Food Photography with Donna Crous

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Now more than ever, shooting food in your home has become a popular photographic genre. However, our fascination with food is nothing new. Artworks in history even dating back to the 15th century show that food was a primary source of inspiration, where painters tried to freeze a point in time in the most realistic perspective. These artworks depicted everything from lavish feasts and banquets to the simplest family meals at a table. The latter often highlighting frugality and poverty in those times.

I have always been a foodie, and love anything to do with food from shopping to prepping, so food photography was a natural progression. Capturing your food
is about making it look delicious and lip-smacking. That being said, you don't need to be a top-end chef with extraordinary plating skills, no, it’s more about seeing the image. Simple ingredients found around the kitchen can make beautiful mouth-watering images. Think of a boiled egg with dripping yolk, melting ice-cream in a scoop, fresh berries with a spritz of water or a fizzy drink/champagne being poured into a glass.



Hints and Tips when shooting food using natural light

The sun is an ideal source of light for shooting your food, but it is also incredibly unpredictable and changes in both colour and strength throughout the day. For this reason, many professional food photographers prefer to shoot using artificial light to ensure a uniform look throughout their images. There are, however, many professional food photographers who have forged great careers using just the sun. Learning to master it and work with it can be immensely rewarding, and actually really easy. The secret lies in the direction of the light for the particular food or drink you are shooting.

Food is almost always shot using directional light either from the side or the back. Never shoot food straight on as it will lack depth and dimension and look, well, just unappetising.

Finding Your Light

The best way to find the perfect setup spot in your home is to take an egg and walk around to your various windows. Standing with the egg side on, you'll want to

see a beautiful ombre feathered shadow falling across it, starting with a lighter closer to the window and falling off into shadow. Ideally, soft filtered light, using either a diffuser or overcast weather, is perfect; thankfully here in the UK, we are not short of overcast days.

On days when the weather is grim and dark, it may be best to "bounce the light". This is done by positioning a reflective shield (tinfoil or a piece of white card works perfectly) on the opposite side of the food. This reflects the light back onto the dish, thereby bringing down a heavier shadow. Shadows are your friends, but too much shadow can make it heavy, finding a happy balance is key.





Understanding Your Camera

The best starting lens to use for shooting your food is a 50mm f1.8. This is the perfect go-to lens for us foodies and being reasonably priced; you will definitely get your money's worth from it. At a later stage adding an 85mm f1.8 and a macro lens to your kit bag also make for a great variation. While lenses are important, understanding and knowing how to use your camera in manual mode is key.

Choosing Your Direction

Your light direction is entirely based on the dish or drink that you are shooting and your preferred style. The general rule of thumb is one-directional sidelight. Backlighting for clear drinks like cocktails, low food like tarts with a shiny glaze or waffles with honey works

beautifully. The beauty of digital is if you are unsure, shoot in both directions and see which look you best prefer.



ISO

Many food photography blogs recommend that all food should be shot at an ISO of 100. This, I feel, is unnecessary and makes learning the other functions in the exposure triangle that much harder. I always recommend a higher ISO when starting out, especially if you don't have access to a sturdy tripod. That being said, the lower the ISO the sharper the image, so do try to keep it as low as possible; but don't sacrifice your shutter speed if you are not using a tripod.

Shutter Speed

Shutter speed for food photography is an essential element in your exposure triangle, especially if you are trying to capture the perfect dripping shot. Try to keep the shutter speed to 1/125sec of a second or higher when shooting handheld, anything lower than 1/125sec could end up with camera shake and an out-of-focus image. Using your light meter in your camera should ensure a perfectly exposed image.

Aperture

There is no set rule for aperture as it depends on the message you want to convey in the scene. I prefer to shoot a straight on scene with a wider aperture which creates a shallow depth of field. Using an f.stop of around f3.5 and choosing a “hero” or a prominent element as a focal point will help to draw attention to
the area that you want to feature. For an overhead or flat lay shot, you’ll want the whole image to be in focus, so a smaller aperture starting around f5.6 is ideal.

White Balance

These days Nikon’s digital cameras are really advanced with temperature settings, making it easier than ever to achieve a good colour balance. Leaving
your camera set to auto white balance and shooting in RAW format gives you room to correct any white balance issues in post-production.

Styling Your Scene

Before you ask, yes, all my food is real and totally edible. I feel that food photographers have a bad rep for fake food. Granted, in bigger commercial shoots, many substitutions are used due to time constraints or food spoiling fast. Still, when shooting at home in natural light, there is no need to fake
it. If you are concerned about food spoiling, instead use a stand-in ingredient to set up your scene or camera settings before adding the dish.




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Here are a few tips to help with styling,

Keep your ingredients fresh and hydrated – the camera never lies!

Plate up on smaller plates, fill your scene with pinch bowls of fresh herbs, spices or fruit.

Neutral props make the food really stand out.

Fabrics add a great visual aspect by adding texture and a leading line.

Be aware of reflections, particularly with shiny cutlery.

Find interesting backgrounds that add drama. Vinyl surfaces are great to wipe clean after spills. Also, wooden planks, newspaper, parchment paper, sheet music, wallpaper samples, ceramic tiles make fantastic and unique surfaces.

Try and avoid pine tabletops, they can end up being very yellow/orange and somewhat overbearing.

Don't feel the need to fill space; negative space can be very powerful.

Odd numbers create better composition 1, 3, 5 (cupcakes, glasses, plates) are visually more appealing.

When in doubt, style in a triangle either placing three dishes/glasses or piling popcorn.

Always make sure that your props are relevant to the dish, adding a teapot in the background of a curry dish is not ideal.

Adding Variety to Your Shots

When shooting a number of different dishes, one can start to feel that they look the same after a while. This is when you need to grab a family member and put them to work either by adding their hands in the shot, holding a dish or for camera-shy ones, just in the background. Having a person in the shot really helps the viewer connect with the image. If you are on your own or don't have a willing family member, then using a tripod and setting your camera to a timer is the way to go. I have programmed my camera to take ten images per timer session, allowing me to capture a perfect drip or sprinkling scene without too much back and forth.



What started out as a hobby has turned into a full-time profession for me, just by playing around and working on a distinctive and unique style. I'd so love to see other photographers and cooks create showstopping images by finding ingredients and props around the house, and using the tips above.

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