

# DIY Food Photography Techniques to Increase Your Menu's Online Appeal

By Lindsey Danis

**You have a website and social media presence.** Or you should have if you want to stay in business. And hungry diners want to see your food.

Posting vacation photos on Facebook for friends and family is one thing. Posting pictures of your menu items so that prospective guests stop scrolling to learn more about your concept is quite another.

Restaurants are challenging environments in which to take photographs. Dining rooms tend to be lighted for ambiance. There may be few windows that let in natural light. Behind the scenes, kitchens have bright fluorescent lights and utilitarian furnishings, like stainless steel prep tables. Shooting in these conditions can cause unsightly glare that washes out food or big shadows that show the photographer lurking over the scene.

The good news: if you own a current model mobile phone, you have a pretty decent camera close at hand at all times. Moreover, developing your photography skills takes time, but it can be done and, as we hope you'll appreciate by reading this article, worth your while for many reasons. And even if you decide not to do it yourself, you can gain insight into how qualified food photographers approach their subjects. In fact, you might be advised to spend money hiring a professional, as your time is much better spent running your restaurant.

We also discuss the legal issues related to posting photography on the Web. As with most aspects of restaurant management, including food photography often more than meets the eye.

## Count the Ways

Diners are increasingly using social media to make dining decisions. If you're not sharing great photos of your food, you can bet diners are sharing their s's and tagging you. Their photos may not put your menu items in the best light, which is all the more reason why you should be posting better ones. Two, sharing your food on social media goes hand in hand with telling the story of your brand and with digital hospitality. Three, it's worthwhile to know how to take a few photos that tell your restaurant's story even if you decide to bring in a professional photographer for a shoot.

Kimberly Houston is a certified pastry chef, food stylist, and professional food photographer who teaches the essentials of food photography at TeachMeHowtoBake.com. Houston thinks that restaurant operators can get started with food photography using their cell phones. "It's not about the camera, it's more about understanding composition, colors, [and] lighting," Houston explains. Practicing with a cell phone allows restaurant operators to learn what works without also needing to learn how to operate an expensive camera. Houston, who has an iPhone 12, estimates that she uses her phone for 80 percent of her food photos.

With just your smartphone and knowledge of photography essentials – lighting, staging, composition and food photography trends – you can start to stand out on Instagram or any other platform. When it's time for something more than a smartphone camera, Houston recommends shopping for refurbished cameras, such as those sold on eBay or Amazon. They're cheaper than buying new ones.

## Lighting

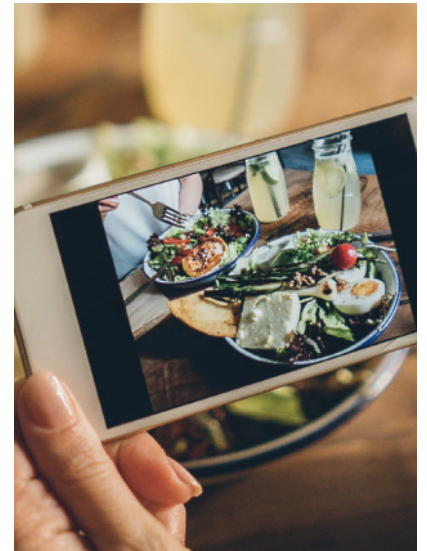
Light is one of the most obvious challenges you'll have to work with when taking photos. Best practice is to take advantage of natural light, like what comes through dining room windows. Use a window table during the day, ideally before you're open for service. Set up food so that light hits it from the side, without glare. Light from the back works well too, if side lighting isn't possible, says Houston.

Houston recommends two techniques to reflect light toward the food while preventing strong shadows. Both require another set of hands. One option is to stand up something white (like a white napkin or a sheet of paper) on the opposite side of the food. Natural light from the window will bounce off the white paper toward the food, while the white hue will absorb shadows. Another option is to have a second person light the dish from the side with their phone flashlight. The extra light coming in from the side will brighten the dish.

