



# CREATIVE MEDIA **FUNDAMENTALS**

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## **SMART PHONE FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY**



CMF015

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# The Basics

There are a few food photography concepts that are the same regardless of whether you are shooting at home or in a restaurant. We'll cover those first, before getting into the location-specific challenges and in-depth lighting tips.

## LIGHTING IS KEY

- Natural light is ideal. Try to avoid artificial (man-made) light if possible.
- Regardless of your setting, it's best to look for directional window light.
- Back-lit or side-lit dishes make for more compelling images that have drama, depth and texture. Do not place the light source behind you and try to avoid equal lighting from all directions.



## TELL A STORY

Food photography should make you feel something. You want to make the viewer feel what it's like to be in your kitchen, in that restaurant, enjoying a dinner party with friends, etc. Just like a room can have a unique ambiance, so should your images. This can be achieved by using one or more of the following:

- **Lighting** (as mentioned above): Lighting can create dimension, accentuate texture and make it look as if the viewer is there.
- **Props**: This is important, and it doesn't matter if you are shooting at home or in a restaurant. Include flatware, textured napkins, a wine glass in the background, etc. These things can all be used to set a mood. Flowers and white napkins can create the feel of a fancy or romantic meal. A tea towel and coffee mug can create the feel of a casual cafe.
- **Include ingredients**: This is for home shots. Add some whole or sliced veggies or herbs in the shot. Lemon slices, basil leaves, or grated cheese are good examples. It gives a sense of what it was like to cook the meal or be in your kitchen.



# Getting Ready: Restaurants

## PROPS

When you're dining out, you won't have as much freedom when it comes to props as when you're at home. That's ok, however, as the items you find on your table will help to tell the story and give the viewer a feel for what type of place it is and how casual or fancy a meal it is.

The props you find at your table may include:

- Napkins (cloth or paper)
- Different types of glassware
- Flowers
- Condiments
- Flatware
- The menu

## THE SCENE

In a restaurant, this will likely be your table. If you happen to find yourself in a more casual environment, you may have the liberty to move around and carry a plate closer to a window or a table with better light.

If you have the freedom to move around, you can also think about adding a personal element by having someone hold the plate, as if it is being served. The human element can help tell the story.

Look at where the light is coming from and try to position the food such that the light is coming from behind or from the side. This could mean adjusting the position of the plate and/or yourself.



If shooting at the table, position any available props on and around the plate. Try to make the frame look as natural as possible. Remove items that may not fit in the scene or impede into the edges of the frame with no added benefit (ex: cell phones, menus, etc.)

## USING A SMARTPHONE AS LIGHT SOURCE

If the lighting is dark or overly contrasty, you can call on a fellow diner to add some “fill light” using the flashlight on their smart phone. Don’t hold this light too close, as it could appear too harsh and produce unappealing shadows. You can also soften the light by placing a white napkin or tissue in front of the flashlight.

You can also get creative with lighting by using your phone’s flashlight or a candle from your table. This can be especially fun when photographing beverages. By hiding the light behind the beverage, you create a back-lit look that illuminates drink. In the example below, you can see how a phone light was used to over-ride the dark, mixed lighting.



## BE INTENTIONAL & AVOID DISTRACTIONS

One of the big challenges to shooting in a restaurant or cafe is avoiding a distracting background. There is a lot going on in a restaurant and the backgrounds can often include other diners, tables, chairs, decor, etc.

**Be Intentional** Everything in your image should be intentional and the food should be the star of the show. If the background elements don't help to tell your story, they can be distractions.

Consider the image at right. In some photos, a menu or pair of glasses might seem inappropriate and distracting. In this case, however, they help to tell the story. This was shot on a hot day in a restaurant at the beach. The sunglasses and fresh fruit help to paint that picture.



**Shoot straight down** There are a few ways that you can avoid distractions in your restaurant images. The first is camera angle. If you shoot straight down, you have complete control over what's in the frame. Just be sure to remove distracting elements on the table. In the example below, you can see that there are a lot of background elements. The image was simplified by shooting straight down.



