

# FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

A SHORT GUIDE  
BY KENT DUFAULT

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# FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

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Did you know that food photography is considered one of the most technically oriented niches in the photographic industry?

Photographing food is always fun. We love food, we love to eat- Why not take pictures of it? Did you know that food photography is considered one of the most technically oriented niches in the photographic industry?

We knew a rather well-known food photographer who was hired to shoot a close-up of a single M&M candy for an advertisement. He, and his assistant, spent the better part of an entire day going through thousands of M&M candies looking for the perfect specimen.

While we won't need to be that focused, it's important that you realize that good food photography is about the details. The information we're going to give you, herein this guide, is aimed at the beginning food photographer.

This would apply to a food recipe blogger, a chef, or anyone that would just like to take nice photographs of a meal they've prepared.

# FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

Some of these tips will apply even if you're snapping a shot with your cell phone at a nice restaurant.

Once you're aware of the 5 most common "food photograph mistakes", you'll begin to unconsciously make decisions to avoid them.

While we won't need to be that focused, it's important that you realize that good food photography is about the details.

# 5 COMMON FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY MISTAKES



# 5 COMMON FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY MISTAKES

Here are those 5 mistakes-

1. Poor lighting
2. Underexposure
3. Out of focus
4. Framed too tight or too wide
5. Poor angle

In a moment, we're going to look at examples depicting the above problems, but before we do that, we want you to take a moment and study this collage of excellent food photographs.

This is your assignment- Can you find 4 common elements in each of these photographs?



**4 COMMON ELEMENTS  
IN EXCELLENT FOOD  
PHOTOGRAPHS**



## 4 COMMON ELEMENTS IN EXCELLENT FOOD PHOTOGRAPHS

Here they are- and write this down- because these four tips alone- will vastly improve your food photography - no matter where you take them, or, what you take them with!

1. **Backlight** - This is a KEY element to great food photography. Backlight brings out texture and special highlights on your subject: such as steam. If you don't want your food looking like it was just run over by a dump truck - Backlight it.
2. **Simple** - Don't try to include too much. A good rule of thumb, when starting out, is no more than 3 elements in the photograph. Stay close, and keep the background to a minimum. Remember, you must still follow the rules of good composition or your photograph will be lackluster. Two rules of composition that are often utilized in food photography are: the "Rule of Thirds" and the "S Curve".

## 4 COMMON ELEMENTS IN EXCELLENT FOOD PHOTOGRAPHS

Food looks terrible when it's underexposed. You want your exposure to be correct, or even slightly overexposed.

- 3. Focal Point** - With food photography you will have a minimal depth-of-field. Figure out who the hero is in your shot- (a blackberry, a slice of bread, the juice on the edge of a steak, the foam on your latte) - and then make it a strong focal point. That's where your camera focus should be; everything else in that photograph should support that focal point.
- 4. Exposure** - Nothing else you might do in your food photography will make your food look more like donkey dung than under-exposure. Food looks terrible when it's underexposed. You want your exposure to be correct, or even slightly overexposed. Subjects like meat, poultry, and fish generally look better at a normal exposure. Lighter items like pastries, breads, and desserts often look better slightly overexposed. When possible, you'll want to use a tripod and keep your ISO to 200 or less.

**FOOD  
PHOTOGRAPHERS  
EQUIPMENT LIST**

# FOOD PHOTOGRAPHERS EQUIPMENT LIST

Zoom lenses have a tendency to “creep”. This means that you will be fighting to keep your framing and focus correct. You’re better off using an inexpensive prime lens.

- **A good DSLR** - you could begin with a point and shoot, but if you’re serious about food photography, a DSLR is a must.
- **A good prime lens and a good macro lens** - Try to stay away from zoom lenses. When taking food photographs you will often be hanging over your subject: looking down at it. Zoom lenses have a tendency to “creep”. This means that you will be fighting to keep your framing and focus correct. You’re better off using an inexpensive prime lens. A couple of suggestions would be a 50mm f/1.4 or a 35mm f/2.0. As soon as possible add a macro lens to your camera bag.
- **A sturdy tripod** - Beginners usually take their food photography under natural light because they don’t have a lot of fancy lighting gear. This means low light levels and long exposures. You will need a sturdy tripod to keep your ISO low, your depth-of-field up, and your framing / focus locked in.



## FOOD PHOTOGRAPHERS EQUIPMENT LIST

If you can purchase a tripod that allows the extension column to be engaged horizontally, this would be a huge advantage as it would allow you to “hang” your camera out over a plate of food.

- **Lighting** - When you're starting out natural light will be fine. Find a location with a window: in-direct light is better than direct sun. Food looks better in a photograph when there is low contrast. Keep your lighting even. If the window has direct sunlight, hang a sheet over it and back your shooting table away from it a little bit. A very important aspect of lighting food is “fill light”. Start collecting small pieces of white board, card stock and small mirrors. Think of anything you can use to bounce light back into the photograph. If you want a little bit harsher bounce light- glue tinfoil to a board. The tinfoil board will bounce harsher light if it's smooth and softer light if you crinkle it up, then smooth it back out before gluing it down.



## FOOD PHOTOGRAPHERS EQUIPMENT LIST

- **Background** - We highly recommend that you work on a moveable surface. Setting up a food photograph can take some time. You don't want to spend all that time setting it up only to find that the sun has moved and your lighting is now poor. We recommend that you either find, or make, a small wood platform; approximately 3 feet by 4 feet. This platform can be carried around or placed on a table with wheels. The main thing is that when you are ready, you want to get the food to the light. It's also helpful to collect various background materials. Items with texture usually work best; items such as old crusty cookie sheets, white kitchen linens, pieces of wood or metal, parchment paper, etc.

