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# Tempting the Palate

## The Food Stylist's Art

### Witness the Shooting

THE THANKSGIVING PHOTO shoot I am about to describe is, in many respects, like any important dining experience. Preparations begin days before the event. The menu (or concept) is decided upon ahead of time, along with the recipes and layouts of the items to be photographed.

For the traditional Thanksgiving meal, the mother or grandmother is typically the hostess; guests include aunts, uncles, children, and other family members. In the studio, the photographer is the host, and he tries to make the “guests” (the client, the art director, the marketing director, and the food stylist) feel comfortable and ready to work. The prelude to most formal meals is the gathering of guests over cocktails and hors d’oeuvres. By contrast, our dining experience starts at 9:00 A.M. with muffins and coffee and a platter of bagels and cream cheese.

At this meal, old tapestry fabric is laid out for use as the table covering. Flowers, which have been ordered well in advance to ensure that they will be fully open on the day of the shoot, are arranged in a glass container, adding a bountiful touch to the table. Antique dishes are put into place. The lush, old-fashioned floral arrangement and the soft lighting from candles in brass holders evoke a bygone era.

While all of this is going on in the main studio, the food stylist and assistant are in the kitchen, making and organizing the food to be photographed. The food stylist has bought the food in advance and prepared a few items, such as breads and desserts, ahead of time to keep last-minute preparations as simple as possible.

The hero—the turkey—is now given a facelift. It is stuffed, pinned, tucked, oiled, and put into, then taken out of, the oven four or five times. Each time the turkey is taken out, it is sprayed with a browning agent before being put back in. For this photo shoot, using just the right amount of makeup on the bird is the secret to giving it a truly home-cooked appearance. It takes about fifteen minutes to create this look. The main concern is color: the skin must be a perfectly rich, golden brown.

If the assignment had been to photograph sliced turkey breast for an advertisement or television commercial, the bird would have had to be cooked thoroughly or steamed so that the exposed meat would not look raw. The skin would have had to be carefully preserved. When poultry is photographed for an advertising client, at least twenty birds are usually kept on hand for the shoot in case problems arise.

Attention is paid to every detail, even the angle of a knife and fork. After everything is set up, with all the props in the picture frame but before the food is brought to the table, Polaroid photographs are taken and enlarged on a copier to actual page size, so that the art director can sketch in the advertising text and discuss placement. During this particular shoot, we discover that the candles extend into the headline area on the magazine’s cover, so they are cut and burned down to the right height.

When everything is set, the food is arranged on the antique dishes and brought in. The photographer makes minor adjustments in the lighting. The candles are lit, and the photographs are shot. After a final Polaroid is taken, the team agrees that the photo is just as beautiful as had been envisioned, and then the mouth-watering, enticing—and, yes, undercooked—turkey is immediately disposed of. Like performance art, food photography is ephemeral; it is most definitely of the moment.

### Issues of Identity

The food stylist is the person who artfully makes, prepares, and designs food to be photographed. The motivation for creating captivating pictures of food is to persuade—indeed, to seduce—the general public into buying a particular product. The food has to appeal to the five senses, yet it must be translated into a single visual image.

In any creative endeavor, the artist must be entirely focused and committed to what he or she is trying to do. The same

Right: *After the Shoot.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK RICHMOND © 2003



principles apply for the food stylist designing a plate as for the painter contemplating a canvas. Like the painter, the stylist starts out with a theme and then works with colors, textures, patterns, and the positive and negative shapes they create. Food styling is a meditation and a passion. The stylist's vision is what can turn an ordinary photograph into a work of art.

But is the food stylist an artist, a culprit, a hero, or a hired gun? The trendsetters in this business have always been the large food companies, and the backbone of the food industry has traditionally consisted of women's service books and magazines. It is through the eyes of the stylist that the food is transformed into an image. Whether a picture of food on a package or a recipe in a magazine, the final objective is the same, and that objective is usually commercial, rather than purely aesthetic.

### Consider the Subject

Food has a life of its own, and its life expectancy is short, so photo shoots are labor-intensive, both physically and emotionally. It might be supposed that the career of a food stylist is glamorous, but there is pressure in shopping for the right foods and in making sure that everything gets to the studio on time and in perfect condition. There are no hard and fast rules, no pat solutions to food styling problems. The stylist must be extremely knowledgeable about food and its chemistry and must be willing to explore original and exciting ways of looking at food. Timing is also critical. Thinking fast in a problematic situation is crucial for a good food stylist. Problems must be solved on the spot.

Food also has an energy of its own. The artistry of the stylist lies in tapping into that energy and directing it—not controlling it! It's best to go with whatever is natural and realistic. "The ideal and best food styling is recognizing what that dish looks like in real life and conveying it without sacrificing the integrity of the recipe," says Romulo Yanes, *Gourmet's* in-house photographer for the past eighteen years.

Though many people are under the illusion that the food they see in magazines, advertisements, and television commercials is artificial, in most cases it is not. Food stylists shop for the best quality and freshest foods they can find. Sometimes out-of-season produce must be flown in from another hemisphere. It is also a misconception to think that the food stylist does outlandish things to enhance the food. This may occasionally be true for television commercials in which a certain effect is sought, but it is largely untrue for still photography. We use the real thing. Making it look appealing and appetizing is the greatest challenge, though there are others.