You can light the dish from both sides with phone flashlights if light is low, Houston recommends. However, if you're not getting the results you want with natural light or flashlights, Houston suggests buying stand lights. These lights have a big footprint. You can't set them up quickly for an impromptu photo, and your restaurant may not have the floor space to accommodate bulky lights in the back of the house.

Without enough light, food is going to look dull or dark, which is exactly what you don't want on Instagram. Photos may come out looking noisy, a technical term for the graininess that often occurs in low-light situations. While you can make some

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If you keep getting shadows from the angle of the phone, Houston recommends turning the phone upside down. This changes the angle of the lens relative to the dish and can improve the photo. Says Houston, "You avoid having a wonky, out-of-focus photo" by turning the phone upside down.

## Staging

Good food photography starts with good staging. "Very rarely [is there] only one thing in the photo," says Houston, who encourages operators to think about objects in the photo telling a story. If you're shooting a bowl of soup, she explains, "you would want to put everything in the photo" that would be served with the soup, like "something to drink, napkins, spoons, bread or crackers."

Certain foods are notoriously difficult to photograph well. That includes ice cream (prone to melting) meat, which tends to change color when lit by artificial light, and brownies, which can look like a brown blob.

Houston freezes anything the ice cream is going on, like a dish or spoon, to buy herself a little more time to shoot. Still, you'll want to get everything else ready before you scoop the ice cream. With meat, she recommends slightly undercooking it so it retains more of a pink color. Salads are surprisingly tricky to shoot. The freshness of ingredients doesn't always transfer, and a big salad can shrink down on a plate or in a bowl, so it doesn't look like much.

With anything that needs to look fresh, Houston recommends filling a spray bottle with equal parts water and glycerin, available at craft stores.

Spray the salad with this mixture before you shoot and "when you get up close to take the photo, it looks super fresh [and] super crisp." Houston also recommends using mixed greens with contrasting colors or "carefully placed croutons" to give the salad more dimensions. When plating the dish, emphasize height by building it carefully or faking it. "We used makeup wedges to stick in between [the greens], so it doesn't fall flat," Houston says.

Houston gives added texture to bakery items like brownies using butcher paper or parchment paper. She crumples up the paper like she's going to throw it away, then smooths it out and puts the brownie on top. The crinkly edges "help that photo stand out," and the trick also works for raw meat, she says.

Getting back to the idea of telling the story, Houston says she'll often include garnishes in the background. This might be salt and pepper. It could be raw ingredients for the dish. If she's shooting a red velvet cake with a nut topping, for instance, Houston will put the image. This communicates to the audience what is in the dish, effectively telling the story of the item in a visual manner.

She gives another example: a chicken nuggets meal that might be on a kid's menu. If the focal point of the dish is the chicken nuggets, Houston says, "I'm not going to put the fries on the plate with the nuggets. I'm going to have the fries stacked behind it [and] the ketchup in a dipping cup." Grouping the items tells the story of the meal while centering the protein on the plate.

Staging a photo well takes time, but it can actually save you time in shooting and editing images. When you set up the scene with care, you'll get better photos if you didn't stage the scene in advance. Staging also gives you a chance to hide or mask any objects you don't want in the photo, such as an electrical outlet or wall you're shooting against.

## Composition

Composition takes a long time to master, but knowing a few simple tips can dramatically improve the quality of your photos.

The "rule of thirds" is one of the most common. Instead of centering the dish in the image, put it to the left third or right third of the frame. This rule also applies vertically. For help visualizing where things fall, turn on the grid (which looks like a tic-tac-toe board). Line up your dishes at the intersections of the grid according to the rule of thirds.

Another composition tip is to use lines or geometric patterns in the image. The human eye is drawn to patterns and appreciates symmetry and shape. Working with lines, such as by arranging items in ascending order, makes an image eye-catching. And that could influence a decision about where to dine for the night.

