

ISO400 f/4 t0.8sec

What's on the menu?

Winnie photographs an array of dishes at a restaurant



experience

A Day in the Life of a



Food Photographer

Get an insight into the **world of gastronomic photography** through the lens of a food photographer

words Winnie Ma **photos** Jeannie Heng and Winnie Ma **stylist** Peilin Breller

Whenever people find out I'm a food photographer, I always get asked one of two things: "Do you get to eat what you shoot?" and "Wow, how'd you get into that field?" I can tell you that shooting food is in my blood. As a product of an award-winning amateur photographer father and a mother who has won many cooking competitions, it only seemed natural to head into this field – although it did take a long time to find my passion, motivation and direction.

Most of my friends and family remember me bringing my trusty pocket-sized Canon PowerShot S100 Digital ELPH to all our meals where I wouldn't let anyone touch their food until I've taken a shot of it. Does this sound familiar to any of you? Therein began my love for shooting food. Over the years,

I upgraded to other cameras until I got my hands on my first Canon EOS DSLR. Finally, I was able to capture food through a much more controlled perspective. The ability to change lenses and control my own settings allowed me to manipulate how I wanted the images to look.

I figured the best way to start was to put up an online portfolio/website. Having an online presence allows you to show your work for people to see. People are also able to seek you out via the internet. Of course, it's imperative to begin with a solid set of images you feel confident about. You are only as good as your last photo; therefore what you place online for the world to see should reflect you, your style and your technical capabilities. The origin of my beginnings stems from having an online portfolio that has allowed me to work with clients



Winnie's Portfolio

Winnie has photographed desserts for menus, commercials for shaved ice and coffee shops

such as Lee Kum Kee, Lawry's, Hyatt Regency, Fleming's Steakhouse, FIJI Water and various magazines as well.

THE INGREDIENTS OF GOOD FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

Preparing for a photo shoot is equally important as the shoot itself. I can't stress how important the pre-production process is since that's the time where you can determine all the various factors of the shoot with your client: what are we shooting, what photographic style are we going for, what does the location look like, what kind of lighting equipment or special camera equipment will I require, who will be handling the cooking and styling, what are these images going to be used for? The moment you step onto the set, you should have answers to all of these and more.

Another critical aspect of being a successful food photographer is having a strong team working with you and knowing when to delegate tasks. Though I have some food styling experience, I find that having a great food stylist and assistant to work alongside you is key and will allow you to focus on the photography side of things. Building a great relationship with your team and knowing what they bring to the table can make the difference between a good photo and a great photo. If you're lucky enough to find someone who shares the same business ethics and work aesthetics as you, you'll find that over time you can both look at something on the table and know what to change or modify without even speaking! It's important to understand your roles on the set of a shoot for a successful assignment.

Similarly, for a successful shoot, open communication with the client is essential from the get go. You need to be flexible and react to what the job requires but at the same time, if something doesn't look good or can be improved, it's important to be tactful about it since the shot doesn't just represent your client but also your own work. You have to remember that you are hired for your expertise and you are the professional.

SECRET RECIPE: MUST LOVE FOOD

Apart from being skillful with your camera and all the respective equipment, food photographers should really just LOVE food, plain and simple. It's important to know how food functions and how ingredients work. Being knowledgeable about cooking processes, how ingredients correlate to the final product, helps you gain a better perspective of the best way to shoot the dish itself. In addition to knowing the culinary side of things, having a strong

artistic vision helps you marry props to the proper plate of food. Colours, textures and shapes are all vital in making your shot look its best. Once the pieces of the puzzle come together, you can see what is the best angle to shoot. Experimentation is ideal in helping you feel more at ease about shooting in angles or methods you've never tried before.

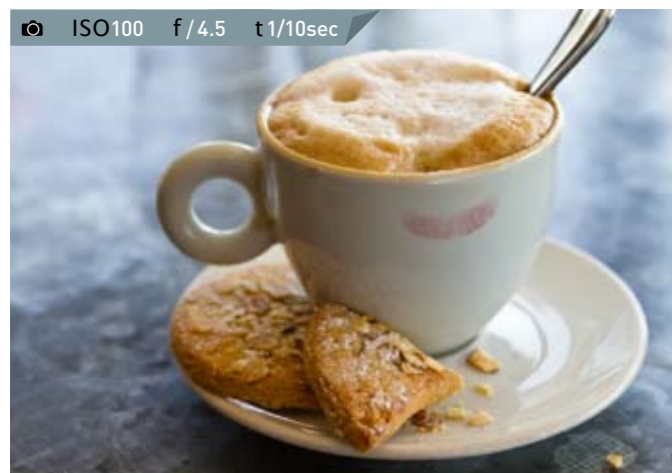
As a food photographer, one generally thinks that our work revolves around restaurants and food establishments. The reality is that food is everywhere! I've been hired by food corporations to shoot marketing materials for sell sheets and tradeshow banners, hired by food-related businesses to shoot

packaging and website images, menu boards, cookbooks and recipe cards. The possibilities are truly endless.

