



Food Photography

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Hello everyone! My name is Mel Go and it is my pleasure to join you today. I served the state of South Carolina in the SC Department of Education and two public school districts for over 20 years. I currently work remotely in Columbia, SC as a statistician and computer programmer with a large K-12 test company based in Minnesota. For leisure, I enjoy photography, videography, baking, and the visual arts among several other things.



I first started taking photos long before I developed an interest in food photography. One year, I decided to bake recreationally. Baking allowed me to fulfill the urge to create or make something. It was scientific and artistic at the same time. After I enjoyed baking, the fun did not stop there, I pulled out my camera at the end of each baking session, turned on the bright range lights, took the photos of my creations, and posted them on Facebook. I gave away most of what I baked too. I derived so much enjoyment from these two back-to-back hobbies. It is this same enjoyment that made me want to share today what I learned.

Orange-Flavored Gumdrops Made with Apple Sauce



In this session, I am going to go over several ideas on how you can get better results with your photography. Specifically, we will focus on food photography. What you learn today has many applications. First, all of us who like to work with our hands can benefit from maintaining a digital portfolio of our work. Even if we are not selling anything, we can enjoy looking at our creations and post them on social media to share with our friends. If we are making or producing something that we would like to sell, the pictures are very necessary marketing tools in today's digital age. More and more people would like to see rather than read about something.

Classic Chocolate Chip Cookies with Chocolate Topping



Just as many of us know how to drive a car but are not mechanics, many of us can take photos with our cell phones and cameras even if we are not professional photographers and do not know what the aperture and focal lengths are. We are going to go over tips with a hands-on, results-oriented, and troubleshooting approach. The focus will be to take the photo as we want it to be instead of retouching or altering the photo later with software.

Banana Nut Mini Muffins



At the beginning of the session, your coordinator will have passed a worksheet around. I encourage you to complete it at the end of this session. After you have filled out the worksheet as a record of ideas and possible action items, it is my hope that you will go home and apply what you have learned during this session.

A GOOD FOOD PHOTO

- “The eyes eat first.”
- You can “taste and smell” the food just by looking at it.
- It makes you want to eat the food.

What makes a good photo?

My personal criteria for a good food photo are:

It makes others want to eat it.

It looks so good that the viewer can taste or smell it by looking at it. The eyes eat first. The visual appearance seems to activate the other senses. You might actually remember something you had eaten before that is very similar to what you are looking at.

KNOW HOW TO USE YOUR EQUIPMENT

Peppermint-Flavored Cream Cheese Mints



There is a bewildering amount of photographic equipment and accessories available to us. Take the time to learn about your equipment. When you take advantage of its features, you will take better photos.

NOT ENOUGH LIGHT

Chocolate Cookies with Andes Mint-Chocolate Chips



Just as the human eye needs light to see, the camera lens needs enough light. For example, newer cell phones tend to be designed to handle low-light situations. If you do not shoot in manual mode, you are most likely relying on the settings of the equipment.

TOO MUCH LIGHT

Blueberry Muffins



It's also possible to have too much light. At that point the pictures are overexposed. A sign that there is too much light is when the photos looked washed out and faded. Here is an example.

USE MORE LIGHTING

Angel Food Cake with Piped Chocolate Drizzle



No doubt flash photography can be useful. However, it can be tricky to get a good result because you may not like the way the photo is taken at the time the flash is applied.

In lieu of flash photography, I can recommend supplemental lighting. You apply the lighting and the objects remain illuminated while you take the photos. If you do not like the results, you can adjust the lighting and repeat the process until you achieve preferred results.

Another thing to beware of is light reflecting back towards you because of a mirror or glossy surface.

COLOR OF LIGHT: WARM TO COOL



Warm light



Cool light

The color temperature of white light varies. White light can be warmer or cooler. A warmer white light tends to be yellowish and a cooler white light tends to be bluish. It's important to notice the type of light in use because it affects the outcome of the pictures. The type of light can cast a tint in the photo.

DIRECTION OF LIGHT



No-Knead Walnut Bread Baked in Bundt Pan

If you've ever taken a photo of people with the sun right behind them, then you have a back-lit situation. As such, anything with its back to the light source will look darker in front of the lens. If possible, try to shoot in such a way that the light illuminates the object of the photo.

