

The Serious Eats Guide to Food Photography

<http://www.serious-eats.com/2015/03/beginners-guide-to-food-photography.html>

THE SERIOUS EATS TEAM

34



[Photographs: Vicky Wasik, unless otherwise noted]

Taking great photographs of food is a hard-earned skill—after all, that's why some people are lucky enough to get paid for

it. But it's also a lot easier to hone these days, no matter who you are; even a smartphone can yield gorgeous, high-quality images.

Sure, professional cameras and lenses—provided you know how to use them—can make taking a great photo easier, but they're by no means necessary to the process. Just think of all the **amazing Instagram feeds** out there. What separates magazine-worthy photos from their less impressive counterparts isn't a fancy camera or expensive equipment. It's an understanding of what it takes to compose an appealing image and the confidence to execute your vision.



A great photograph is never a fluke—you may not know why it's special or how you made it that way, but the fact remains that certain fundamentals still came together to make it happen. Details like composition, lighting, and styling, which apply regardless of whether you're using a digital single lens reflex camera (DSLR), a simple point-and-

shoot, or an iPhone.

The takeaway? There's just some basic knowledge and practice standing between you and some seriously mouthwatering food photos. Read on or jump to one of the sections in our index to get started!

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY 101: THE INDEX

Lighting
Composition
Styling
Equipment
Manual Settings Overview
Shutter Speed
Aperture
ISO
White Balance
Post-Processing

WHAT MAKES A PHOTO GOOD?



[Photograph: Ideas in Food]

First and foremost, a good food photo should evoke the food's best traits and its inherent deliciousness. The colors and textures of a dish should be celebrated, not muted or hidden. That means avoiding blurry snapshots, unappealing angles, and that all-too-common yellow cast at all costs. If your mouth doesn't water when editing your photos, you did something wrong. Here's what you need to up your food photography game.

GREAT NATURAL LIGHT

Good lighting is the single most important criteria for good photography, and the very best light is indirect daylight—a shady spot on a sunny day is the holy grail of natural lighting conditions. It gives your food a bright, even glow, and doesn't tint colors in the way that indoor lighting typically does.

