

STAGES OF A FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY SHOOT

Quick Guide by Stacey Hill



Food connects us; it is a key element of our society. Sitting down as a group or a family to share a meal is one of the fundamental bonding ceremonies that we have. The presentation and delivery of the food can become an event; think unveiling the decorated glazed Christmas ham or setting the pudding on fire.


As a group, we partake of food, share choice morsels, and recommend a favorite sauce or side dish. Food helps us to communicate and it ensures we take time to spend with our loved ones. It slows us down, gives a common subject to talk about, and can break the ice at events where we might not know everyone.


Culturally, food is important as well. Many special events like weddings, key birthdays, the birth of a child, or the loss of a loved one are celebrated with food as a central element of the occasion.

Food can be an event in itself. The ritual of dressing up to go out to a nice restaurant, choosing the wine, deciding on the menu, and appreciating the fine presentation and delicious flavors that we would not normally eat is often a treat saved for a special occasion.

In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the base of the pyramid is the widest, giving importance to the most fundamental physiological requirements: air, water, food, shelter, warmth, and sleep. This shows how food is an intrinsic part of our welfare. Without it, we literally cannot survive.

Beyond that, however, we can enjoy food as a sensory experience. We eat first with our eyes, enjoying the deliciousness of the visual appearance, before we reach out to taste our first mouthful, closing the loop on experiencing how good the food tastes as well. Our brain is a hungry organ; it actually consumes up to 25% of the body's blood flow. It demands that we feed it sufficiently.

 **Key Lesson:** Food is a fundamental part of our health, culture, and society. Is it any wonder that social media is full of food images? It's our favorite thing!

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to improve your composition skills for better images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide: [Advanced Composition](#).



Photograph by Stacey Hill

What you will learn in this guide:

- The importance of food in life and photography
- Food photography is challenging and requires a commitment of time
- A great food photograph includes numerous elements, so you will learn what the elements are and how to put them together
- How to plan a food shoot
- How to add important elements to your food shoot including story and mood
- How to set up a food shot
- How to analyze your attempts and make improvements
- Backdrop suggestions
- The importance of the camera angle
- How to observe and fix problems in the background




Photograph by Stacey Hill

Presentation is of key importance. A meal may be highly nutritious and flavorsome, but if it looks like a soggy brown mess, it will not be visually pleasing.

The challenge with food photography is that food prepared in its natural state is not always the most photogenic when put in front of the camera and may need some assistance. This leads to the art of food styling, where food is prepared (often cooked from scratch) to ensure it is visually pleasing.

Next, it needs to be presented in a manner that can be composed to look good in camera, and also show the food off to its best advantage. This sounds pretty easy, but trust me, it is much harder than it looks.

 **Key Lesson:** Because we are exposed to so many images of food, you may not realize that good food photography is harder than it looks.

If you want a really good food image, a lot of effort has to go into creating the best outcome.

Here are some of the many elements to consider:

- The food itself and the story you are telling about it
- Background and backdrop
- Lighting
- Angle of shot
- Staging the shoot
- Lens choice, focal length, and aperture
- Prop choices
- Color choices
- Final editing

For the at-home photographer, you may need to cook the food (and more than once if it doesn't come out right the first time), select the props, style the scene, tweak the styling, set up the camera, and then shoot it at several angles, all while keeping the food looking fresh and edible.

Given that you could spend a good hour or so just styling the scene before you even put the hero food into the shot just to get ONE good shot, it can take a lot more work than people anticipate.



Key Lesson: Good food imagery starts with having the best quality food available.



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PLANNING A FOOD SHOOT

Planning your shoot is recommended. You can make a checklist, which can be used for future shoots, which makes your planning process faster and more efficient.

A checklist helps remind you of the things that need to be done, and also the order they need to be done in; though, as with everything, prepare to be flexible as things can change if you have a minor food disaster, for example.

Develop your own list as your process may well be different, but here is my basic checklist:

- 1) Decide on the food subject choice
- 2) Define what the story of the food will be
- 3) Depending on the food, what mood and tone do you want for the scene: will it be light/bright or dark/moody?
- 4) If you need to cook the food and it's the first time trying the recipe, cook it at least once to test the recipe and see how it comes out

- 5) Based on how the food looks, make the following choices:
 - What color/texture background will it be shot on? What backdrop will be used?
 - What angle of light will be used: side or backlight?
- 6) What story are you telling with the food, and therefore which props does it need?
- 7) Given the props and the story, what is the best height and angle to shoot at?

Once we have all these decisions made, move on to the next stage:

- Place the stand-in and do a test shoot
- Check the lighting and composition
- Tweak the styling
- Test shoot again
- Tweak the styling some more if needed



Photograph by Stacey Hill

Eventually the composition will be sorted, and then you can start to shoot the actual frames.