The source of the light is critical. Depending on the position of the light source relative to what you are taking a photo of, unwanted shadows may appear. Are all shadows undesirable? To me, the answer is it depends. A photo is 2-dimensional and having shadows can help bring out the 3-D aspect of the photo especially if there are textures involved in the actual item you are taking a photo of.

Here is an example of bread with the light source placed to the side. Without this shadow effect, the bread would have appeared quite flat in the picture. With the shadow, you can see better the texture of the bread and the shape of the pan the bread was baked in.

SELECT THE BEST

Thin and Crispy Oatmeal Cookies with Chocolate Chips



Select the best food specimens. Remove/hide/disguise imperfect units.

If you want to show off the uniformity of the food items, you can pick the most uniform items and highlight those in the picture. If you don't have perfect units, you can hide the imperfections by how you position the items and how you take the photo. You are not required to include any imperfections in the photo.

ARRANGEMENT

Chinese Almond Cookies



Arrange the food in a pleasing way. Certain arrangements are more interesting than others. As you experiment, you will find different ways to arrange the food, which will enhance the appearance of what you are trying to take a picture of.

REMOVE WHAT YOU DON'T WANT INCLUDED

This “tail” could have been removed.



Wipe up any spills. Remove crumbs. Whenever possible, already remove or exclude from the photo anything that you want to exclude from the very beginning. Also look at what is around the food and remove anything undesirable. If at a party, try to take the photo at the beginning before anyone touches the food and before the food is half-eaten and surrounded by soiled napkins, leftovers, empty cups, and dirty plates.

BACKGROUND AND LIGHTING



Same bowl of soup
with different lighting
and backgrounds.



Background

Backgrounds can do a lot to enhance a photo. The background should complement the object of the photo and not become the main feature of the photo.

Lighting

What is the color of the food? Will the type of white light you use enhance the appearance of the food? Running some test shots is always a good idea to make sure you choose the best lighting option and use the better white balance options available in your camera.

MATTE VS GLOSSY FOOD SURFACES



Pineapple Upside Down Cake

Look at the food and see if it is matte or glossy. When it is glossy, the light will have a greater effect on its appearance. Glossy surfaces will reflect the light and create “highlights” in the image.

TIMING



Consider the timing of taking the pictures. A food item freshly cooked may not look the same 5 hours later. If a dull dry film has appeared over food such as soup, you can stir the soup to bring out the moisture and enhance the appearance of the soup.

CHALLENGES



Chocolate Chip Chocolate Cookies with Piped Chocolate Drizzle

When the color of the food is very uniform, it can be more challenging to take a good photo. Anything that looks homogeneous could be challenging because there is less contrast within the food item itself. For example, a closeup picture of milk, will look like a white flat surface.

CROPPING

Chocolate Cream Cheese Mints Molded as Buttons



Although it's a good habit to shoot the picture just the way you want it in its final form, it is not always possible. You can crop the photo to isolate a better portion of the picture. When I was first starting out with photography, a co-worker always reminded me to look for "the photo within the photo." He showed me several original photos against their cropped versions and I could see how the final photo looked better compared to the original uncropped version.

SHOOT WITH THE CORRECT FORM



Filipino Dessert: Brazo de Mercedes

If you have heavy equipment and/or shoot hours on end with bad posture, it is possible to strain your neck, shoulders, arms, and hands, such that you experience stiffness, discomfort, and even pain. I've met too many college students with heavy cameras already complaining about pain. If you have equipment, consider putting it on a monopod or tripod and activating the shutter with a wired or wireless shutter release.

Another advantage of mounting the camera on a tripod is the camera is absolutely still. When you hold the camera and don't hold it steady, you can contribute to the blurr in the picture.

CLOSING REMARKS

Photos: All photos were taken by the presenter. Except for the tray of brownies used to illustrate the spectrum of warm to cool light, all food items were cooked/baked by the presenter.



You know a good food photo when you see it. Individual preferences vary, but what is important is that you like the photos you take. Do not ever let criticism stop you. If there is any truth to a criticism, take it as a learning opportunity and acknowledge that opinions are just that and vary from person to person. The degree to which anyone likes a photo is subjective and also depends on where they are in their photography skills and knowledge. As each year passed by, my photography skills evolved and some things that I found acceptable during the first year, I no longer preferred in subsequent years. Your own photographic eye will evolve with practice. With practice, you can only get better.

This concludes the presentation. I wish you a good day and many, many adventures with food photography and photography in general.