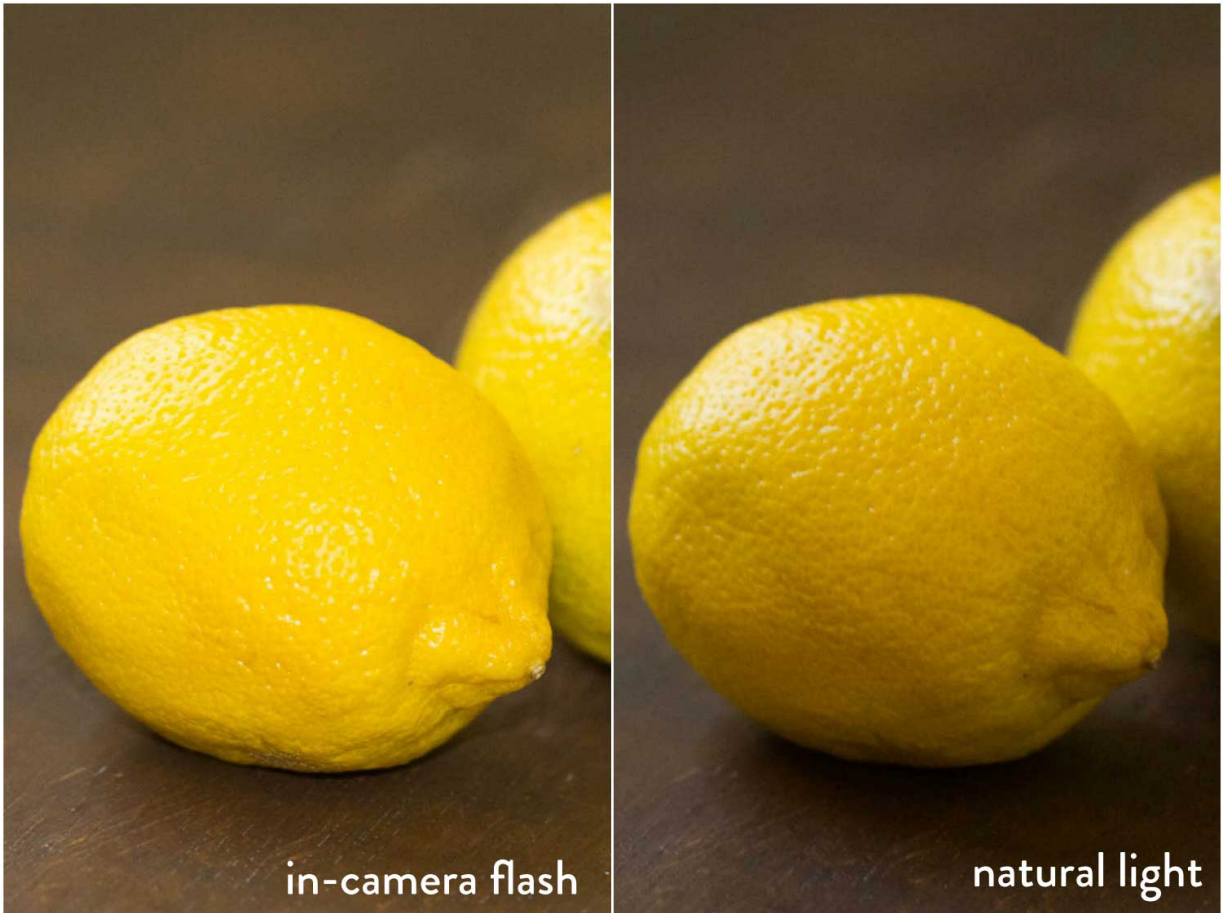


On the left, a blown-out photograph taken in direct sunlight. On the right, a balanced image taken in indirect sunlight.

But when it comes to natural light, you may find yourself tempted to instead move your food into that alluring patch of bright, beautiful sunlight. Don't. Direct sunlight tends to be harsh, creating dark distracting shadows and making whites and light colors *so* bright that they lose any discernible texture and

shape. Think about it this way: in post-processing, which we'll dig into a bit later, you can usually add more brightness to a photo without many negative consequences; removing brightness, on the other hand, tends to leave an image muted and anemic.

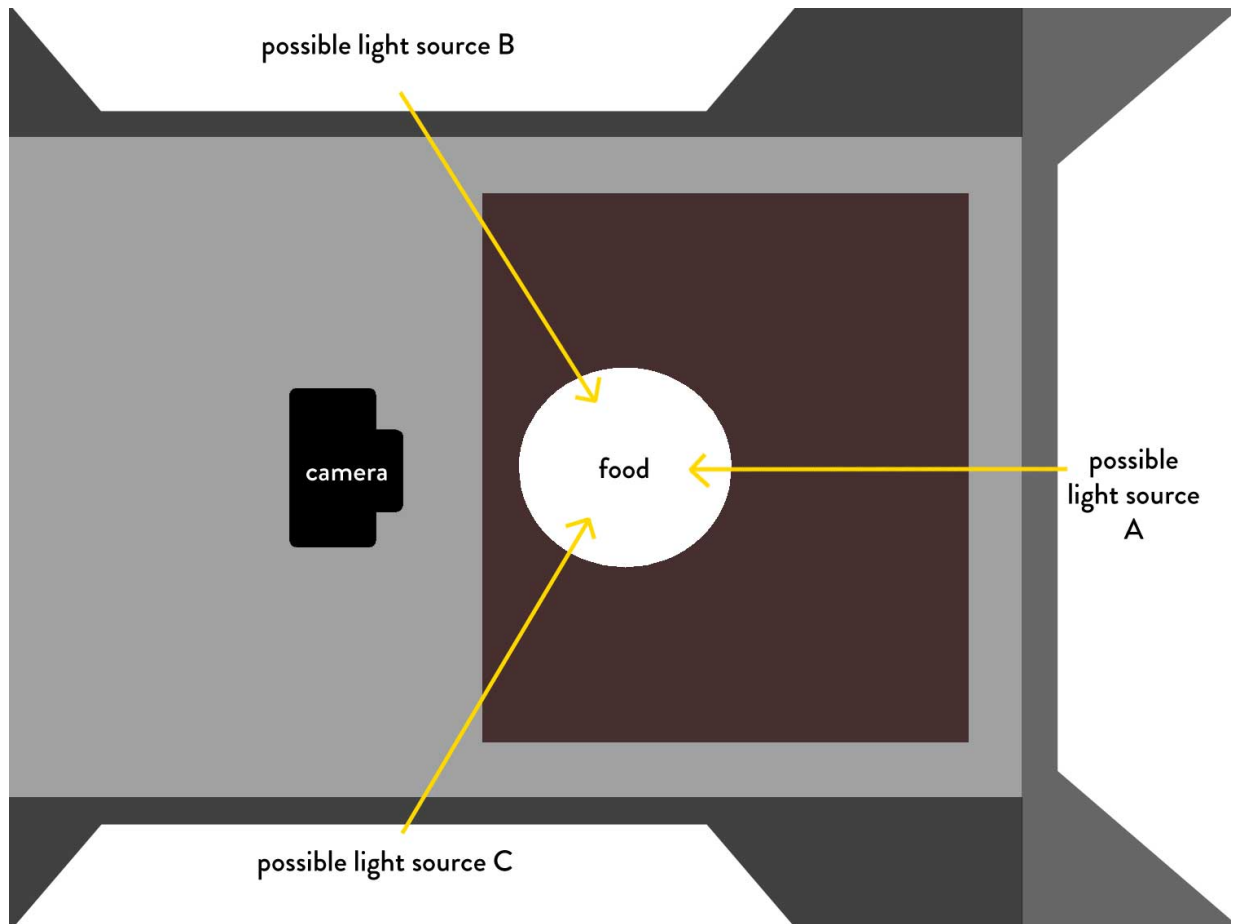
And while we're at it, a similar rule applies to your in-camera flash. Don't use it. Never ever ever ever, no matter how bad the lighting. Flash photos of food create harsh reflections and glare as well as funny-looking fall-off — your food looks like it's floating in space. If you must shoot in low light, you can read up on better solutions [here](#).



