

How to Take

**Stunning
Food Photos**

.....
from creators of LearnFoodPhotography.com
.....

Learn the Basics of Taking Better Food Photos

- Understand the Process of Photographing Food
- The Initial Guide to Lighting for Better Food Photos
- 4 Simple and Practical Ways to Improve Photographic Composition

This book is dedicated to G, my better half.
Without her understanding and constant support keeping up the blog and writing an eBook would have been impossible.

Thank you for downloading the first version of this eBook. This book is absolutely FREE!! If you paid or bartered your life away for this Book, you should know that you've been conned.

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ABOUT LEARN FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BLOG

Learn Food Photography (www.learnfoodphotography.com) is a Food Photography and Food Styling Blog written by Neel with support from G (it would have been impossible without her support). At this time, we publish at least two posts with tutorials, tips or articles on food photography, styling and related topics.

If you would like to get our next blog post or be notified about next eBook release, subscribe to our FREE [RSS updates or email updates](#).

ABOUT THE EBOOK

This is the first eBook from LearnFoodPhotography.com and is focused on basics of food photography for aspiring food photographers. This 20+ pages eBook includes basic food photography concepts with more focus on general concepts.

We start with challenges in food photography and how this photography niche is different than any other niches. We briefly talk about process of photographing food and share a visual to explain the process in less than two minutes.

We talk about the only two things you will ever need to make a stunning food photos. We then talk about basics of lighting, types of lighting and some concepts of composition.

This is a restricted and review version for those interested. I would love to hear your feedback on this eBook. What would you like to add in here? What is missing from here? Please send me your feedback by [clicking here](#). After receiving feedback, I will be updating this eBook and releasing it under Creative Commons License.

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THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHING FOOD

Food photography is the most unique form of photography and is one of the most challenging niches of photography. It is also most demanding if you are styling your food too.

What Makes Food Photography Challenging?

Photographing food is a lot of work and as some say food is a very difficult subject to photograph. It is one of the most demanding niches in photography. Unlike landscape photography or architectural photography, where all you need is a good eye and a camera, food photography not only *requires* a good eye and a decent camera, it *demand*s a beautifully styled food plate. Food Photography is more than just the act of photographing food and for this reason it is sometimes grueling and complicated.

People Involved

Food Photography requires a big team if done professionally. If you are doing this alone, you need to know not only photography, but also food plating and or styling. People involved in food photo shoots and combined effort required is many times greater than landscape photography or such. One person can complete landscape photography assignment easily. However, for food photography, you need someone to take a photo, but then before taking the photo, we need someone to assemble the dish. Oh but even before assembling the dish, we need someone to cook the dish first. If you read the previous, a photographer, a stylist and a chef are just a few roles that several people play in a food photo shoot. In larger shoots, you will find several other roles like art director, food shopper etc.

Required Gear

A landscape photographer is happy to take a tripod and a good lens and in most cases that is good enough. Food photography on the other hand, is not only about a good lens and a tripod but also light bouncers and reflectors. Food photography needs more props to set up the scene too. Plates, silverware, napkins, background sheets/boards to name a few. As a result of this, photographer needs to take into account how do these small and big props impact and interact with the main subject in a photo.