💎 **Key Lesson:** Planning and preparation will make sure you have an efficient workflow and will schedule your time well.


ANATOMY OF A FOOD SHOOT


Let us work step by step through a food shoot.

- The food SUBJECT is some freshly picked redcurrants from my garden. They are a lovely bright red color and are ripe at the peak of summer.
- Because it is a summer fruit, I want the STORY to be light and airy, so the background and base will be white. However, I have a gorgeous vintage silver jug that is the right size to have these redcurrants spilling out of and it offers a nice shape, adding some darker contrasting tones to help balance out a very bright white scene.
- MOOD and TONE will be light, bright, airy, and vintage.
- PREPARATION is to pick the fruit and assemble it carefully in the jug. One trick is to pad the bottom half of the jug with some kitchen paper so you only need half as much fruit.
- I have some white painted bead board for the BACKGROUND choices, which gives enough

interest and texture to the baseboard. However the hard, straight lines will have a lot of visual weight, so to balance that, the background will be a softly draped, light cotton fabric. This will add some textural interest to the background but not be too overwhelming. It also helps hide the horizon line between the baseboard and background as well.

- SHOOTING ANGLE/HEIGHT will include a side-on shot to capture the lovely shape of the jug as well as some 45-degree angle and overhead shots as well. The shots will vary between portrait and landscape orientation of the camera, depending on how the styling goes.

 **Note:** The next photographs you'll see are all unedited RAW images straight from camera, unless noted.

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to improve your composition skills for better images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide: [Advanced Composition](#).



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SHOT ONE

SETTING UP THE SCENE

- Put the bead board down, put up white Foamcore as the backdrop, and then drape the white cotton fabric over it. Make sure there are interesting drapes and folds that can be seen, but make sure that there aren't any heavy shadows in the fabric tucks.
- Give the jug a wipe with a soft cloth to make sure it's clean. Scrunch up some kitchen paper and put it in the bottom of the jug.
- Add in the redcurrants, taking care to drape a long strand in the front, with a nice curving stem. Remove some currants at the end so the stem sticks up bare.
- Fill the jug nicely and then arrange some scattered currants around it. Try not to make them look too 'placed.'
- Set up the lighting. This image was shot with a Speedlite in an Octa Softbox set to the left of the frame.
- Take a test shot.

ANALYZE THE SHOT

- The jug looks great; the curve of the handle is lovely.
- The redcurrants are strong and bright with nice specular highlights, giving good dimensionality.
- The shadows are soft and the exposure is good.
- The fabric drape in the background needs some attention.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

SHOT TWO

SETTING UP THE SCENE

- I tweaked the fabric and shot at a slightly different angle, and a little closer.

ANALYZE THE SHOT

- It is a better angle for the jug. I can see the curve of the lip better.
- Closer up is better.
- The fabric still needs tweaking.



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SHOT THREE

SETTING UP THE SCENE

- I took another shot at a slightly closer and lower angle.

ANALYZE THE SHOT

- It is a better angle for the jug. I can see the curve of the lip better.
- Closer up again is good.
- The fabric folds are much better and the darker shadow is now gone.
- I am not necessarily loving the portrait orientation, so I will change it over to landscape.



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SHOT FOUR

SETTING UP THE SCENE

- The camera is changed to landscape orientation.
- This brought more of the background into frame so I had to re-drape the fabric to accommodate.

ANALYZE THE SHOT

- The angle of the jug is still good, with a nice balance between the lip and handle curves.
- The distance to subject is good and the aperture is the right one for the outcome we want.
- I have hit the edge of the bead board and it's showing on the right-hand edge of the frame.
- There are some dark shadows in the fabric on the right-hand side.

SHOT FIVE

SETTING UP THE SCENE

- I changed angle of shooting and adjusted the jug to suit.
- I rearranged the fabric in the back to cover the edge of the bead board.

ANALYZE THE SHOT

- The angle of the jug is good, but I have lost some negative fill on the right-hand side.
- The fabric looks awful, messy, and the big dark shadow is obvious.



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SHOT SIX

SETTING UP THE SCENE

- I changed the angle again

ANALYZE THE SHOT

- The angle of the jug is good, but I have lost some negative fill on the right-hand side.
- The fabric is much improved. There are some small tucks on the left-hand side that might need tweaking, but it's OK for now.
- Landscape orientation is currently the most pleasing to me so far, but I have only been shooting direct side-on shots, so some variation is needed.

