

Food Photography: Recipe for a Great Image

from Stu Glaser

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Of all the types of photography that I am involved with, I seem to get more questions about food photography than just about everything else combined.



“Kurma Cake” captured by Ikmal Fauzan (Click Image to See More From Ikmal Fauzan)

I appreciate that not everyone who drives a car wants to know how the engine works so—with that principle in mind—I have prepared this checklist that should yield a more than satisfactory results when photographing food:

- **Blur the background.**

This forces the focus to be on the food. A good photograph has to guide the viewer.

- **Use a very narrow depth of field.**

This strengthens the image by focusing the viewer’s attention even more.

- **Use a window as the background but not with direct sunlight coming through.**

This gives a light, airy feel to the photograph.

- **Use fill flash otherwise the subject will be too dark.**

The bright background would silhouette the food without some help from the flash

- **Diffuse flash with either greaseproof paper or purpose made diffuser.**

Undiffused flash light is very harsh and causes hard shadows. Hard shadows are the enemy of the food photographer.

- **Shoot on a level with the food and not looking down on it.**

People see the top down view every day. A different angle stimulates the brain. This angle also works best with the light through the window background.

- **Make sure all ordinary household lights are switched off.**

Different lights have different temperatures and camera sensors see this even though we don't.

- **Check that camera white balance is set for sunlight.**

This will give the clean white light that the best food photography uses.

- **If photographing in the kitchen, check that the range hood light is off.**

Again, this is related to color temperature. The range hood light will cast a nasty orange glow over anything nearby.

- **Use a tripod and either a remote shutter release or the timer on the camera.**

This will make the image pin sharp by removing camera shake from the equation.



“pulutan (finger food)” captured by neil roy panes (click image to see more from neil roy panes)

- **Use as low an ISO setting as the camera allows.**

This will eliminate noise, which will make for a sharper looking image.

- **Use white plates and a plain surface. Brushed stainless steel is ideal.**

White plates and brushed steel give really nice understated reflections that add great depth to an image.

- **Remove clutter. Leave only the plate and the food.**

A simple compositional point helps the viewer to focus on the food.



“Coffee” captured by [Filippo Diotalevi](#)

- **Don’t overfill the plate unless the photograph is for a fast food chain.**

The reason for this is twofold. It helps the viewer and it contributes to the general airiness of the image.

- **Use a sprig of a fresh herb to add a dash of color.**

Food is often beige, and a splash color can really make an image come alive.

- **Make the plate big in the image.**

Obvious one this but the plate should occupy at least 80 percent of the width of the photograph.

- **Don’t be scared to crop the plate. Use the plate’s edge as a compositional element.**

A shot with just half of the plate in frame makes for a really pleasing composition.



“would you like some breakfast?” captured by [Kalyan Chakravarthy](#)

▪ **On the computer use a little sharpening but not too much.**

Generally speaking some sharpening is a good thing, but overdoing it makes the edges very unnatural looking.

▪ **Crop to tighten up the composition if required.**

It is best to get as close to the final composition as possible with the camera. Viewfinders do not always show the image exactly as it will appear in the final photograph, so a little cropping may be required.



“Food Project: Mediterranean Pizza” captured by [Kayla Joelle Mahood](#) (Click Image to See More From [Kayla Joelle Mahood](#))

This may seem like a lot to remember, but it does become second nature very quickly. Remember, though, that these are only guidelines and not hard and fast rules. The best photographs are taken by those that are prepared to take risks and to learn from the process.

About the Author:

For more about food photography and minimalist cooking including examples of my photography check out my guest post on my wife's blog [Minimalist Cook](#). For more about minimalism in general and additional examples of my camera work check out my wife's other blog [Minimalist Woman](#). I have been fascinated by minimalism for many years, especially as it pertains to photography and the arts.

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