



THE ONE ESSENTIAL FOOD SHOT

Most food shots you see in travel magazines were taken far from the controlled confines of a studio, and having the ability to add a great looking dish to your folio of photos is essential for any aspiring blogger. Here's a quick primer on how to set up that shot and make it work wonders. Words and images by Ewen Bell.

Window seat, please

If you haven't already guessed from my past features in *Digital Photography* magazine, the key ingredient to any great photo is interesting light. Cameras don't see objects; they only see light. Teaching your eyes to see light can take a little practice, but most of us already know a good restaurant table when we see one. The best light for shooting food on the run is the window seat, otherwise known as the naturally occurring softbox.

Imagine a bright sunny day with tonnes of harsh, direct light blasting away at a scorched city below. In a waterside restaurant in Melbourne recently, that's exactly what myself and a journo were faced with. We arrived for the lunch service and grabbed a seat just inside the awning with views of the Yarra River beyond.

Outside the sun was intense and bright, the worst kind of light you could want for close-up or portraits: too much contrast, sky-high angles and all the colour gets drained out. Under the shade of the awning, however, the light softens perfectly because the direct light has been removed from the equation. Better still, a window, doorway or awning will always create a softbox effect by letting that soft angled light come pouring across from the side.

That light is very, very soft, yet rather bright – the perfect light for food photography.

Into the light

Having arrived early, it was no problem getting the waiter to arrange the ideal table for my photographic needs, and better still they were happy to arrange a second table specifically for the shoot. Myself and the journo had our own table for eating and chatting, and then facing towards that softbox effect we had another table that I could tinker with and style some shots.

What you may not expect here is that I'm intentionally shooting into the light. Working with this setup takes a little practice, and for many people they have to overcome a basic rule of law for photographers. This effect works because the source of light is very soft, and because we have such wonderful processing software these days that a minor tweak or two back on the desktop will make the scene perfect. More on that later.

By picking lunchtime for a food shoot, you ensure you have the brightest source of natural light the day can offer. Most contemporary kitchens these days lean towards white and bright decor anyway, so chances are you're shooting with plates and tables that are very white on the grey scale. Backlighting the setting is ideal for this combination.

Shooting into the light isn't necessarily an all or nothing proposition. You just need to shuffle around a chair width »



» IMAGES

FLINDERS ST STATION

» (FAR LEFT, TOP)
Shot with a Canon 1D MkIV; 24mm lens; 1/640sec; f/2; ISO 200

LUNCHTIME LIGHTING

» (LEFT) Canon 1D MkIV; 50mm lens; 1/125sec; f/4; ISO 400

VISUAL FEAST

» (RIGHT) Canon 1D MkIV; 24mm lens; 1/200sec; f/4; ISO 400

“You only need one great shot to accompany a travel story, so let's work on getting that one shot right”



“Some people earn more money for a day of food styling than a travel photographer earns in a week”

setup that just looks great and then spend the entire lunch shooting the same shot only with a different dish in the middle. Think about what happens when suddenly an editor wants two shots from that restaurant instead of one.

and you can get a little sidelight into the shot, or shuffle back when you want something 100% backlit. The choice is yours, and from the confines of a restaurant table you have great flexibility in the mix of backlight to sidelight.

Style over sustenance

Good light and good food are now assured for the shoot, but to bring it all together you need to practice some styling. Some people earn more money for a day of food styling than a travel photographer earns for a week of brochure shooting. It's a fine skill that you can't master overnight, but you only need one great shot to accompany a travel story, so let's work on getting that one shot right.

The key theme to good styling is adding props into the frame. If you start with just the basic dish on its own, sitting on an empty table with no adornments, then it's rather dull and looks odd. The natural tendency is to use a set table instead, but you'll soon find that most table settings are presented for a diner, not a camera. My technique is to ask the waiter to set a table for two, and then take all those elements and jumble them up.

Some waiters get really annoyed by this, but they soon warm to my madness when they see a few photos on the back of the camera.

