

Picture Perfect

By A/Prof Cuthbert Teo, Editorial Board Member

Let me share some basic tips for food photography using digital cameras.

Lighting makes good photographs, and this is especially true for food photography. Try to make your shots reflect the time of day that the food is usually eaten. Thus, breakfast and lunch need a brighter setting, so have more light in the background. For dinner and cocktails, try to darken the background. Front lighting tends to have a flattening effect, so try to avoid on-camera flashes. Side lighting usually creates beautiful highlights. Backlighting can produce beautiful highlighted rims (Figure 1), but there is a danger of background washout. A high light source from the top will create short shadows close to the subject, but the top of the subject will be bright. A lower light source from the top will create a more natural look – longer shadows and less surface glare. During the day, if you want to use natural light, try to find a table next to a window that is level with the shooting surface. Try to position the surface you are shooting so that the window is to its side, or just slightly behind it.

There are three traditional camera angles in food photography – the diner's angle, top down, and straight on. The diner's angle is how you would see the plate if



Figure 1: backlighting produces beautiful highlights in this salted nut tart



Figure 2: a diner's angle of this molten lava lemon cake invites you to dig in



Figure 3: a top down view of home-cooked vegetarian mee tai bak highlights its individual components



Figure 4: a near straight on shot shows the height of this salad nicoise

you are sitting at the table to eat – about 25 degrees. The diner's angle invites the viewer to “dig in”, so to speak (Figure 2). The smaller the angle, the more depth the subject has, and you want to keep the background in mind. Top down shots are graphic shots, which means that they are usually used to highlight the components in the food (Figure 3). Use straight on shots when you want to show the height of the food – for example, a sandwich or a tiered dessert (Figure 4).

If you want to tell a story, use a wide shot first, showing the whole dish or even the whole table (Figure 5). This sets the context of the food items in tight shots. The main problem with wide shots is that the food items become small as compared to the rest of the scene. Tight shots have an opposite problem – they may highlight details in the food which most diners don't experience. But this can make people think about why they are only seeing a detail

Photos: Dr Martin Chio



Figure 5: a wide shot sets the context of the individual dishes in this family dinner

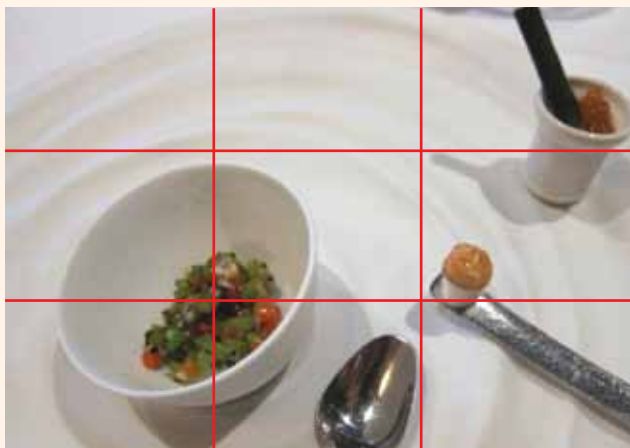


Figure 6: the main item in this amuse-bouche is placed at one of the intersections of the lines

in a photograph of a food item which they have eaten before, but never noticed.

When orientating the subject, try not to put the subject in the bullseye of the shot. When orientating the shot, imagine a grid of two equidistant vertical lines and two equidistant horizontal lines placed over the image, place the centre subject at one of the intersections of the lines (Figure 6) – but it is fine to break this rule of thumb if you want to.

If you are trying for an artistic shot by shooting with a cropped frame camera, allow some flexibility for you to crop with your software, by giving about 1.5 centimetres of cropping on all sides of the image on camera.

When choosing softness or sharpness, try to stick to a moderate depth of field, where the subject is in focus, and with the background and foreground in soft bokeh (the aesthetic quality of the blur) (Figure 7). The depth of field is affected by a combination of lens aperture size, lens focal length and distance of the lens from the subject. A wider aperture, a longer focal length, and a close subject will cause more bokeh.

Generally, set your camera at the lowest ISO setting for that lighting condition. A higher ISO number will cause more noise, so an ISO setting of 100 to, at most, 400 should do.

Despite your best efforts, be realistic about the quality of the shots you are going to get. You are not working with props and controlled lighting. Many photographs that look good have been colour and exposure corrected. Beautiful poured shots are often layered shots. Many commercial

shots of food involve styling with fake food. That crunchy-looking cereal and blueberries just floating on the milk is often cereal and fruit fixed in white glue that looks like the ideal milk that we imagine. That tall burger may actually be held up by scaffolding. That gorgeous looking ice cream may just be a mixture of confectioner's sugar and margarine with appropriate colouring added. That Bloody Mary on the rocks might have acrylic or rubber ice cubes, with the condensation on the glass actually corn syrup. That freshly brewed coffee may have had soap detergent bubbles added with a pipette.

But you can do some simple natural styling (Figure 8). Use a chopstick to pull out some swirls from a heavy stew or curry gravy. For a prawn cocktail, fan out the prawn tails and angle them upwards. For a fruit pie, take a shot with a slice of the crust removed to show its contents.

I hope these tips will help you take better photos of food. Remember, practise, practise, practise! **SMA**



Figure 7: this shot shows a home-cooked fish main dish in focus, and the vegetable side dish in the background in soft bokeh lends aesthetic quality

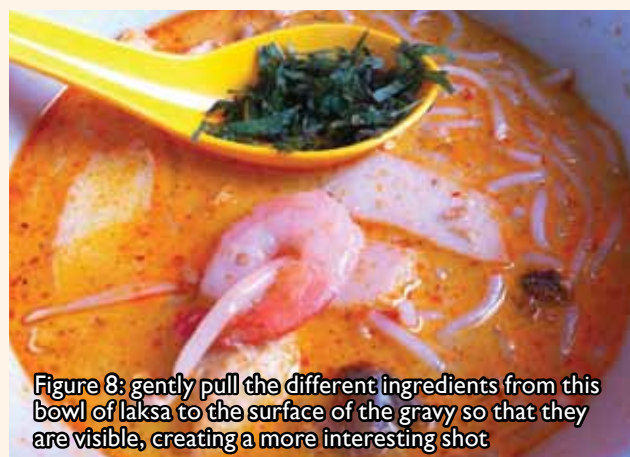


Figure 8: gently pull the different ingredients from this bowl of laksa to the surface of the gravy so that they are visible, creating a more interesting shot



A/Prof Cuthbert Teo is trained as a forensic pathologist. One of his hobbies is photography.