

The Art of Eating with Our Eyes

by food stylist [Cindy Epstein](#)

Food photography can be called "the art of eating with our eyes." When food is placed before us, we experience all forms of sensory pleasures. We delight in the food's colors, inhale its aroma, feel its texture and temperature, hear its sizzling/crunch/snap, and finally taste and savor its goodness. When we view an image, we must rely solely on our eyes to call upon the imagination and memory of all our other senses. If the picture tells its story well, the viewer can vicariously experience the food and conjure up the pleasures and feelings associated with eating it. The [food stylist's job](#) is creating that experience for the viewer.

When dining in a restaurant, the diner has all his senses heightened. He can enjoy the ambiance of his surroundings, sip a beverage, and feel a pleasant anticipation of the food's arrival. When the waiter places the food before him, the diner sees the beautiful arrangement on the plate – all the colors and textures right at his fingertips. He is assaulted by the food's aroma, especially if it is hot and steaming. Then, the first bite. His palate is awakened. He smiles, turns to his dining companion and hopefully says, "Ummm, this is fabulous!"



The chef created a delicious and memorable meal and arranged it artfully on the plate. The diner is very satisfied and having a positive dining experience. Success! Every restaurateur's goal!

So why does a restaurant need a food stylist working with the photographer on a photo shoot? Simply stated, the stylist needs to create an illusion in the image that simulates the actual dining experience. The image needs to clearly convey a powerful message to the viewer and quickly convince him that he wants to eat there.

One of the best marketing tools a restaurant has is fabulous food imagery. Photos need to be fresh, creative, well designed, and tantalizing. The restaurateur needs to show his very best to his potential customers in his printed marketing materials, his menu, and online.

In today's web savvy environment, many people rely on the Internet to help them choose a restaurant. They want to peruse the menu and actually see the food before making a decision. The content and quality of the images must make a profound impact to attract new customers and keep them coming back.

So often the restaurateur assumes that the chef can style the plate for the photographer, but the stylist's craft is much different than the chef's. The chef knows the recipe, the preparation, and the plating, and he is masterful at making every dish perfect for his guests, but the stylist makes the plate for the camera.

There is great truth in the expression that “the camera never lies.” But truth be known, our eyes do! Food looks very different when photographed, and it takes skill and often many years of practice to create a plate that is beautiful to the camera’s discerning eye.

When a plate is delivered to the diner, he has all of his senses in play and the food has been freshly prepared. He may not consciously register the details like the sheen on the vegetables, the glisten of the meat, and the way the sauce naps the plate because he is in the midst of a total experience and all his senses are heightened.

When someone views a photograph however, every little drip, drop, crumb, and spec come into view. The colors and textures are right before the viewer’s eyes, but he doesn’t have the benefit of his other senses. Nor can he take a bite. A good image needs to grab the viewer’s attention immediately and register the thought, “I want to eat that! It looks delicious!”

While dining, the food is served and the diner begins eating while the food is at its freshest. During a photo shoot the food will sit out while the photographer is preparing for the shot. Food loses a lot of its pizzazz and eye appeal very quickly sitting on a plate under lights.

In the restaurant, the diner always views the plate from the same angle. He is seated, looking down at his plate, but the photographer doesn’t always shoot at the same angle. When the stylist creates the plate, she has discussed the angle of the shot with the photographer and builds the plate accordingly. The stylist must make a number of adjustments to the plate to accommodate the camera angle.

The stylist also needs to understand how the consistency, color, and texture of the food changes as it cooks or sits out on the set. Fully cooked red meat looks grey, brown, and shriveled in a photo. Chicken skin wrinkles and shrinks. Vegetables wilt, milk looks blue, fruit darkens, ice melts, sauces break, pepper looks like dirt, pasta falls limp, coffee has an oily film on the surface, and water leaks from tomato sauce.

Think of the food stylist as the makeup artist for the food, using her well honed craft to create the perfect picture.

Just as clothes and cars go in and out of fashion, so do styling techniques. Over-stylized dishes are a thing of the past. Look at a cookbook from the 60’s compared to one today and the differences are striking. Styling today is much more about creating a natural fresh food image.

Working on location or in the studio, the stylist comes to the photo shoot with a toolbox of gadgets and gizmos to create a camera-perfect plate. Her kit will include tweezers, pins, cotton puffs, tiny sponges, paint brushes, sewing scissors, good knives, museum gel, sticky tack, every kind of adhesive imaginable, a fabric steamer, any number of thickening agents, stabilizers, cotton swabs, bamboo skewers, eye droppers, a hot glue gun, coloring agents, spritzer bottles, tiny spoons, x-acto™ knives, razor blades, and a hundred other items. Good food knowledge and formal food skills are also a must, as is a working knowledge of visual balance and a “good eye” for layout. Using all these skills, along with her repertoire of styling tricks, artistry, and attention to detail, the stylist creates the food that the camera loves.

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