Moral of the story? If you're shooting indoors, your best bet is to set up during the day near a window—though again, outside the range of direct sunlight. In a restaurant, that may mean politely requesting a specific table; in your home, it may mean shooting in a room other than your kitchen. It can be helpful to take note of the quality of light you get in different rooms throughout the

day and set up accordingly. But if your home mainly gets tons of direct light, don't despair. You can make your own indirect light by hanging a white sheet over the window—this diffuses the light without adding the kind of tint you'd get from, say, a colorful curtain.

Once you've found your perfect spot, it's time to think about positioning your food in relation to the light source.



Ideally, the light should illuminate the dish from a slight angle, like options B and C in the diagram above. If light comes directly behind you, it ends up casting an unwelcome shadow on your dish. Another option is to backlight the subject (option A), which yields a moodier and often more interesting image. In this case, the light should come from above and behind the plate,

maybe even a little off to the side. But figuring out where light should hit your dish ties directly to the angle and frame that you're shooting with.

A STRIKING COMPOSITION

Composition is basically an umbrella term for the arrangement of stuff in your photograph. In a well-composed photograph, you can immediately tell what the primary subject is, whether it's a person, a plate, or a single sprinkle on an ice cream cone. In other words, composition is second only to lighting when it comes to taking a good photograph.

One helpful tool, especially when you're starting out, is the rule of thirds. It's a simple but useful concept, though we like to think of it as a suggestion

more than an actual rule. It works like this: Imagine your frame is divided into a nine-part grid (like sudoku). The rule of thirds says that your main subject—a plate, a slice of cake, an olive—should be placed either along those lines or at their intersections, like so:



And sure enough, following

those general guidelines does tend to yield images that are more familiar and appealing—our eyes are naturally drawn to those intersection points, which is why you'll notice that principle at work in everything from films and photographs to paintings and graphic design). Offsetting your subject from the center of the frame catches the eye and can even be used to communicate motion or activity away from the center.



See how it looks off when the rule of thirds is disregarded?

Picking the main subject to place in the grid is often easy and obvious; at other times, you may want to pick a specific part of a subject to highlight—say a drip of melting cheese rather than a whole grilled cheese sandwich—in which case you'll

want to adjust your frame accordingly.



Consider the best qualities of the food you're shooting when deciding how to position the camera. Bottom right photo: J. Kenji Lopez-Alt

But framing your food is just one element of composition — you'll also need to decide what angle best suits your subject. A flat, round pizza will usually look best shot from directly above, while a tall dish of ice

cream might benefit from a 45° angle to keep the focus on the three-dimensional contours of the scoop. Meanwhile, a burger stacked tall with all the fixin's will look great directly at eye level, so bring your camera down close to the table. Just make sure you have something in the background like a wall or a board to block out unwanted items in your kitchen. And remember, even food wants you to capture its good side. One side of a burger might look more appetizing than the other, and you might want to focus on the side or top of a roast turkey rather than, say, its backside. The best way to learn? Shoot from multiple angles until you've honed your instincts.



The dreaded camera slant is disarming rather than appealing.