Your objective is two-fold when styling: using props such as glasses and cutlery to build layers of complexity to the frame; plus give yourself a few alternative compositions. It's very easy to find one

Camera configuration

You'll be relieved to learn that you won't need a special lens or expensive camera to shoot this scene, and in fact almost any small DSLR can handle the task. The simple recipe is to shoot around F/4 with a standard lens. When I say "standard" lens, I mean the equivalent of a 50mm perspective. If you have a full frame DSLR like the Canon 5D or Nikon D700, then you just need a 50mm lens. Most people carry zoom lenses, which is no problem either if yours is a 24-105mm or similar. Just pick the 50mm length and you're ready to shoot.

On a smaller DSLR, the partial frame models with an APS-C sized sensor, a "standard" lens is around 35mm instead of 50mm. This is because the sensor is smaller and it effectively crops half of your image, so you need to pick 35mm on your zoom lens instead.

Aperture is important here and F/4 is a good starting point. You don't want everything in focus for a nice food shot; you want the eye to be drawn into the primary subject. It's a conventional tool for composition and works very well with all kinds of still life photography and portraiture. A lot of good lenses go down to F/2.8 and very few won't achieve F/4, so this mark is usually achievable for photographers without having to go out and buy a special bit of kit.

My personal preference for most work is for the ultra-fine depth of field around F/2, which needs a more demanding lens and more demanding attention to my autofocus system. Such shallow depth of field is usually too shallow for food work,

as you don't get enough detail sharp in the frame. F/4 is the way to go for food.

If you haven't done a lot of shallow depth of field work, you may need to learn a little about the autofocus system on your camera as well. Most DSLR systems offer a grid of focus points, when really you only want one. I set my camera to use the central focus point alone, and that way I know exactly where the camera will lock from. By pressing the shutter half way down, the camera locks focus – then I recompose for aesthetics before committing the shutter and capturing the shot.

Wide and long

If you have a good zoom lens that covers 24-105mm, it's worth doing a little experiment to see what the alternative shots are like at the wide and telephoto ends of the range. If you shoot too long, say at 100mm, then you simply end up standing back across the room to get

» IMAGES

SEASONAL SPREAD

» (FAR LEFT) Canon 1D MkIV; 50mm lens; 1/320sec; f/4; ISO 400

FILLING YOUR FRAME

» (LEFT, ABOVE) Canon 1D MkIV; 50mm lens; 1/320sec; f/4; ISO 400

SHOTS THAT SIZZLE

» (BELOW) Canon 1D MkIV; 24mm lens; 1/160sec; f/4; ISO 400



Food focus

All the bokeh you can eat...

"You don't want everything in focus for a nice food shot – however, the ultra-fine depth of field around F/2 is usually too shallow as you don't quite get enough detail sharp in the frame. For the majority of food work, F/4 is the way to go."

“The lesson here is simple; shoot tall and fill your portrait orientation from top to bottom”

enough subject into the composition. Telephoto lenses are great for isolating and excluding, but remember the essence to good food styling is bringing in extra detail and embellishing the main subject.

If you try to shoot it wide instead of “standard”, say at 24mm or even 16mm if you have it, then you quickly realise you can’t contain the action. You end up with too much in the periphery that distracts from the subject, and you’re likely to get perspective distortion that just makes the final result look rather amateur. It is possible to shoot food with a 24mm wide angle, but you need to practice that skill and you often need a bigger table.

Stick with the 50mm equivalent lens and you can quickly focus on the task of good composition and building up the scene with a few adornments.

Supermodels are tall

Food photography rarely involves supermodels but they do have something in common. Both work best when shooting portrait. Shooting your dishes landscape is possible and often essential for some magazine layouts, but 99 out of 100 times the winning shots are going to be portrait. Just ask Heidi Klum.

If you’re not accustomed to tipping your camera sideways to shoot, you’re missing out on the best images you never knew you had. (Okay, we’re back to food here now; forget the supermodels for a minute.)