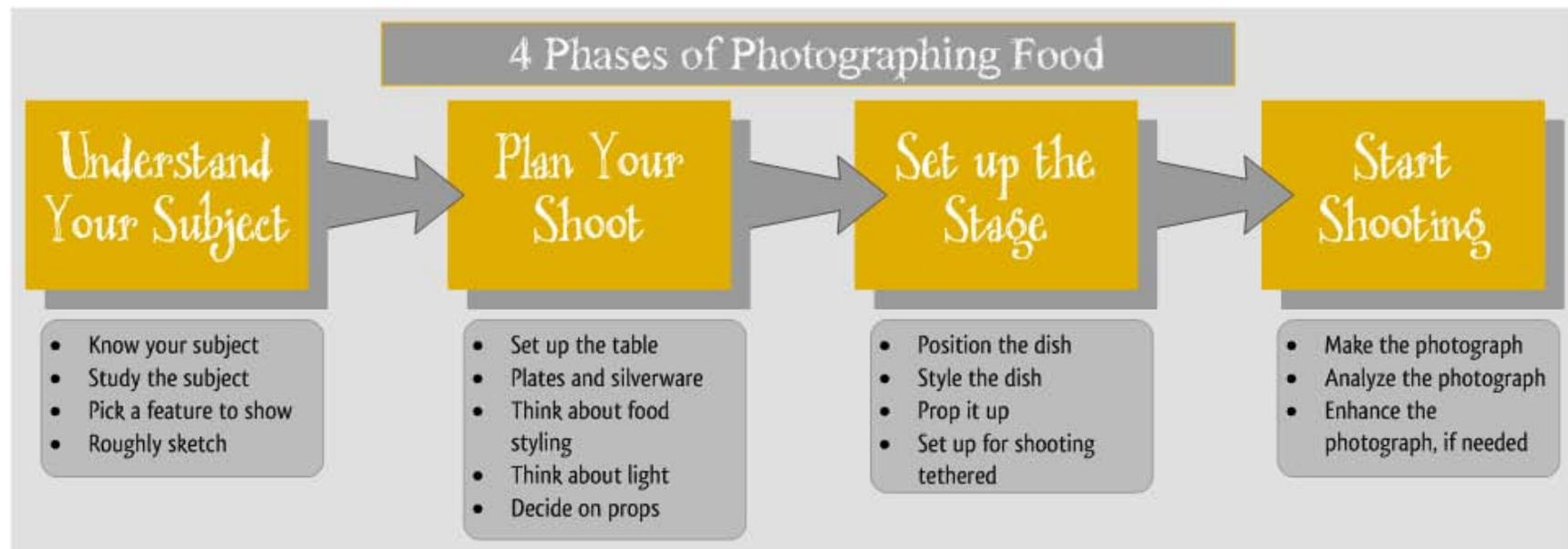
“If you can take great food photos, you can shoot anything”

- Unknown

Food Photography includes a lot of activities and all of them should be done perfectly to get a great picture. After taking just few photographs, you would realize that food photography is very complex. The act of taking the picture is just one element in this process. There is the food itself and the ambience around it. Then there is the food styling element and oh! Don't forget selecting the right plate and silverware. Any one of these activities go wrong and there goes your photograph - in the trash bin.

PROCESS OF PHOTOGRAPHING FOOD

In the previous section, we saw what makes food photography so complex. Due to its complex nature, photographing food is rather long process and aspiring food photographer should understand this very well for taking better food photographs.



The illustration above shows four phases of this entire process. The process starts with understanding your subject – a dish you want to photograph in this case. Once you understand your subject, you move to the next phase where you plan for your photo shoot. After planning it is then time for setting up the stage before you start shooting the subject. This is a high-level process that you can use when photographing food. In the next few pages, let's look at these four phases in a little more detail.

Understand Your Subject

Before getting all geeked up about the high-tech camera and worrying about all the settings you should use and the filters and the lenses, wait. Wait and know your subject. Photography is less about the camera and more about vision. If the vision is in your head, it is easy to capture it by using a tool. The act of shooting and the camera is the last thing that you should be worried about. So, stop and understand your subject. What is its shape? What are its features? How do you want it to look in the photograph? Make a rough sketch of what you want. [Further Reading: Understand Your Subject – Part 1](#)

Plan Your Shoot

After making a rough sketch, you have some understanding of how you want the final photograph to look like. Now, it is time to plan for making that photograph and while doing this, refining the vision. So what kind of plate is the food in? How is the lighting? And food styling? What does that look like? What about the background, is it white or black? Or perhaps some other color? Is there a napkin that you are using? These questions should be answered before setting up the stage and starting to photograph food. [Read More: How to Plan Your Shoot](#)

Set Up the Stage

Now you have a plan, you have refined your first thoughts and defined what you want to a greater detail. Keeping those details in mind, it is time to set up the stage, well the table. You need to answer questions like how should the dish be positioned? Is the lighting appropriate? Once you position your plate with or without food, depending on type of food and convenience, you can start beautifying it and styling the food. Place some props that complement dish/food. If you like tethering, set up the computer to shoot tethered. If you don't like shooting tethered, move on to the next phase. [More Details: 4 Essential Steps for Setting Up the Stage](#)