**Blur the Background** Another way you can minimize distracting background elements is by blurring them. In the iPhone Camera App, the Portrait Mode setting can be used for this. Using Portrait Mode, tap on the screen to define the object you want to be sharp. The camera will analyze the scene and blur the background. There are also settings that allow you to determine how extreme this blurring should be. In the image at right, there was a bustling bar area in the background, but because Portrait Mode was used, you can't see the people, bar stools, bottles, etc. The attention is focused on the Tiki beverages.



**Get Close** Finally, you can also avoid distractions by getting closer. The image at right was shot on a busy street in Paris. By getting closer to the dish, we were able to prevent the background traffic from appearing in the frame.



In the example below, you can see that there is a lot going on in the scene. By getting closer, we were able to focus the attention on the beautiful produce.



# Getting Ready: Home

## PROPS

One of the nice things about photographing food at home is that you have more control of the overall feel of the images. Props play a key role in setting the mood in your food photography. The props you choose will determine whether the image makes you think of a dark, moody restaurant, a casual picnic, an airy café, your mother's kitchen or a simple dinner at home with friends.

Food photography props may include some of the following:

- Cloth napkins
- Tea towels
- Glasses (water, juice, etc.)
- A mug of coffee or tea
- Flatware
- Fresh herbs
- Lemon/lime slices
- Fresh veggies (from the dish)
- Candles





## BACKDROPS

You will need to decide what kind of surface the food will sit on. This will complement the type of food you're shooting and the props you choose. This could, of course, be your dining table or kitchen counter. Other ideas may include a wooden chopping block, a colorful table cloth, a light blanket, etc. You can also purchase backdrops that imitate the look of various surfaces such as wood, marble, stone, etc.



## FIND THE LIGHT

- Find a place near a window, where you can position the food such that the natural light is hitting the dish from the side or from behind.
- Ideally, you should have a nice fall-off of light, where the side of the room with the window is much brighter than the rest of the room. This will create images with nicer contrast. If this isn't available, you can use something large and flat (a piece of foam core or cardboard, for example) to block light from one direction.
- Back-lit or side-lit dishes will make for more compelling images because this directional light accentuates the texture, contrast and depth of the subject. Do not place the light source behind you and try to avoid equal lighting from all directions.



**This is actually a laundry room!**

## PREPARATION

If you're shooting food at home, chances are it's the food you prepared yourself. Food should be photographed immediately after it's plated and you don't want to be scrambling to set things up after cooking. Therefore, you'll want to prepare the shooting location before preparing the meal!

Set up your surface and props and decide what plate you're going to use and garnishes that will go on the food. Then set to preparing the dish.



## STYLING

Food styling is a large part of the food photography. If you're in a restaurant, the work has been done for you. If you're at home, it will be your job to make the food appear as appealing as possible. When styling the dish, here are a few things to think about:

**Color:** There should be a nice amount of color contrast in the dish. Some dishes will have that naturally. For example, a beautiful caprese salad will have a lovely balance of red, green and white. Other times, you'll need to embellish a little. Picture a mushroom soup. While absolutely delicious, let's face it. Mushroom soup is brown and lumpy. It needs a little help to make it live up to its potential. You can do this with the use of colorful adornments and added texture. Vibrant, green herbs are great for this.

You can also use props to add colors that nicely contrast the food. This could include place mats, napkins, tea towels, etc. For example, pasta may not be vibrant, but you can complement it by placing it against a red or green cloth napkin. Green herbs can add both a pop of color and an element of freshness.

**Texture:** A tasty dish will have a nice contrast of textures: creamy, crunchy, crisp, etc. This should also be conveyed in food photography. If the dish is creamy, add something that balances out the smoothness. This could include cracked pepper, toasted nuts, flaky salt, etc.



**Balance:** Styling a plate can be similar to composing a photograph. You don't always want to place the subject (the food) in the dead center. It really depend on the dish and the style of plate. An off-centered placement can appear modern, and may be more ideal for fancier dishes, especially if "molecular gastronomy" is involved (think foam, gels, etc.). If you do choose to place the food subject on one side of the plate, you can balance the dish by placing smaller garnishes or sauces on the other side. This could include lemon slices, a swirl of complementary sauce (like a balsamic reduction, hot sauce or aioli), some fresh herbs, etc.