Depth of field refers to image crispness. It measures the sharpness between the object that's closest to the lens and the one furthest from it. When elements at the back of an image are fuzzy, the depth of field is shallow. Think of a close-up image of a cake, where the other items on the table blur together in the background. Think of a banquet table where everything is crisp and clear. That's a deep depth of field.

There are times when you'll want a shallow depth of field to highlight a particular element, like a close-up detail. Most of the time, you'll probably want a deep depth of field. Understanding when to go deep or shallow helps you get the right type of images to convey your story.

You'll also want to consider the orientation of your image. Instagram favors a square image, so part of the image will be cropped in the feed regardless of whether you shoot horizontal or vertical images. If you shoot square images on your phone, you'll see exactly how it will look in your feed. Other social media sites aren't as particular, although certain orientations do better. Hospitality company Inntopia found in a study of 30,000 photos shared on Facebook, for instance, landscape images received the highest engagement, followed by squares.

One last note on composition: avoid zooming. Get closer to the object instead. Zooming leads to images that look noisy, particularly if you're shooting on a smartphone.

## Trends

Trends come and go. Current food photography trends teach you what types of images diners are responding to now.

Houston recommends two major styles for the present moment: "light and bright" or "dark and moody." Light and bright is colorful and happy, with lots of light. Dark and moody "tends to be more masculine" with artificial light, she explains. Your restaurant's concept may lend itself toward one style over the other. Houston gives the example of a steakhouse, where the meat and potatoes cuisine might lend itself toward darker dishes.

To evoke a dark and moody aesthetic, use dark props. This might be an old, stained sheet pan, a dark linen napkin, a natural wood counter, a slate cheese board, or a black napkin. Control the amount of natural light. Ideally, you'll want just enough light falling on the dish. This might mean using a curtain or foam board to block part of the light coming through a window, so only parts of the image are lit. This creates more shadows, but in this case, it gives it the moody atmosphere you're looking for.

For a light and bright look, your goal is to maximize natural light without going overboard and giving the image a washed-out tone. Choose props that lighten the look, such as white or natural blonde wood.

Houston also recommends particular camera angles and shots to aim to take. Overhead and 45-degrees are popular camera angles right now.

Avoid the temptation to get the entire menu item in the photo every time. While you'll want some shots that show the full dish, it can be nice to focus in on part of the item. Bite shots are another recommendation. "It typically gets people to buy more," especially if the item is stuffed with something. Whether it's a stuffed pasta or a cake, cut a forkful and get a close-up shot of the interior.

## Posting to Social Media

The above tips will help you take better photos. Higher-quality images are more likely to stand out on social media apps. But there are also a few other ways to maximize your reach on social media.

Hashtags help you get found whenever someone searches for a relevant term. Incorporate hashtags with every image you share. Mix and match specific, local hashtags to attract community members with broad hashtags that speak to the concept or cuisine.

Be consistent with app usage. Post photos that are visually similar, so users will be able to tell your posts when they see them. Write captions in the same voice (ideally one that speaks to your target audience). Post regularly. Social media algorithms actually reward users who post frequently as opposed to those who post on the app occasionally. Just by posting regular content, you can increase the reach of every post.

Engage with other businesses and with customers. Tag other businesses when you mention them. This can cross-promote your restaurant to their fan base and lead to comments. Replying to customer comments increases your engagement rate and builds customer loyalty. Posts with high engagement rates may be shared widely, extending your reach.

Ultimately, social media platforms aren't going away. By understanding how to use them to drive customers to your restaurant, you'll reap rewards. The more you practice, the more second-nature these tips will become.

## Legal Issues

There are times when you might want to show customers enjoying your food or use an image someone else took. Brush up on privacy and copyright concepts to avoid a legal misstep.

**Privacy.** Your restaurant is a public space. That's advantageous where social media photography is concerned. People don't have a lot of privacy protection in a restaurant and can be snapped and share photographs without worrying about obtaining permissions or getting releases.