One pitfall you especially want to avoid is the camera slant. Some people think that rotating the camera slightly clockwise or counter-clockwise will create a more interesting composition, when it really just confuses the viewer and makes the plate look like a flying saucer. Keep your camera level, and if there are any strong lines in your image,

try to keep them as straight as possible.



What are you looking to communicate? Big spreads send a different message than a tight close-up.

Finally, decide whether your photo might benefit from zooming in or out. Will your image be better served by seeing the whole plate and some context, or just getting nice and tight into a specific part? Sometimes the single

component of a dish is more exciting than the whole shebang. Zooming in on one cute little dumpling rather than a distractingly busy basket of six can be much more compelling. At the same time, a zoomed-out bird's-eye view of a table filled with different cheeses can paint a more interesting and diverse picture than showing a single slice.

THOUGHTFUL STYLING



Once you've got the basics down, it's time to have fun. Getting creative with props and styling can bring your images to the next level. It's especially handy to have a few tricks up your sleeve for those particularly unappetizing dishes (think chunky soups, messy sandwiches, and the perpetually tricky sausage).

Choose the plate wisely: Square and rectangular plates are

typically harder to shoot than round ones—it's easy for them to wind up looking trapezoidal and wonky, especially at eye level or shallow angles. It's also easier to work with a salad-size plate rather than a full-size dinner plate, since you won't have to worry about filling up any unwanted space on the plate and the food itself will look more prominent. Patterns and bright colors can be a great way to add some character to plain foods, but you don't want the platter to distract from the subject.

Add dimension and personality with accessories:

Napkins, utensils, glassware, and other placements can fill up the composition and make your images more engaging. Do make sure to think about color—taking a quick peek at [a color wheel](#) can give you a good sense of complementary colors (colors directly opposite each other on the wheel are pretty much guaranteed to look good together). As with dishes, avoid using so many accessories that you lose sight of the goal: The food should always be the star.

Garnish the dish: Is that chunky brown bowl of soup being uncooperative? Put an herb on it! No, but seriously, adding herbs, condiments, and toppings can be a great way to dress up a dish, even the ugliest ones. Again, think about what colors will enhance the dish, but make sure that your garnishes make sense. There's nothing more jarring than an ingredient that doesn't belong, no matter how pretty it might look.

Hit up a thrift store: More than half of our office props—

awesome, unique items—were picked up at second-hand stores for a few dollars apiece. (Just the other day we packed a crate with dishes, glasses, and bowls for under \$30.) If you plan to shoot lots of different cuisines, look for a variety of cutlery and dish styles. Rustic vintage stuff is trendy because it can look homey and timeless, but sometimes clean and crisp will do more justice to your food.