**Layers:** Just like getting dressed in the morning, you can layer the dish as you would layer clothing. The "base" outfit might be a dress (if you're going to a fancy restaurant) or jeans and a t-shirt (if you're going to your local taco joint). This is the main food item. Then you add larger accessories, like a scarf, a belt, a bag (for the ladies), etc. This is the equivalent to the sauces and garnishes. Finally, you add the jewelry, wrist watch, etc. This is the final textural and beauty elements: the cracked pepper, the flaky sea salt, the sprinkle of fresh herbs... you get the idea.

# THE SHOOTING PROCESS

## CONTROLLING THE LIGHT

When there is light coming from all directions, the subject can end up looking flat. For this reason, it's important to look for directional light, as this will create more texture, depth and drama.

In your home, try to find a surface that is next to or in front of a window, as natural light is best. (This can even be a floor, as the viewer will never know if you choose your angle right.)

My favorite location is actually in my laundry room, on top of my dryer! There is a large square-ish window behind the unit and I can easily position myself such that the light is coming from behind or the side.

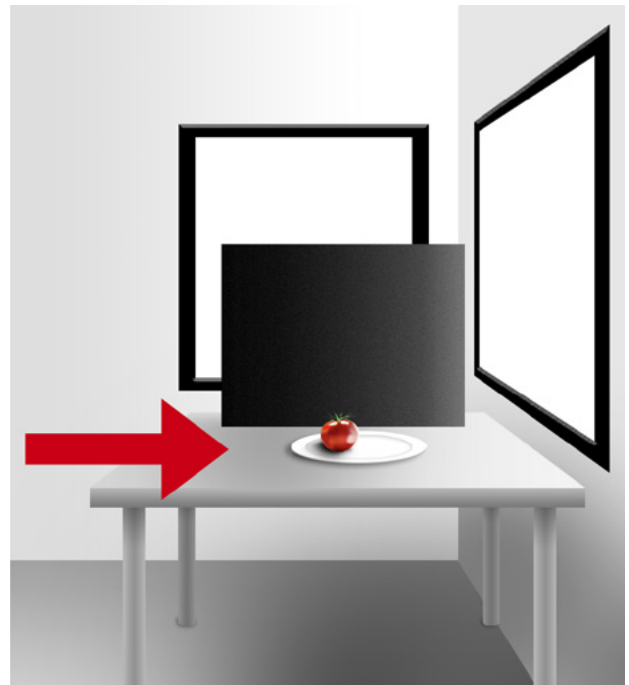


If there is no natural light, look for a light source that is as close to white as possible. A warm or cool light will add a color cast on the food. If there is no other choice, however, we will later show you how to color-correct in the editing process. Just try to avoid mixed lighting, as this can make it difficult to remove the cast.

If it is hard to find directional light, you can try to create it yourself by holding a neutral-colored piece of foam core or poster board in order to block the light from one direction. This should be positioned just outside of the camera's frame.

In the diagram at right, the arrow indicates the camera direction. A piece of poster board is being used to block the light coming from the back window.

This will be harder to do in a restaurant but there are some things you can try. If the place is casual or not crowded. You can move the plate to a window that has directional light. If you want to block light at your table, you might need to be creative and use an unfolded napkin, a place mat, etc.



## CAMERA ANGLES

You can obviously shoot from whatever angle you find to be ideal, but there are three main angles that are commonly used in food photography, and all serve specific purposes.

**From above:** An image that is shot directly from above is commonly called a “flat lay.” In this type of shot, you have complete control over the composition, because there will be no background elements in the frame. You are shooting straight down onto the table.



When shooting from above, artificial light could be an obstacle. If there is a light directly over your table, your phone will cast a shadow on the dish. You can remedy this by positioning the dish such that the light is coming from an angle. In the example at right, there were no windows, so we had to rely on the overhead light. You can see the shadow cast when we tried to shoot straight down.



**At a 45-degree angle:** This is the natural angle of shooting if you are sitting in a restaurant. At this angle, the texture and height of the dish will come across more, as in comparison to a “straight down” shot.

When shooting at an angle, part of the background scene will be visible. In this instance, you will need to pay attention to the background elements. Do they add or take away from the story? If you are shooting a cup of coffee, the creamer cup that’s sitting in the background might be relevant. Alternatively, a cell phone would seem inappropriate.

If the background elements can not be removed, you can minimize them using Portrait Mode, which blurs the background.