Our shoot focuses on an editorial magazine shoot that required us to develop four images to be featured in a magazine. Editorial magazine work is an area of food photography that requires less stringent parameters. Though there are some guidelines that art directors will provide you, the images are allowed more freedom for creativity. As with any shoot, I began with finding out exactly what these images are for, how they are used and what style we should work on. Once we found out the recipes, we were able to develop a vision for each of the

Getting ready to shoot

(Clockwise) Winnie's food stylist prepares the salad and selects the table setting for the shoot. While Winnie sets up her equipment, the stylist arranges the salad and place setting. Winnie then photographs the salad and voila – a tempting picture of a fresh tomato and cucumber salad!



Ahi Soba Noodles



ISO320 f/2.8 t1/100sec

The food stylist prepares the soba noodles while the assistant lays out the tools needed for the shoot. Winnie (below) does some initial shooting



ISO100 f/2 t1/25sec



ISO320 f/2.8 t1/30sec



ISO320 f/2.8 t1/50sec

The stylist carefully arranges pea sprouts and carrot shreds atop the soba and brushes on oil



ISO400 f/3.5 t1/250sec

Winnie experiments with different angles, while the stylist helps out with the chopsticks



ISO400 f/3.5 t1/160sec



ISO100 f/5.5 t1/320sec

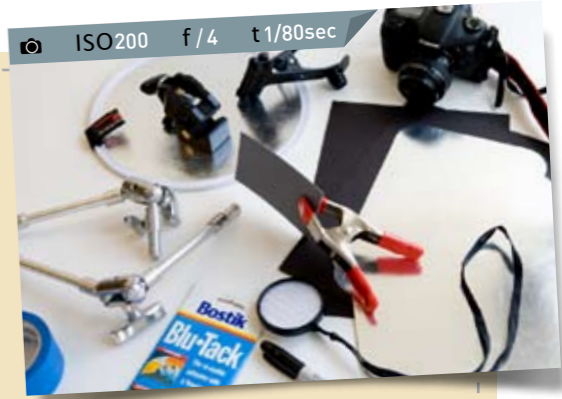
{Food for Thought}

Most people think as a photographer, I spend a lot of my time shooting. The reality is that this is still a business. Much of my day is spent replying to emails, writing bids/estimates, handling pre-production groundwork, location scouting, shopping for props or ingredients for an upcoming shoot, researching new equipment and scheduling. Wearing many different hats is a given in this profession. Although being an artist is what you're known for, having business savvy is just as important.

A lot of people also think that as a professional photographer, you can shoot however you like. But your job is to produce images based on what the client's needs and requirements are. Is this an editorial shoot or a commercial shoot? Is this for a website or for an advertisement in a publication? Many factors will determine how you shoot and why it needs to be shot in a certain way. Growing with the challenges of a project can be a launching point for you to take on new (and sometimes intimidating) equipment, new shooting techniques and skills. I never stop learning, there's always room to grow and to develop more skills but the main thing is to always keep it fun!

TIPS

- 1. Look for tools that can help you** from art stores, restaurant supply stores and hardware stores. My favourite malleable and disposable reflectors are the shiny reflective lids on BBQ roast duck takeaway containers. Don't be afraid to use and craft your own tools that fit your budget.
- 2. Use a tripod to get tack sharp images** even in low lighting. Use the lowest ISO possible to reduce grain and noise since images blown up for print will need to be as clean as possible.
- 3. Challenge yourself with new photography techniques** and learn to use artificial lighting such as off-camera flash units (Canon Speedlites 270EX II, 320EX or 580EX III).
- 4. Experiment and master angles you are comfortable with** (overhead, tilt-towards, tilt-away, angled from below or above, straight-on) along with different lenses to see what works best.
- 5. Don't just shoot up close at wide-open apertures; try to shoot with deeper depth of field** (f/11 and above) for a different look to your photos.
- 6. Craft together a small styling kit** so that you can style food with precision straight out of the kitchen. My kit has medical tweezers, makeup sponges (to prop things up), small spoons and spatulas, eyedroppers and mini spray bottles in it.
- 7. Master each lens** so it will become second nature to you. When it's time to pull a lens out of your bag, you will know exactly how it will perform.
- 8. Play around with the equipment** you have and keep it fun. Don't let the technical details discourage or overwhelm you.
- 9. Learn how different directional lighting works.** See how natural lighting from the back will vary from the front and how food looks in it.
- 10. Combine natural ambient lighting with strobe lighting.** It gives off a very modern and clean effect that's frequently seen in magazines today.



ISO200 f/4 t1/80sec

dishes and proceeded to shop for props accordingly, based on the needs of the article.

THE ASSIGNMENT

By the time we arrive on set for the shoot, all groceries should have been purchased, prepped and ready to go. "Hero" food items are selected for its shape, colour and size – the more perfect the better. On set, everyone has their own task: the food stylist will handle all the cooking, plating and styling while assistants act as an extra set of hands for anything we may need them for. Often, we may need last minute trips to the market for purchases.