We’re all too used to shooting everything in landscape orientation because that’s how most cameras are designed. Trouble is that your average table setting looks dreadful in landscape, with corners getting clipped by the edge of a chair or the main dish sitting heavily on one half of the frame. Tilting to portrait orientation simply provides far more pleasing options for composition.

Aesthetics are a personal choice, but have a glance through any magazine that features really top food photography and see how many frames they print as a landscape. Not too many. You’ll even see some cropped square to avoid the landscape option. The lesson here is simple; shoot tall and fill your portrait orientation from top to bottom.

Coming out of the shadows

By now you have a nice list of technical tune-ups that should allow you to focus on the creative potential of the kitchen. With the light streaming in from behind,

soft but bright, you can shoot frames at F/4 and just keep an eye on the shutter speed so you’re getting sharp images. Depending on the location you might get a window seat that leans towards soft instead of bright, in which case you simply dial up the ISO setting as required.

I have routinely cranked up to 1600 ISO on daylight shoots when the light is very, very soft, and you’ll be hard pressed to spot the difference. Noise is only a problem in candle-lit conditions; you won’t run into problems when you’re just taking advantage of the high ISO to add a little shutter speed.

One more step is often required when you get the images back onto the desktop and start tinkering with the RAW files. Backlighting is very lovely to work with but sometimes a bit of essential detail ends up underexposed. In the studio we design the backlighting rig to throw soft light behind, but also add a second strobe to put some fill light in the foreground. The combination avoids the problem of underexposed hero elements.

If you use software such as Capture One (or Lightroom, Aperture, etc) there’s an effective solution called Local Adjustment Layers. I create a brush that’s wide and very soft and tag the underexposed section of the frame. Once tagged, I increase the exposure for that adjustment layer and the job is done, my desired detail is pulled through from lower down inside the RAW file.

The key to making adjustment layers look natural is a very wide brush that has a soft gradient between the effected area and the rest of the frame. Don’t try to be very precise with the brushes; make them rough and avoid hard edges. It takes so little time to paint in a layer and tweak to compensate for exposure, but the results will look very professional.

Forethought to foreground

The final tip for composition is something I’ve learned from experience but I still make the mistake often. You have to be careful when building compositions that have out of focus elements in the foreground; most of the time it simply doesn’t work.

Shallow depth of field work, in this case shooting at F/4, is never easy and you have to be selective about where the focus is pulled. Equally with food styling, you may have to be selective about letting anything of detail into the

foreground of the frame as these elements can upset the balance of your composition.

While shooting these images at The Sharing House along Melbourne’s South Wharf Promenade, we ordered a rather sensational dish of Scallops and Whitlock. The scallops are plump and juicy with delicate fringes of coriander adding a splash of green to the scene. I shot that dish with a few alternate setups, including some tighter shots. The little round scallops work nicely for

composition. Regrettably I wasn’t paying enough attention to my choice of focus and after a dozen shots I failed to grab one with the foreground scallops locked sharp.

There are a few good shots in the set, but no great ones. What it really needed was a very sharp scallop that revealed the delicate pattern of the coriander leaf, as that pairing is the hero of the dish. The good news is that after shooting the scallops we devoured

them all, and frankly this lunchtime shoot proved to be our favourite meal of the entire three days spent reviewing Melbourne’s contemporary culinary style. Perhaps part of what made it our favourite was simply nailing some great shots and knowing we had them in the bag for when the time comes to pick images for a layout.

For more of Ewen’s work in the field here and abroad, check out photographyfortravellers.com



» IMAGES

JUST DESSERTS

» (TOP) Canon 1D MkIV; 50mm lens; 1/250sec; f/4; ISO 400

COFFEE TIME

» (MIDDLE) Canon 1D MkIV; 24mm lens; 1/60sec; f/2; ISO 1600

DEGRAVES, MELBOURNE

» (LEFT) Canon 1D MkIV; 24mm lens; 1/200sec; f/2; ISO 1600

BIG FINISH

» (FAR RIGHT) Canon 1D MkIV; 50mm lens; 1/250sec; f/4; ISO 400