**From the side** This angle is best used if you have a clean background or plan to blur the background. If you are shooting at home, you can create your own background and/or place elements there to help tell a story. It's also useful when you want to direct extra focus to one side of the dish. It can be a nice angle for drinks/glasses and is great for food that has a good amount of height.



## COMPOSITION

In addition to the lighting position, there are some things to think about when framing the scene:

**Avoid distractions:** Everything in the frame should be intentional. Look at the background and surroundings to make sure there are not any busy elements. These can be removed by changing the angle, by physically removing them or by blurring the background. In the examples below, distractions were hidden by covering the background with a blanket (left), by blurring the background (center) and by angling the camera down (right).





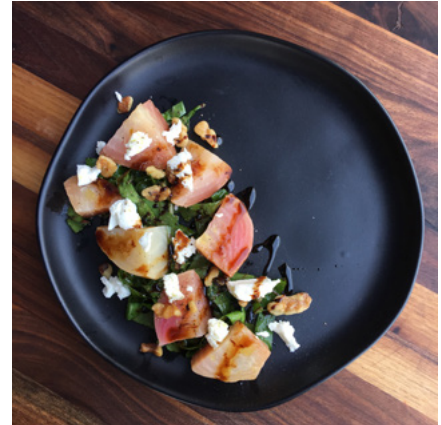
**Watch the edges:** If an item is going to be cut out of the frame, make sure that it is done so intentionally. Cutting off half of a napkin can be visually pleasing, but cutting off one little corner can look messy.



**OOPS!**



**Use angles to lead the eye:** It's very easy to position all of the elements in the scene horizontally or vertically, but adding angles can make the scene look more natural and the angled lines can lead the eye where you want it to go. Angles can be created using backgrounds, props or the plating of the food itself.



**Weight:** Think of the objects in the scene as having weight, and you don't want all four sides to be evenly balanced. You also don't want ALL of the weight to be on one side.

The food will likely be the largest element, carrying the most weight. Consider placing it off center so that the image is not so symmetrical. Then, use smaller props on the other sides (flatware, smaller bowls, herbs, etc.) to create a pleasing balance.

# GET CREATIVE

Traditionally, we think of food photography as consisting of a meal on a plate. There are, however, ways that you can deviate from this norm and get creative! Let's look at a few.

## VEGGIE "ART"

Raw vegetables are a thing of beauty. Thanks, Mother Nature! All of the colors, shapes and textures can be used to build really creative compositions that can range from very simple (the tomato heart) to super complex (the veggie rainbow). I will commonly shoot these types of photos after coming home from my weekly farmers market visit.

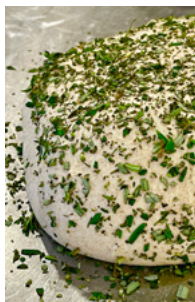


When choosing backgrounds and what veggies to use, think about contrasts in color, texture and textures. The shiny peppers contrast with the gritty background. The rough carrot skin contrasts with the sheen that was created by photographing them while they were wet. The cloth under the heirloom tomatoes contrasts in color with most of them, yet matches their stems.



## SHOW THE PROGRESSION

If you're shooting at home, you can document the process of creating the dish. If I plan on doing this, I will set up my shooting spot before starting to cook. I'll choose the location and put a backdrop in place. This way, I can carry the food there at each stage. Of course, this could easily be your kitchen/food prep area if you have nice natural light.



## ADD A HUMAN ELEMENT

Adding a human element, even if it's just someone's hands, can make an image feel more personal. You can show someone's hands as they cut into a dish or perhaps just presenting the food.



# EDITING

We could do an entire class on editing, but here are some iPhone Photos App settings that can be useful:

**The Crop Tool:** The Crop Tool can be used to adjust your composition after the photo has been taken. It can be especially useful for removing distracting elements from the edges of the frame.



**The Warmth & Tint sliders:** If you had to shoot under man-made lighting, the white balance may be off, resulting in a color cast on the food. To correct this, you can use the Warmth slider to make the image warmer (more yellow) or cooler (more blue). The Tint slider can be used to make the image more green or more magenta.



**Vignette:** The Vignette setting will darken the edges of the frame, drawing the eye into the center and toward the subject.