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SHOTS SEVEN TO NINE

SETTING UP THE SCENE

I have bunched these shots all up together as I didn't like any of them. The change in camera angle didn't suit the arrangement with the jug at all.

We forget sometimes how our eyes see things and our brain processes an image quite differently to how our camera does, so it's important to take the time to shoot all the possibilities that you have time for.

In this example we didn't get any better shots by changing from where we started, but the reverse is entirely possible, but we will not know until we try it.

These were all shot tethered to a laptop, so composition was judged using the back of the camera and the bigger image on the laptop screen to make the judgment call.



Photographs by Stacey Hill

SHOT TEN

SETTING UP THE SCENE

- I wasn't happy with the previous side-on angle, as it lacked sufficient shadow on the right-hand side of the jug, and it didn't look as good.
- I changed the angle of my camera to be closer to the handle and put a black card up to the right, off frame.
- I changed the arrangement of the scattered redcurrants.
- I added a spray of water on the bead board for a bit of textural interest and also picked up the backlighting, which was now present due to the change of camera angle.
- I fluffed the fabric a little.
- I zoomed in a bit more.

ANALYZE THE SHOT

- Yes, the ducks are starting to line up here.
- The jug looks good, and the placement of the redcurrants is better.
- The light is better and much more directional with the shadows present closer to the camera.
- The spray of water is nice.
- I need to crop the frame on the left-hand side when editing.
- One redcurrant is just poking out from behind the jug and needs to be moved
- Nearly there!



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SHOT ELEVEN

This is the Final shot, fully edited in Lightroom.



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SUMMARY

It took approximately an hour to do this shoot. Only half of that was spent shooting; the rest was in preparation and setup of the scene, the camera, and the lighting etc.

So it took an hour to get one good food shot. For some food I only had to pick and assemble in a vintage jug, which only took a few minutes, I created the shot in pretty good time! The staging was also very simple and quick and easy to adjust.

Imagine if you had to prepare and then cook a dish. That could take at least another two hours, assuming it comes out looking good the first time.

The more elaborate or complicated the food, the more time it will take to ensure it is looking its best. Plus, food has a limited lifespan in front of the camera. Fruit will brown, delicate greens will wilt, hot food will begin to cool and congeal, and cold foods can melt in front of hot studio lights.

Preparation of the scene and the staging and getting the composition RIGHT is necessary before you put the plated food in front of the camera, as you may only have minutes to shoot with it before it 'dies' and becomes unusable.

CONCLUSION

Shooting food can be extremely challenging, and equally rewarding as a result. It is an expensive subject to shoot, as you have to account for the cost of the food (and sometimes more than one serving) plus all the accessories you need to stage with it.

Planning the scene and the shoot is key. Staging the food for best presentation and composition will be an ongoing event. Tweaks will be needed; the food may need to be refreshed between takes.

However, the thrill from doing ALL of this alone – preparing/cooking/assembling the food, styling and shooting it, and coming out of it with a GREAT image – is fantastic.

An unexpected side effect is that you also generate a lot of delicious-looking food, and hopefully it tastes good as well! Sharing this with your friends or family is a nice bonus, which they will appreciate. All the cooking is good for increasing your skill set as well, and you can try out tasty new recipes.

It does mean a bit of extra time at the gym too, though!

I warn people that shooting food is not as easy as they think it should be. We are deceived by the gorgeous images on Facebook and Instagram, not realizing that hours of work have gone into that one perfect shot. For some people, that may inspire them, whereas others may be completely uninterested in putting that much work into a shoot.

Fortunately there is space for all of us to create in a way we enjoy, and if you love food as much as I do, I hope you have a go at shooting it, and making your friends go...

WOW!

Self-Check Quiz:

1. How important is food on an everyday basis?
2. Does the quality of the food make a difference?
3. Do you need lots of dishes and cutlery and extra stuff?
4. How long does food stay fresh?
5. Can I eat it at the end?

Answers:

- 1) *Without food, humanity would starve, so it's pretty important!*
- 2) *Yes, if you want your images to look great, the food itself must be of the best quality.*
- 3) *It depends, but if you want to tell a more creative story about the food, then yes, you will need lots of props.*
- 4) *It depends on the food, but food does not look fresh for long in front of the camera. Ice cream will melt in minutes!*
- 5) *Some food styling techniques mean the food is NOT edible at the end of a shoot, but most home shooters will not use them, so yes, it should be eaten, but it will probably be a bit cold!*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Stacey Hill invested in her first DSLR back in 2007. While having many adventures out and about in the South Island of New Zealand, Stacey took to blogging about her experiences learning photography. Eventually she discovered the fun and creative possibilities to be had with Photoshop. Stacey can be found having an opinion all over the place:



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