



Steak and Potatoes on the Grill

ASSIGNMENT ELEVEN: **PLAYING WITH FIRE**

Shooting food on a grill can be a challenging experience, especially in a studio environment, where starting a real fire is usually frowned upon. But fortunately there are many ways you can create the look of a real grill without risking a visit from the local fire department.

◀ This image may look hot, but everything in the shot is actually cold.

ISO 100, 1/125 sec, f/8, 50 mm lens on Canon DSLR

Food Stylist: William Smith, Prop Stylist: Nora Fink, Special Effects: Geoff Binns-Galvey



▲ The blue cast was created in Adobe Camera Raw and enhanced even more using Photoshop.

ISO 100, 1/125 sec, f/8, 50mm lens on Canon DSLR
Food Stylist: Jacqueline Buckner,
Prop Stylist: Nora Fink

Even if the food is only supposed to look like it was cooked on a grill, it will need to have grill marks on the meat. How will you do that? Here's another reason to have a gas cooktop instead of an electric one. Food stylists we work with often use metal skewers heated by the flame of a gas cooktop turned up high to sear the meat and give the impression that it just came off the grill. Here are a few assignments we completed for our clients involving fire or a grilled look.

Steak for the Traveler

It's very rare for a client to give you total creative freedom. Most come armed with a detailed shot list, a style guide, and years of ingrained business practices that can stifle a photographer's ability to do something unique and different.

Clients that allow you to express yourself creatively empower you to shoot using techniques that may not be a part of your usual repertoire. They encourage you to experiment and allow ample time for you to work through the details of each shot. They are unusual clients indeed, but exactly the type you need for a complex steak image.

Weeks before the shoot I had asked the client to collect a few images that he felt represented their brand. They didn't have to have food in them, but they did need to be inspirational. When we began looking at the images, there was one that both of us noticed and liked immediately. It was rather dark and had a blue cast over the entire image. That shot became the inspiration for our shoot.

We also developed a narrative for this image to help us choose props and a lighting style. The story behind this one was "a weary traveler stopping to eat a delicious meal." We started with a well-worn tin table and a suitcase. We looked at placing the suitcase on a chair near the table but decided that setting it on the table was not only unexpected but created mystery. I purposely allowed the front of the suitcase to fall into shadow to keep the hardware from distracting from the meal.

Lighting

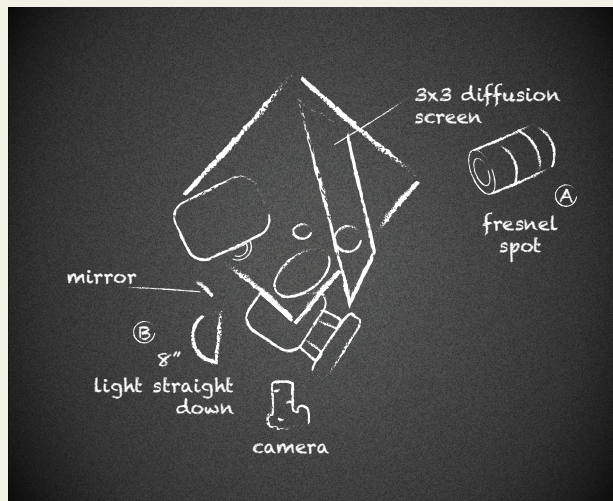
I wanted the light to fall off quickly and create strong shadows, so I placed a 3' x 3' diffusion screen in close to the set, with the bottom of it nearly touching the salad and the top leaned over the set another 2 feet. Behind it I placed a Fresnel

Camera Raw

I prefer to process my images using Adobe Camera Raw, mostly because that is what I am used to. There are certainly other options available, but I would suggest capturing your image as a raw file rather than a jpeg. The reason is that a raw file allows you to adjust settings that are normally decided at the moment of exposure, things like white balance, exposure, and sharpness. Raw images provide maximum flexibility for editing your images and making changes later.



▲ The Fresnel spot is the main illumination for the image, while the other light is used to light the chair.



▲ Here is the lighting diagram.
Power settings (watts per second): A=188, B=163

spotlight to keep the light concentrated on the screen. The effect was almost like having a diffused light bulb about a foot in diameter right above the set. It reflected in the table and the knife, creating some very cool highlights. Because it was virtually above the knife, it threw a shadow to the right side of the salad and to the left side of the meat.

The light fell off quickly, as planned, so that the drink to the left of the set was barely even noticeable. A small mirror on the left side of the set bounced just enough light back into the suitcase so that it would not be completely lost to the shadow. To light the chair that was pushed up against the table, I aimed another light directly at the ground. That way, none of that light spilled over onto the table.