Once everything is set up, I work closely with my stylist to select the props we believe will work best for the particular dish we are making. The stylist frequently makes recommendations to me to help improve the shot whereas I in turn also make suggestions during the cooking or plating process to help bring out the best in the dish itself. Making food look its best and

camera-ready is the true goal since the camera lens picks up on the tiniest details.

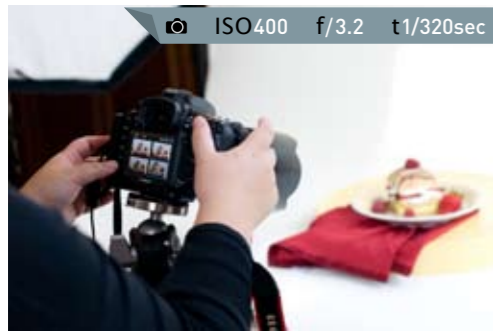
As the dish is prepared and ready to move to the shooting table, it's important to take note of its lifespan or lack thereof. I'm always ready to shoot by the time the food arrives – it's much akin to a ticking time bomb! More often than not, it takes several tries of shifting things around and changing camera angles before we feel it's "the shot". The Japanese soba noodle shot was the perfect example of this where we had to try out variations of the chopsticks on the plate versus chopsticks in mid-air before we got it to our satisfaction. From there, we had to adjust our aperture and lighting even more so to obtain as the shadow effect to the right (see facing page).

Though we try to keep food in its most natural state, we do at times have to utilise some tricks of the trade to keep food looking its best. Food stylists will often employ the use of ascorbic acid, glycerin, oil sprays and many other useful items to keep food in top form. Underneath layers of food are

Napolean



Winnie shoots the food stylist preparing a napolean



Winnie checks the napolean images after shooting through the LCD. She doesn't like what she sees



Winnie decides the problem is that the stack isn't high enough so the stylist adds on more berries and cream to create a taller napolean. The final photograph – perfection!

toothpick scaffoldings used to hold up food to make it stand out in the image. Countless shots are done with museum wax holding items in place while pieces of thin plastics are used to layer in between a burger patty and bun to prevent it from sinking.

Once all the pieces come together in harmony, the delicious presentation is ready for the camera and of course when your client says "I love it!" you know you did your job right and all your efforts are paid off.

There are times however when things just simply do not work and you have to learn to change gears and "let go" of the original concept you have in mind. For example in our Napoleon shot, we started off with a shorter stack but it simply didn't work so we went back to the kitchen to construct a higher version and that did the trick. It's important to learn when to not box yourself in and be flexible to modifications.

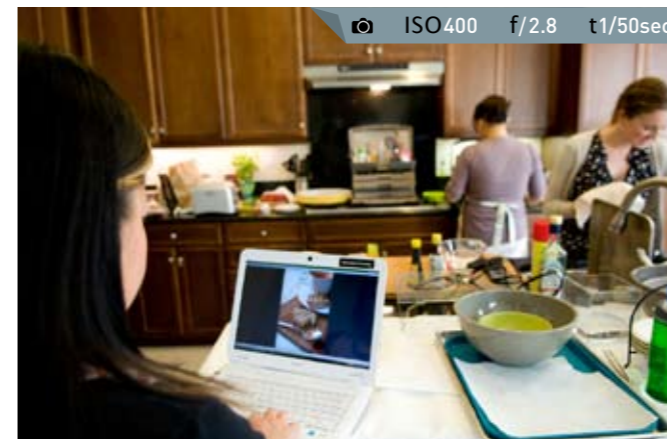
It's also important to listen to your client's feedback.



Soup & Toast



The food stylist darkens the grill lines on a slice of buttered toast and then uses hot tongs to further char the bread. When the soup and toast are ready for the camera, Winnie begins the final shoot



Winnie views the images shot on the laptop, making sure everything's in good order before starting to clean up. The final soup and toast photograph



This after all, is about their product and their goals. It's crucial to stay on track of the project. If you budget for one day and expect to finish in one day, then it's critical you do so. Being in control of the set is also part of the photographer's job – the safety, conduct and comfort of everyone is vital to making the shoot a smooth one.

Although transitioning from a hobbyist to a professional photographer was a huge step into the unknown, it's brought me nothing but satisfaction. I love what I do. There's an immense sense of joy, pride and gratification when I see my work in print, in advertisements, packaging and knowing that I came from a place where only years before I knew nothing of the trade. When clients "ooh" and "aah" at my photos, it's a huge sense of fulfilment to know I brought their vision to life. With a bit of passion and drive, it's within anyone's reach to become a professional photographer. Don't forget to love what you do and do what you love.

And finally, the answer to the question at the start of the story – I sometimes do get to eat the food I shoot ☺. That's a wrap! 📷



it's a wrap!