Start Shooting

Phew!! Finally we can get started with photography. Once you have a refined plan and everything is set up, it is time to make great photographs. Take shots keeping the [basic elements that make a great photograph](#) in mind. Once you have taken the photograph, I prefer to analyze the picture before moving to the next type of shot. Since digital cameras make it absolutely easy to analyze, this is very easy. If you are shooting tethered, the photo is shown on the computer screen and helps you to make decision whether you need to retake the shot. And after all is done, this is the time to do some post processing. [Further Reading: Start Shooting](#)

MAKING A STUNNING FOOD PHOTO

Making a photograph is different than taking a photo. I strongly believe that great photographers make photograph. They don't just take it. Making a photograph is difficult. When you make a photograph, you carefully choose and include certain elements that support your vision for the photograph.

For making a stunning food photograph you need two things:

- Understanding what is a stunning photograph
- How to implement what you understood

Understanding a Stunning Food Photo

A stunning photo evokes emotion. Strong emotion. A photograph that moves you enough to take some action is a stunning photograph. A dessert photo that makes you lick the screen is a stunning photograph.



*Stunning Strawberries - Photo by [*clarity*](#)*

Long time back, I read somewhere that a stunning photograph has a special quality. When it is of thumbnail size, it attracts the viewer and draws her in and forces her to click and enlarge it. After she enlarges the photograph, the larger version is so moving that she just can't take her eyes off.

That is how a stunning photograph can be differentiated from a purely emotional perspective. Emotions can be a little profound, so lets try to make it a little simpler.

Let's look at some of the characteristics of a stunning food photo:

The Only Two Things You Need to Make a Stunning Photo

We looked at some of the subjective and emotional aspects of a great photograph. In this section we will talk about some specific characteristics of a stunning food photograph. In fact, we will just talk about two things that make or break any food photographs. Several other elements relate to these two things in some way.

Appropriate Exposure

The first critical thing for any photograph to become a masterpiece is appropriate exposure. For food photos, appropriate exposure means well lighted subject. Shadows and dark areas (under exposed) make beverages and dishes look unappealing. Exposure can be controlled by three main ingredients – aperture, shutter speed and ISO. Read more about these [three ingredients of any photograph](#).

Over Exposure – When light is exposed on the sensor or film more than it should be for a given light setting, the photograph seems to be too bright. This is called over-exposure.

Under exposure – This is opposite of over exposure. In this case, not enough light is exposed on the film/sensor, making the photo a little dark.

Thoughtful Composition

A great photograph has thoughtful composition.

The elements of composition are well placed. The frame and the subject have a relationship.

We will talk more about composition in next chapters.



Different composition for a milk shake

BASICS OF LIGHTING

A photograph is nothing but a black rectangle without light. Light is the most important thing that every photographer needs to understand well. Understanding light is crucial for becoming better photographer and also the least stressed concept by new and aspiring photographer.

Importance of light can't be stressed enough. Understanding and using light will improve your photography skills by a great degree.

Quantity of Light

The first thing to understand about light, especially for food photography is quantity. Having enough light available makes things simpler. If there is enough light, you have to make minimum adjustments and taking a picture become easier.

“But I can adjust my camera settings and still capture an image in low light”, you may say. Yes you can. But that will be only after you compromise the quality of a picture. For example, if you are taking a picture of a dessert and the light isn't enough. If you are using DSLR, you can change the aperture or shutter speed or ISO. Now lets say you decided to change shutter speed, depending on the focal length of your lens, if you go too low on shutter speed without a tripod, your picture quality will drastically reduce. If you decide to increase your ISO, that of course comes with the picture becoming more grainy.

Here the point is to differentiate between enough and too little light on a broad level. Technically you can't measure quantity of light at your home (like 1 kilo or pound of light), but you can sense whether there is enough light. Developing this sense helps you work faster and with minimum retakes.