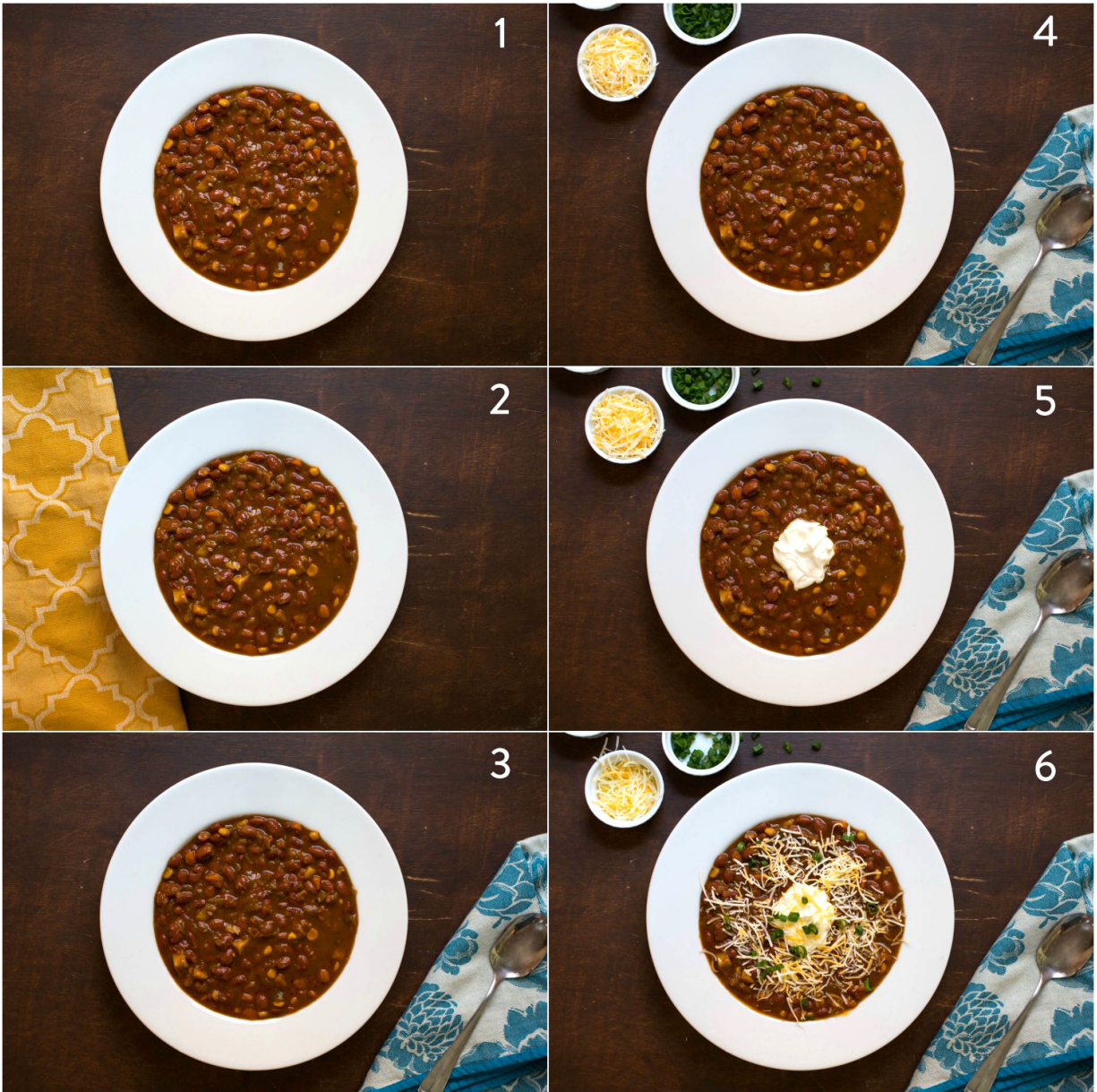
Get creative with your backgrounds: Maybe you've used that boring yellow cutting board one too many times and want to shake it up. Go pick up a piece of wood, stain or paint it to your liking, and voila! You've got yourself a new photo surface. Tablecloths, placemats, and slabs of stone are all also great alternatives to your kitchen table or countertop.

Make sure your accessories are clean: Dirty spoons and used napkins aren't a good look, at least not when they're accidentally included. Double check that you haven't left anything in your background that you don't want to feature.

Interact with the food: If a shot of a dish on a plate just feels flat, consider having someone lift a fork- or spoonful out and focus on that—but make sure their fingers are clean and relatively well manicured if included in the frame. Taking a bite out of a sandwich or scattering some crumbs in the foreground can also create a sense of activity that only makes the food seem more desirable.

Check out this bowl of chili to

see our tips in action.



In the first image, the dish is too boring and simple; frankly the chili looks like a chunky mess. In the second image, we added a yellow napkin, only to find that it looked too warm and didn't

contrast with the soup enough to make it pop. A blue napkin and spoon in the third photo delivered a more appropriate color and a sense of action—someone's going to pick up that spoon and dig in. Still, the top left corner looked a little empty, so for the fourth photo, we added a few little bowls of toppings to make the space more dynamic. Then it was time to brighten the soup. In the fifth and sixth images we began by adding sour cream for contrast and then a sprinkling of cheese and parsley for additional texture and color. Just be careful of over-doing it with the accompaniments—the food should always be the main focus, and too many side elements become distracting.

EQUIPMENT: WHAT DO YOU ACTUALLY NEED?



Starting to think about investing in more serious equipment? Here are some common tools that we use, along with some easy hacks if they're outside your budget.

BOUNCE CARD

A bounce card, or reflector, is just a white surface that can be positioned opposite your light source to literally bounce light waves back onto your subject

and fill in any dark areas or shadows. If you're not ready to order an actual reflector, any large white piece of posterboard will do—you can pick one up for under \$10 in most office supply stores. Sometimes you might actually want to *remove* some light from your subject to create a moodier effect, in which case you'd use a black board to absorb the light instead.

ARTIFICIAL LIGHTING

It's very hard to get in-focus photographs without adequate light. So while most photographers we know prefer natural light to studio lighting, sometimes it's necessary to bring out the big boys. Our office, for example, has few windows and even fewer hours of daylight in the winter, so most of our photos are shot using **studio lights** with a softbox attachment to simulate a nice big window illuminating

the dish.