If you're concerned about litigation, you could post a sign on premises letting people know they may be photographed. Blurring the background of an image where individuals aren't in focus is another way to be sensitive to privacy concerns.

There are some exceptions. Sekou Campbell, a partner with the law firm Culhane Meadows, LLP says a private dining room is one exception. Avoid taking photos at private gatherings when a party has booked a room in your restaurant. While you wouldn't share a bathroom selfie anyway, definitely don't do it if there's a guest in the photo.

Celebrities pose another exception. They have what are known as rights of publicity. In layman's terms, Campbell explains, you can't post a photo of a celebrity who ate at your restaurant to Instagram, as that would be using their image to promote your business.

**Copyright.** Generally, any images you take you retain the copyright of, since you are the creator. You can use these images as you please.

Things are a lot more complex when it comes to images you didn't take, even if those images were taken on your device.

For example, if you hand your phone to a busboy and have him take the photo, he is now the creator of the image. He retains the copyright, even though the image was taken using your phone. To be in the clear, Campbell notes, get the busboy's written consent allowing you to use the image.

When a commercial photographer takes photos for you, the standard practice is to use a work-for-hire arrangement. This allows you to take possession of the images when the photographer gives you the final images. "What you're paying for is the all-encompassing right to use the photos however you want. Generally [for hire] there's limitations going the other way so the photographer can only use [the work] in narrow circumstances," Campbell explains.

If you hired a photographer and they didn't assign you the rights under work for hire, you may be able to get them by modifying the original agreement. N

agreement to give you a license to reuse and you should be in the clear.

What if someone else takes great photos at your restaurant and tags you on social media? Can you share those images? Not without permission from the person who took the photos. Even though you were tagged, default copyright law assigns copyright to the creator. It's worth a shot to ask the creator if you can repost or share the image by direct message. If they give you permission, then you're in the clear to share the image.

Campbell offers another caution: if your restaurant has copyrighted work, like paintings by a local artist, you'll want to avoid showing that work in images you post on social media. "You don't own the intellectual property in the painting," he says, recalling a successful lawsuit that an artist brought when a television show filmed one of her quilts hanging on a wall (*Ringgold v. Black Entm't TV, Inc.* - 126 F.3d 70 (2d Cir. 1997)). "What's in the background matters, not just the people, but the artwork [and any] potential trademarks. All of that needs to be considered when you're posting pictures," he adds.

What's the worst that can happen if you violate someone else's copyright? Content posted on social media is protected by the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA). While you might assume the worst that can happen if you accidentally post an image to which you don't have the rights is receiving a takedown notice under the DMCA, that's not actually true. "Someone could also sue you for posting an infringing photo. They're not foreclosed from bringing a lawsuit," Campbell explains.

In the event of a lawsuit, Campbell says "you can usually negotiate a reasonable solution where everybody is happy." While that may be true, it's best to avoid the legal battle by knowing what not to do.

Campbell recommends the Copyright office's website ([copyright.gov](http://copyright.gov)) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation ([eff.org](http://eff.org)) to go deeper with copyright. Consider keeping up with legal changes that may arise.

## **The Restaurant Paparazzi**

As important as your own photography to present your food in the best light on your website and social media posts, you need to consider that restaurant shoots happen tableside every day and without the operator's knowledge. As you well know, everyone now carries a camera and especially younger patrons share visually and online their experiences – both good and bad. Moreover, you never know when a food blogger will show up at your concept and snap a photo to accompany their review.

No one needs to tell you that food presentation has always been important, as guests dine with their eyes as much as their palate. Today, we need to ensure items are always ready for a closeup as they come out of the kitchen.

One quality assurance method is to take a professional-quality photograph of each item, as it would appear ideally and post the images on a kitchen wall. A back-of-the-house crew with visual guidance on how each item should look when it arrives at guests' tables.