Quality of Light

Not all light is made same. There is light that comes from nature and then there is one that can be created at home (by lighting a bulb that is). Even when it comes from nature, there is that comes directly from sun to your subject, and then there is one that travels surface to surface bouncing around and then lands on your subject. For the lights that can be created at home there is the fluorescent one, then there is incandescent and there is flash.

All these various lights have different qualities and affect the photographs in several ways. Let's look at some of the common types of light and their effect on photos.

Incandescent

Also called tungsten bulb, these are most commonly found in most homes (not sure in European Union though). These are the bulb with the filament as shown in the picture. This type of light produces a yellowish photo and the colors captured in a photograph are not true colors. The color of this light is yellow.

Fluorescent

The white round tubes are called fluorescent light. Like incandescent, this is also found in any homes these days. The color of this light is greenish and any photograph taken in this light turns a little green/blue.



Incandescent Bulb - Photo by [That HP Chap](#)

Direct Sunlight

Direct sunlight is harsh. The afternoon sun overpowers every color when captured in a camera. The photograph is flat without any profile to it. The color is washed out during the bright day (without making any adjustments). If you are shooting food outside, timing makes a lot of difference. Best time to take photograph is when the light is soft and a bit diffused.

“Color of Light? Have you ever wondered what color is light?”

Flash

The most common type of light used in photography is flash. Flash is usually white and closer to natural light than most type of lights. Now there is one thing about on-camera flash that you should know. Generally speaking, direct flash on your camera is bad for photography. On-camera flash flattens the photograph and should be avoided at all times.

White Balance

So we just talked about four different types of light. All these light types modify the color of the subject in a photograph. In cases like these when light types change the color of a food dish, in order to make the colors in the photos as close to real as possible, an adjustment is needed. This adjustment that can be made before or after the photo is taken is called white balance. White balance can be adjusted in a camera by changing your settings to the light



Flash Gun - Photo by [pivenda](#)

type you are shooting in. If you would like to adjust the white balance after the photograph is taken, this is done using photo editing softwares.

In old days, film camera days that is, there were films for type of lights. There was a tungsten film for tungsten light and a daylight film for daylight and so on. That was the old way of getting right colors. Further Reading - [Why Your Cranberries Aren't Red Enough and 5 Ways How to Photograph Them](#)



Same subject with adjusted and unadjusted white balance

Modifying Light

In the life of every photographer, there are times when the available light just doesn't cut it. Either the light is too much or too little. It is sometimes too hard or can be too soft. In those situations, there is a need to modify the existing light.

There are several common ways to modify light, lets look at them one by one.

Flash

As we talked in the previous section, flash is the most commonly used light source when light is not enough. Flash comes in many shapes, sizes and types. This is just one of the most common and most used ways of modifying light.

Reflectors

The purpose of a reflector is to deflect light that comes from one direction and divert it to another direction. These do not only come in several sizes, they also have different colors too. A silver reflector is used when you need more natural light while a golden reflector helps you get warmer colors and warmer light.

Mirrors

The simplest modifier found in almost all homes is a mirror. There is no special gear needed, a simple mirror would do the job. The size of mirror will depend on how much light you would like to reflect.

Diffusers

Imagine hard light, too much light. If nothing was changed the food photo will have a sharp shadow. See the tower of limes photo. Can you see the sharp shadow? The sharp shadow could be made softer if the intensity of light could be lowered. Diffusers do this. A diffuser is nothing but a paper sheet or fabric that acts as a filter and softens the light. These can be used when you are using direct lights like continuous lights or even flash.

In this section we talked about light, its quality, quantity and how to modify it. Now that you know some of the basics, apply them and play with light. Tame the light and design the photograph based on these



Tower of limes Photo by [Darwin Bell](#)

HOW TO COMPOSE A PHOTOGRAPH

Composing a photograph refers to selecting the frame and placing the subject in the frame. Composing a photograph also means carefully planning all the elements and placing them thoughtfully to make the most of the elements of art and principles of beauty.