Impact Luxbanx Duo Medium Square Softbox (26 x 26")

\$137.95 on Amazon

BUY

Lights can be expensive, though.
Hotshoe flashes, which slide

onto the top of your DSLR, can work if you have something big and white to bounce off, but can be tricky if your kitchen is covered in honey-colored wood cabinets, which will cast an unwanted yellow tint.

As for those of you who do most of your shooting at night when there isn't much natural light to be had, a great and relatively low-cost solution is to pick up a Lowell Ego tabletop light. It mimics daylight and is portable, easy to use, and won't take up a ton of room.



Lowel EGO Digital Imaging, Tabletop Fluorescent Light Unit
Available on Amazon

BUY

TRIPOD

Reducing camera shake is critical when you need your shots to be totally clear and crisp. Even a slight blur is highly noticeable in a tight shot of a perfectly plated dish. By steadying the camera, you don't have to worry about an inadvertent movement causing a blur. Tripods are also useful when you want to keep the camera stationary for multiple shots and need both hands in between. That's why we highly recommend using a tripod whenever possible. At Serious Eats, we use a Manfrotto tripod that has a great adjustable column for shooting overhead images, but tripods come in all shapes and sizes, from tabletop smartphone tripods to heavy-duty professional rigs.



Manfrotto MT190XPRO3 3 Section Aluminum Tripod Legs with Q90 Column (Black)

\$199.47 on Amazon

BUY

If you're shooting by hand, rest

your elbows or arms on something sturdy like the edge of the table. In really low light situations, try to find an even sturdier way to keep your camera steady. Holding it against a chair's edge, a wall, or a column can help, or for tighter shots on the table, we like to hold the camera steady by using an empty water glass as a makeshift monopod. Your camera may also have a multiple exposure drive mode—the option to fire off several shots with a single button press. This is a great tool that lets you snap four to five photos each time you hold down the button. Chances are that at least one of them will be blur-free and in-focus.

GETTING MANUAL WITH IT

When your camera is set to automatic, it's doing its best to gauge the light and then produce an optimal, well-balanced, well-

lit, in-focus image. It does this by adjusting shutter speed (the rate at which the shutter opens and closes), aperture (the size of the hole in the lens that lets light in), ISO (the speed at which the camera's sensor registers information), and white balance (the decision of what parts of your image should look white).

Before we proceed, it's important to understand that shutter speed and aperture work in tandem in the same way that blinking and pupil dilation, respectively, impact your vision. Let's say you are taking a photograph of a light bulb. To capture that image, the camera needs to let in enough light that you can see the bulb, without letting in so much light that all you see is its bright, shapeless glow. It can do this by using a very rapid shutter speed (a quick peek) and a wider aperture (wider pupils), OR it can use a

slower shutter speed (a longer glance) with a narrow aperture (pinpoint pupils). Once you've found the right balance between them, adjusting one means always adjusting the other.

But why go beyond auto mode? Shooting manually shifts control from the camera to the photographer. Once you have a working knowledge of the concepts behind the settings, you'll be able to adapt to different situations more easily and make smarter decisions about what you want your image to look like.

Say you're shooting a black bowl filled with a white soup on a dark brown table. In auto mode, because of the extreme contrast between light and dark, the camera may make the wrong assumption about how to expose the image. With your evolved human brain, you can make the right call and adjust your

settings so that the lights and darks are both where they should be. Shooting in manual mode is also pretty important if you are using any artificial lighting.

Here's why it works and how to start experimenting with it at home.

SHUTTER SPEED

Again, this is the rate at which the shutter opens and closes, expressed in fractions of a second. On your camera, shutter speed is expressed as a whole number, but it generally refers to a fraction of a second. In other words, a shutter speed of 80 refers to 1/80th of a second. The higher the number, the faster the shutter speed. The longer you leave the shutter open, the more likely it is that your image will be blurry, because there is more time for the camera to detect even the slightest motion. So if

