodstylingandphotography.org)

Official site for the biannual conference at Boston University

#### [culinaryentrepreneurship.com](http://culinaryentrepreneurship.com)

Three-day workshops on food styling