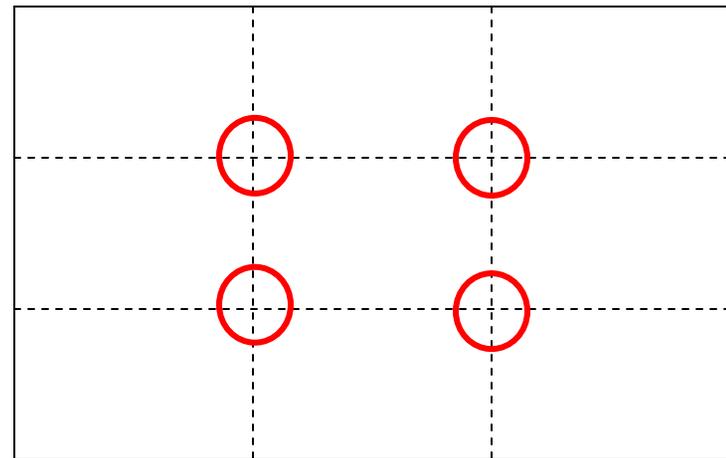
Composition is the most crucial and most complex part of photography. Playing with light and exposing the subject properly is mostly technical part. Making a photograph happens right here – when you decide the composition of a photograph.

For all these reasons, we will keep our discussions about composition at a high level. Let's look at some of the principles that can help you compose better. Now, these principles are not mandatory rules, so feel free to break these if you can create an awesome mouth-watering food photograph.

Rule of Thirds

You have probably already heard about this rule. If you have delved into photography even a little bit, this is the probably the first rule that is taught to you. Most books, courses and workshops touch on this rule one time or other.

The concept here is very simple. A frame is divided into three parts horizontal and vertically. The most appealing position in this rectangle is at the intersection of the horizontal and vertical lines as shown in the illustration by red circles.



A variation in this rule is that if you position your subject on either of the dotted lines, the photograph looks more appealing than if subject was not on the dotted line.

Framing

A good composition depends on how you frame a photograph. What you include in the frame and also what you exclude from the frame. In food photography framing is of great importance. When taking a picture of food, try to move closer. Even closer than you think you need to be. Make sure the dish you want to shoot is creatively filling the frame and there is no unnecessary space and distractions in the frame.

If you just can't move closer, crop your picture after you have taken it. Once you have uploaded the photograph on your computer "zoom in" and remove the distractions from the frame. See whether your eye gets distracted towards any other elements in the photograph. Remove those if you can. Often most aspiring photographers tend to include lot of space around the main subject leading to the main subject being overpowered by the space around it and losing the potential impact that it would have made.

Choosing the Background

Background creates a dramatic effect on your photographs. A noisy background dissolves the impact of the main subject. There are couple of ways wrong background can make a photo unappealing and weak. An object may appear at the back making our main subject lose the focal point and all of a sudden we have a distraction in our photograph. Another example is contrasting colors in the background that throw the main photo in a different direction.

7 Tips for Supportive Background

- 1. White sheets in the background**
- 2. White plates in top down photos**
- 3. Shallow depth of field**
- 4. White light in the background**
- 5. Dark sheet for white food**
- 6. Put same dish in the background**
- 7. Use raw ingredients**

Background should be supportive and should complement the main subject this way photograph with making the main subject eye-catching and appealing.

In some cases changing background is merely walking few steps in a direction, where as in other cases, changing background is a challenge. In cases when subject is in a position that it cannot be moved and neither can you as a photographer move, shallow depth of field is of a lot of help. Read how to create shallow depth of field.

Perspective

Perspective refers to point of view of the photographer. How is the camera placed and where is it placed with reference to the main subject. What is the camera angle? How much is the distance between camera and the subject? These questions refer to the position of camera and subject.

Further Reading:

1. [The Best Camera Angle for Taking Food Photos](#)
2. [The Smart Food Photographer's Guide to Choosing the Best Camera Angle](#)
3. [Complete Guide to the Process of Photographing Food](#)

A REQUEST FOR YOU

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It would help me immensely if you could send me a note with your **honest feedback**. Your feedback is critical for updating this eBook and making the next version available freely available.

Some specific questions that you can answer

Was this book helpful?

What information would you like in the expanded version?

What topics should I include?

What are your challenges in food photography?

Action Requested: Please send me your feedback by [clicking here](#).

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