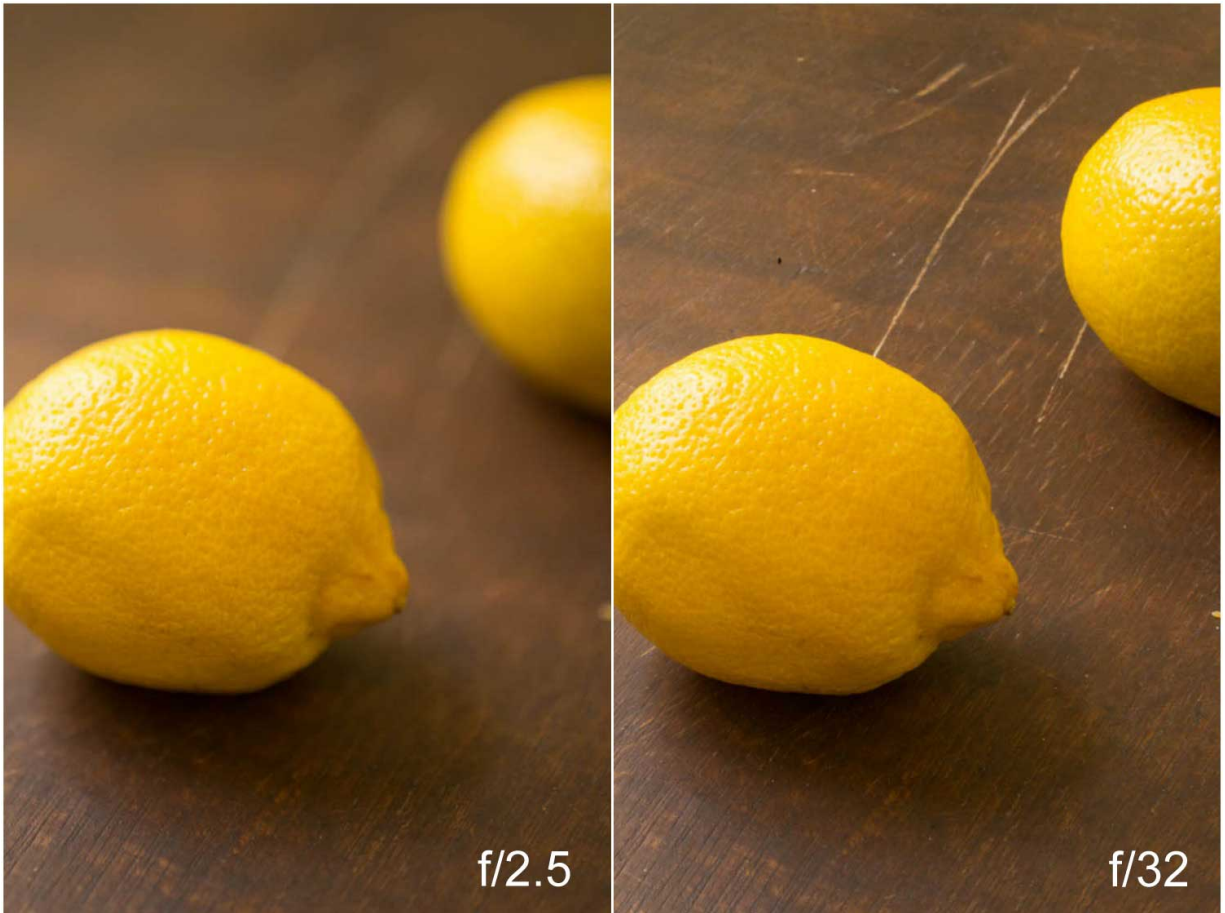
you're holding a camera by hand, you want a shutter speed of at most 1/40th of a second, and preferably faster (We usually aim for at least 1/80 if there's enough light available). Anything slower than 1/20th or so and you won't be able to get clear shots without a tripod. You can use shutter priority, or Tv mode, to have your camera automatically adjust the aperture to accommodate your desired shutter speed, but this mode is best for capturing objects in motion, like cars or athletes. There's not much reason to use it in food photography.

APERTURE (F-STOP)

An aperture is a hole in the center of the lens that's formed by a ring of blades. These blades are used to adjust the size of the hole in order to regulate the amount of light that enters the camera. The size of that hole is measured in f-stops. It may

sound straightforward, but understanding f-stop numbers can be frustratingly tricky. F-stops are expressed as fractions of $1/x$ (where the f-stop is x). An f-stop of 2 means the aperture is half open ($1/2$), while an aperture of 11 means that the aperture is only $1/11$ th open. In other words, **the smaller the f-stop, the wider the aperture is opened, letting in more light; the bigger the f-stop, the narrower the aperture is opened, letting in less light.** Most cameras and lenses have an aperture range of around 2.5 (large) to 18 (small).

Like your pupils, the wider the aperture (i.e. the lower the f-stop), the more light that can enter your camera. And the more light you bring in, the faster your shutter speed can be, which helps avoid blurry shots.