**LET'S ANALYZE A  
FEW EXAMPLES**





## LET'S ANALYZE A FEW EXAMPLES

Let's look at some photographs and see if we can learn something from the mistakes and successes of others.

This isn't a bad attempt! But it lacks character, and there is nothing about the lighting to make the food appear yummy. Remember- Backlighting! Always start with your backlight. Then fill in from the front, and sides, with bounce cards or fill flash until you're within an acceptable contrast range.



This photographer used the backlight but not enough fill light. Each element of the lighting is equally important!



## LET'S ANALYZE A FEW EXAMPLES

This image is backlit with a perfect fill for the shadows. Take notice that the contrast range is “squeezed” so that you can see detail from the highlights to the shadows.



Color balance is of vital importance when photographing food. Nobody wants to eat something that looks yellow when we expect it to be white. If possible, you should manually set your color balance.

The biggest tip we can give you here is- Don't mix the color temperature of your light sources. If your main light source is a sunlit window at midday then don't use incandescent light for your fill. Once you have a command on how color temperature works, you can begin to use it to your advantage to add mood.



## LET'S ANALYZE A FEW EXAMPLES

Food needs to look fresh in order to appear appetizing. Start with fresh ingredients, don't use wilted lettuce. Think about the food that you're about to photograph. Should it appear wet, dry, moist, hot, or cold? If it should be hot, a great tip is to prepare two plates. Create your setting using one plate, while keeping the other one warm in the oven; at the last minute swap them out.

If the food should appear moist, a light misting of non-stick cooking spray will bring the food back to life. Salads often look great with a little moisture spritzed over them from a spray bottle. It's also helpful not to cook your food completely as it will continue to cook while it sits on set.



## LET'S ANALYZE A FEW EXAMPLES

Underexposure and poor lighting are the kiss of death to a food photograph. If you're unsure about the proper exposure, then do an exposure bracket. This technique involves varying the exposure (from what your camera meter tells you) by 1/2 stop increments. A good rule of thumb is to vary your exposure from two stops over normal to 2 stops under normal. You will then pick the best exposure in post-production.



This shot of turkey meat is much more appealing than the previous underexposed one!



## LET'S ANALYZE A FEW EXAMPLES

Make, (or find), a small platform that you can quickly move your set around; this will help you find the right lighting once your set-up is complete; speed is often essential to good food photographs. You need to get the shot before that white sauce congeals!



## LET'S ANALYZE A FEW EXAMPLES

Remember to pick a focal point and follow the rules of composition. This photographer chose to focus on the berries, (as a focal point), but placed them in an awkward spot; the result is that 75% of the image area is out of focus.

The last point we're going to touch upon is framing. You're photographing food, but, you're still telling a story.

This food looks good. But it is framed so tightly that you can't really tell what it is!





## LET'S ANALYZE A FEW EXAMPLES

This version looks just as delicious, but we now have a better sense of what is sitting on the plate. Study your angles and frame appropriately for the best food photographs!


**LET'S RECAP OUR  
TIPS ON FOOD  
PHOTOGRAPHY**



## LET'S RECAP OUR TIPS ON FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

Choose an angle that compliments the subject and organize your image elements (typically no more than 3) into a pleasing composition

1. Backlight your subject first and then add fill light
2. Don't under-expose your image! If you're unsure bracket
3. Pick a focal point and place your camera's focus there
4. Don't frame too tight or too wide. Tell a story, but stay as close as possible
5. Choose an angle that compliments the subject and organize your image elements (typically no more than 3) into a pleasing composition
6. Use a tripod for maximum depth of field and critical focus
7. Build your set on a small moveable platform to catch the light
8. Use interesting textured backgrounds
9. Use fresh ingredients. When photographing cooked food - don't cook it completely and prepare two plates



Don't use mixed lighting sources and make sure your color balance compliments the food

## LET'S RECAP OUR TIPS ON FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

10. Don't use mixed lighting sources and make sure your color balance compliments the food
11. Keep items handy for props. Make sure your cutlery and plates are spotless clean and not chipped
12. Non-stick cooking spray, olive oil, and a water bottle can help keep your food looking fresh and delicious

We hope you find these tips helpful as you begin to explore the fun world of food photography!



# Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



## 3 Free Photography Cheat Sheets

Grab 3 free photography cheat sheets that will help you understand the basics.

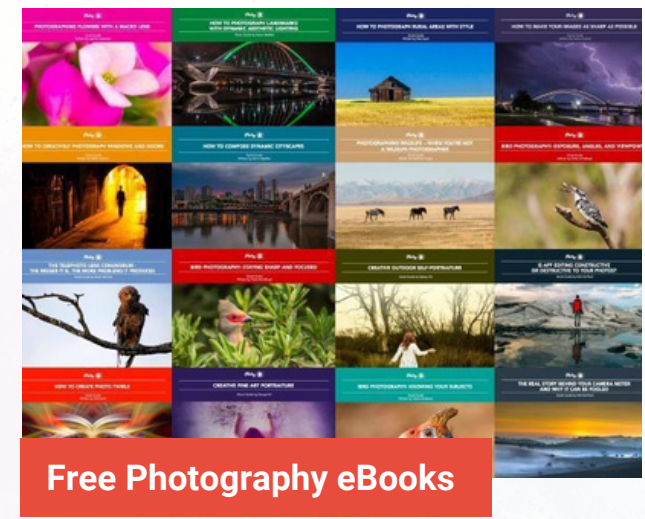
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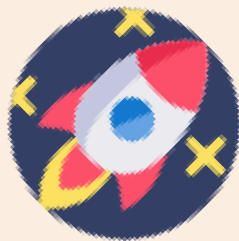
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## IMAGE CREDITS:

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Pg 16 : Rovingl

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