

# lovefood

## How to photograph food

by Lovefood Team | 24 February 2014 |

It's hard to make food look good on camera. But with photographer Sharron Gibson's top tips, you'll be snapping your dinner beautifully in no time. This feature was written with a beginner in mind, but the basics are the same whether you're using a high-end DSLR or smart phone.



### Seeing the light



Photography basically means painting with light. Light is the fundamental thing when taking any kind of photograph. Where is it coming from? What kind of light is it? Are you inside or outside, is there ambient light, what are the shadows like? As a photographer, I never stop seeing light; where it falls, where the shadows are. 'Seeing the light' is the most important photography lesson you will ever learn.

Look around you now: what kind of light is there? Are there lights switched on? Is there a window nearby? Learn to look at the different levels of light.

### Understand your

### camera

Next, get to know your camera. Is it film, digital, or the camera on your phone? Play with it, and get to know how it works.

You need to understand aperture, shutter speed, ISO, and exposure, and the relationship between them all. Here's a quick guide:



The **aperture** ('A' or 'AV' on some cameras) controls the amount of light that comes into the camera using 'f-stops'. These stops affect the depth of field, controlling how blurry or in focus the background is. A wide f-stop (i.e., f2) will give a very sharp focus and very blurry background, while f8 will allow the background to be more in focus.



The **shutter speed** is the control that determines how long light is allowed to reach the sensor for. Using seconds and fractions of seconds, we can control how much light reaches the image. Your shutter speed, as a good rule, should be set at twice the focal distance of your lens, minus 1 stop. So if you're using a 50mm lens, set your shutter speed to 1/80. Or 35mm should be 1/60. This is just a suggested rule.



Auto **ISO** on modern digital cameras is pretty good, but to really achieve complete control and creativity, understanding what the ISO actually does is important. ISO stands for 'International Organization for Standardization' (yes, doesn't make sense to me either)! In old film cameras ISO was the rating of film speed, or how sensitive it was to

light. Digital cameras try to emulate those settings, but I find with food photography you probably don't want to go over 800 ISO.

The lower the setting the more light you will need to control in other areas. For example, 100 ISO is great for landscapes, at the beach or snow. Anything above 1600 ISO will mean that your image will start to look grainy and ideally you don't want that with food photography (although it is beautiful for black and white portraits).



Finally, when you start out with photography, getting your **exposure** bang on is the ultimate aim. Your camera will normally have an in-built meter which is affected by the light. As you become more confident and competent, you'll start to learn that you can flaunt the rules a little – and as your understanding of light grows, your photos will grow technically, too.

Once you've had a play with all these settings, you'll start to get a feel for what you like and don't like. Personally, I love blurry backgrounds and pin-sharp focusing on details for food photography; but I wouldn't use that to photograph a bride's bouquet, for example, as I believe she'll want to see the whole thing in focus.

Have a play: try taking a photo of the same picture using different ISO settings and shutter speeds (only on manual), and see how it affects your picture.

Take a photo (of a cup on the table near a window, for example) every hour, and see how the light changes.

## Finding the light



Light, light, light! The number one, most important thing when it comes to any type of photography. It's all about finding and controlling it to your advantage.

During the day, the best way to find the light is turn off your house lights and wander around the house. You're looking for where the lights falls naturally. Large windows or glass doors are usually the best places to look. If you think you can't see the light, look for shadows instead. Once you 'see the light', you'll never be able to un-see it. You'll stop the car when you see it, and you'll want to photograph it – that can get annoying, especially on motorways when you can't stop the car!



If it's a sunny day you'll find harsh shadows from windows; this is beautiful and creative for wedding photography, but for food photography it's a complete no-no. What you are trying to find (or create) is soft, diffused, even light. If your window light is particularly harsh, it can be diffused with a white mesh or translucent curtain to cut out the glare.

Once you've found your light, you can move on to creating a scene.

## Creating a scene

Before you've even set the food down, you need to create a mini studio. Mine is the table in my dining room with a side light. Normally I have quite harsh shadows from the sun in my dining room, but on the day I photographed the photos shown here, it was quite a dull day creating even, diffused light.

You might want to think about getting hold of a reflector (about 42") to reflect the light back onto your subject, making it more evenly lit.

If you're room is quite dark, you could also think about getting a tripod. This will allow you to have longer exposure times, letting in more light on your subject.



Food photography is all about communicating to your audience what they can't taste or smell. Creating a scene and telling a story helps give your image depth and personality – it brings it to life. Things to think about adding include colour, herbs and spices, and you could also add height with cake stands. Use pretty napkins, wooden backgrounds or boards, vintage cutlery, dainty crockery... they all add texture and layers, which help bring your image to life.

And never underestimate the power of using fresh and vibrant ingredients (such as the beautiful [Bea's of Bloomsbury](#) cakes, and delicate bars of

[Amelia Rope chocolate](#) that I used as my subjects for this feature).

## Composing your image



Composing a really good photograph takes time and thought. Along with all the technical stuff, you now have to 'create' the image that best sells your food. There are a few simple steps that you can take to achieve it: all artists use what is called the 'rule of thirds'. Imagine a Noughts and Crosses grid placed over your viewfinder, and at each of the intersections or crosses (top, bottom left, and right) is where you should place your food. Anything bang in the middle of the photo will look a bit boring. Try it off centre and focus on that. Try creating depth by adding layers and colour to you photo. Use flowers, water glasses, etc out of focus in the foreground and background. Think about balance.



Things to try out: look for shapes – horizontals and diagonals work well with food photography. Try adding the colourful zing of fresh produce to bring life to your image.

Use patterns and make shapes with your food; give it height, fill the frame. Go close up.

Textures, such as horizontal wood boards, or place mats at different angles will help to compose your images.

## Editing and post

# production



Most professional photographers use Adobe Photoshop, Lightroom, or a combination of both to edit their images, and they would normally shoot using the camera's RAW files rather than JPG. This gives more control over the final image. But they are expensive to buy or licence. You can use free editing software that comes with your camera or camera phone. There are some free online sites now where you can upload and edit your images. Try using Picnik or PicMonkey. Or the Snapseed app from Google on your camera phone – it's my favourite!



If you've followed my top tips (finding the light, creating the scene, and composing your image), then your photo probably won't need much doing to, post-snapping. Try brightening up your image using the exposure levels.



You may also need to adjust the white balance, add contrast and clarity, sharpness and saturation to really make the colours pop.

But please never, ever use a filter such as the ones you find on Instagram – otherwise all your hard work from above will be undone.

The world of food photography is

vast and can be highly technical and complicated – but I hope I've given you a starting point to try new things. Good luck and have fun!

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