### (Don't) Promise Me Anything

One of the most difficult situations arises when a client, art director, or editor does not have much knowledge of food. The stylist may be asked to produce a beautiful, alluring photograph that works on paper, but that involves forcing the food to do something it does not do naturally.

There are times when the consumer, working in his or her own kitchen, cannot get the food to live up to its presentation in the magazine or book. The food stylist may have overpromised. But who is really at fault? Is it the stylist or the client whose marketing criteria were such that the food was made to look a certain way? The consumer contends, "My food never looks that way" (how many times have I heard this!), but the consumer is not trying to sell a product.

Dick Frank, a New York City food photographer for over thirty years, offers this example: "My client, a fast-food restaurant chain, told me the food I was photographing (the ads and menus) looked too good. It didn't look like the food that came out of their kitchen. Because of the pace and vast volume of food produced in their kitchens, it is virtually impossible to have that food look exactly like those photos. We spent about three hours on one plating of food; in this sense we did overpromise."

The food stylist makes beautiful, aesthetically pleasing food that tempts people to buy a product. Perhaps the real culprits are the large companies marketing the product. Brad Schiff, Executive Vice-President of Marketing for a family-style restaurant, disagrees: "Obviously, the preparation in the food styling is a lot longer than normal food preparation in a restaurant. However, good food styling is showing what that product looks like. You can't make it look better than it does under normal circumstances." Schiff believes that using photos as a point of purchase for his food and beverage products is key: "A photo sells our product with appetite appeal; it communicates what is in the dish, how much of a portion is in that dish, and it shows exactly what the product looks like."

Schiff claims that he can get a 50 percent increase by showing the food or beverages he is trying to promote on place mats, tent cards, and menu inserts. Nevertheless, his approach is cautious. "The temptation can always be to overrepresent the product, and it is important not to. If the customer buys that product and it...does not look like the picture, he is going to be disappointed and will not buy it again."

## Examine the History

Food styling started out as an outgrowth of home economics. According to Fred Lyon, a California-based photographer who worked for Time-Life on the famous cookbook series *Foods of the World*, the early food stylists “were cranky ladies in white, starched, lab coats. They were officious, threatening, and intimidating and drove us all crazy.” In the 1950s, food styling developed into a profession in its own right. In 1957, *Gourmet* produced its first cover of photographed food, a chafing dish containing “Champagne Cheese,” an upscale Welsh rarebit.

As food trends changed, so did the style in which food was illustrated or photographed. As Food Editor for many years, before being promoted to Vice-President and Editorial Director at *Better Homes and Gardens*, Doris Eddy has observed this evolution: “The style went from very elaborate and contrived, styled photos in the ’60s to a very realistic style in the ’70s. For example, on location the home cook prepared the food. The role of the food stylist... was to oversee the plating of the food for the camera and garnish the plates. The ’80s were a meld, making the food look more doable. And in the ’90s the food was stacked to fill the vertical format of the magazine, whereas before [the photo layouts] were square.”

## Questions of Ethics

The food stylist is a trendsetter and, as such, has a distinct responsibility. Is it right to put makeup on an undercooked turkey for aesthetic reasons, making it look perfect and presenting it as the real thing? The client is looking for perfection in order to sell a product. This is hard commercial selling that, in many ways, parallels the presentation of women celebrities on magazine covers. The makeup artist creates the perfect face by applying a variety of different tones and shades to enhance and embellish the skin and features. Meanwhile, the photographer reinforces the work of the makeup artist with lighting. This is all done to make consumers want to emulate that woman and buy the makeup, clothing, or other product being advertised.

“I see nothing wrong with creating the perfect woman, or for that matter putting makeup on a turkey,” comments Barry O’Rourke, former *Playboy* photographer and author of *How to Photograph Women Beautifully*. “In our business we are hired to sell a product, whether it is a turkey or a beautiful young lady. I have no problem working with a makeup stylist to create the perfect face to sell a product. I think the

younger generation is attuned to this because of Hollywood and television, with all its special effects and things added.”

In fact, O’Rourke notes, “It is difficult these days to know what is reality... The actresses seldom look like they do in real life. They have to look perfect, without flaws. The turkey has to look flawless... I do not think that they have photographed a playmate for *Playboy* in the last ten years who did not have artificial breasts or a nose job... everyone is looking for perfection in all of these products, and selling them stems from our culture searching for eternal youth. If they can do it to a sixty-year-old actress, why can’t you do it to make a perfect turkey?”

## The Artist Speaks

As a food artist, I think and create using the food as my palette and the plate as my canvas. I might spend hours creating a beautiful plate of food or a detailed arrangement of fruit for a commercial package. The creative stylist always finds new solutions to something that has been done many times before. Even if a stylist has styled one hundred beautiful turkeys, it’s important to pretend that each turkey is the first. That way something new will be brought to the shoot.

The stylist must also adapt to the constantly changing technology. The food stylist’s work of art is placed in front of the camera, recorded on film, or captured digitally by the computer. Finally, the food stylist must remain open to the spontaneous and the unplanned. The ability to turn any difficult situation, even a mistake, into an advantage is part of the challenge.

In the art of food styling, interpretation is everything. By understanding how we see and how we can be made to see, the food stylist builds a fantasy around the food, fusing the ideal in the photo with the notion of what can realistically be achieved. The stylist translates an idea into a photograph and, in so doing, connects the food producer with the consumer. ●