Aperture also affects depth of field, a photography term that's all about how much of your image is in focus. A low f-stop will create a shallow depth of field, so only the thing you are pointing at will be in focus, while the rest of the image will be more blurred out. With a higher f-stop, everything from the background to the foreground will be in focus. A shallow depth of field makes

your subject stand out against an artistically blurred background. But if you go *too* shallow, you risk blurring your subject itself out of focus.

Use aperture priority (Av) mode to have your camera automatically adjust shutter speed for your desired f-stop. It's much more commonly used in food photography than Tv mode.

ISO

Once upon a time, ISO referred to the speed of a roll of film. These days it's all about the camera's digital sensor. The higher the ISO number, the faster the sensor will register light, which allows you to use a faster shutter speed. This is useful in low light situations where, even with a wide open aperture, your shutter speed isn't fast enough for a clear image. But the higher you set your ISO, the grainier your image will be.

You can get away with higher ISOs if you're posting small images online, but the loss in quality becomes more apparent at larger sizes and in physical prints. To keep your images crisp and clear, aim for an ISO closer to 400 (or lower in great daylight), and avoid going higher than 1600 on most consumer cameras.

WAIT, SO WHAT SETTINGS SHOULD I USE?



In low light situations, your best bet is to use a wide aperture and higher ISO. As we've mentioned, small f-stop numbers shorten shutter speed and therefore eliminate blurring, allowing you to take sharper pictures even in dimly lit rooms. A high ISO will allow your camera's sensor to detect more light, but keep in mind that the higher you go, the grainier the

image will get.

In well-lit areas, choose your aperture based on how much of the image you'd like in focus. When your aperture is wide open (smaller f-stops), your depth of field is very shallow, meaning that things in the far background or foreground will be out of focus. This can be a good thing if you are trying to call attention to a particular detail on a plate—the crust on a burger or the melted strand of cheese on a pizza. Smaller apertures (larger f-stops) will widen your depth of field, allowing you to get both the front and the back of a plate of food in focus all at the same time. For beginners, an f-stop setting of 3.5 to 5 is a pretty good starting range.

WHITE BALANCE



Even when your shutter speed and aperture are on-point, you're not guaranteed a photograph with vivid, accurate colors. Light in restaurants, and often homes, is usually either incandescent or candlelight, both of which are quite yellow. Your eyes compensate for this automatically, but your camera's sensor doesn't. Unless you adjust your white balance, photos will have an odd color cast, like the

left image above.

Most cameras have a custom white balance adjustment setting. All you've gotta do is point your camera at a white or gray object, snap a photo, and use it to set your white balance. Look at your camera's manual for specific instructions on how to do this with your camera. You can also use the automatic white balance setting and adjust as needed in post-production (more on that later).

Another way to improve color balance is to avoid multiple light source situations. Multiple light sources can cast different colored tints, which makes adjusting the white balance nearly impossible. For instance, shooting near a window with great natural light coming from outside while your warm yellow kitchen light shines from inside. When possible, turn off the light inside to eliminate any strange

color casts.

POST-PROCESSING



If you have Photoshop and know how to use it, do it! Even iPhoto and other simple photo apps (like Preview) have basic photo editing capabilities built in. We use Adobe Lightroom to organize and edit our photos here at Serious Eats, with the occasional help of Photoshop for those more difficult images. Here are the most common and useful techniques you can use:

Fix white balance: Usually this involves selecting the white balance tool, then clicking on a spot in your image that should be a neutral white or gray (napkins, menus, and shadows on plates work well for this). You can also manually adjust the color balance using the temperature and hue sliders.

Adjust levels to brighten or darken your image: The goal should be to make sure that the lightest spots in your photo are pure white while the darkest areas are pure black, with the majority of the image staying in the center portion of the levels curve. You should also aim to preserve any detail on both the light and dark ends of the spectrum.

Adjust contrast, brightness, and saturation: The goal should be to make your images pop, but not look like they've been exposed to radioactive waste. If your camera supports RAW format and you have an image editor that can process it, use it! It makes adjusting things like color balance much, much easier and in many cases, will allow you to fix things that are virtually unfixable once you convert to JPEG or TIFF. Working from RAW is like working from a photographic negative, while working off a JPEG is like trying to fix a photograph that's already been processed by the local CVS. You just don't have as much control.

And with that, you have all the basics you need to start churning out stunning food photographs.

Tag us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), or [Facebook](#) to show us how it goes!

— *Written in collaboration by
Niki Achitoff-Gray, Vicky Wasik,
and J. Kenji Lopez-Alt*