Image Post-Production

I processed the image using Adobe Camera Raw immediately after capture, adjusting the raw file to get the overall blue tone we wanted. I kept the Fill Light slider at zero, but I increased clarity and contrast to make the image “grittier.” Then I opened the file in Photoshop to enhance the blue color even more on everything but the food and the chair. I did this using an adjustment layer with a mask.

Black, White, and Silver

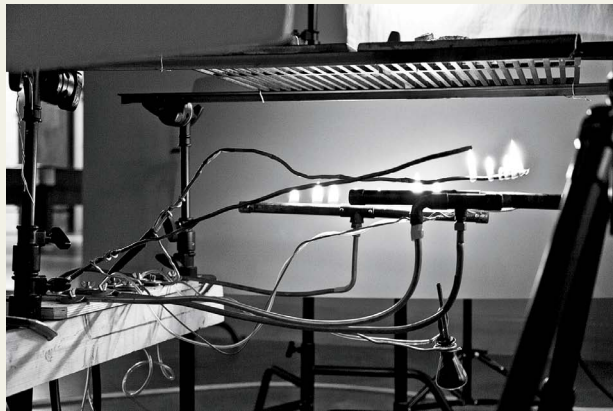
The most challenging aspect of the next assignment, to create a “real” grill shot for the manufacturer of the aluminum foil, wasn’t the flames or the food (in this case potatoes), but getting the right exposure for the foil.

Trying to get detail in both extremes of your image (highlights and shadows) is difficult, and when they are black and silver and not just black and white, it’s virtually impossible. But with this client, it became a necessity.

▼ The fire, the food, and the foil make for a very complicated exposure.

ISO 100, 15 sec, f/11,
50mm lens on Canon DSLR
Food Stylist: Lisa Marie DeVille





► Propane gas travels through valves and copper tubing to specially designed gas burners.

▲ Close-up view of gas burners.



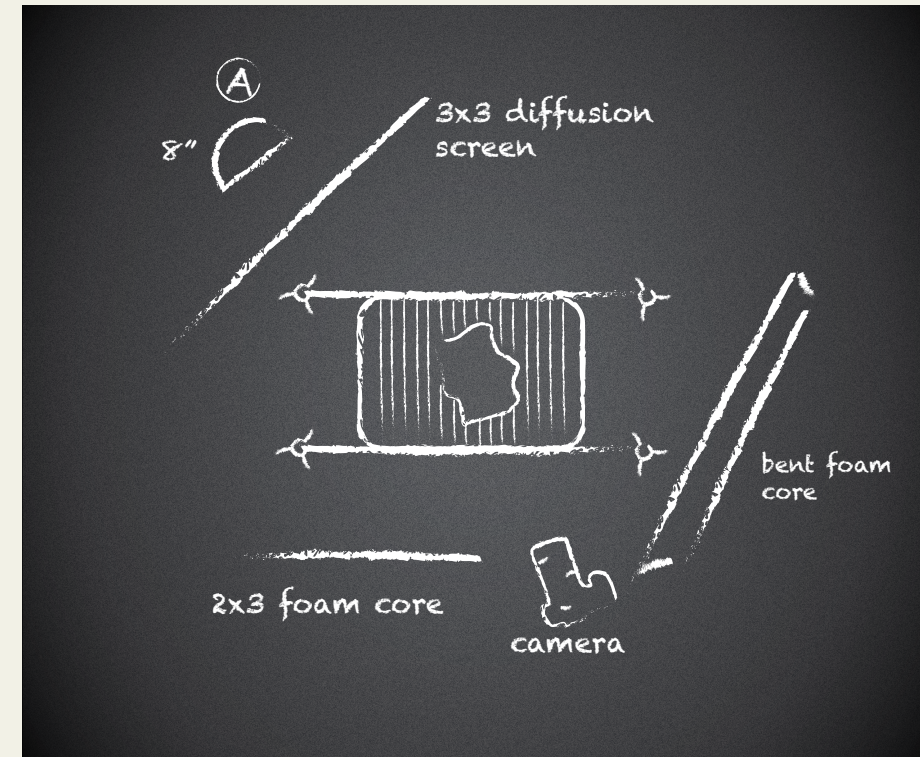
You can't just let the highlight blow out and call it artistic, or explain to your client that it's nearly impossible to get detail in something so bright. Because the aluminum foil reflects your lighting like a mirror, it is almost always overexposed when everything else looks right.

Flame Technique

Flames under a grill can be done several different ways. One example is the metal shovel filled with charcoal briquettes under the food (see Assignment 9, "Shooting Food for Packaging"); another is to hire a special-effects rigger/designer to set up a highly controllable "flame bar" rig to create just the right amount of flames.

Lighting

This image was going to be shot on a grill in the studio, so I needed to make sure that my camera was locked down tight and that I had the correct aperture for exposing the fire. Then I set up a 3' x 3' diffusion screen to the left side of the set as my main light, and to the right of the set I placed a large piece of foamcore to act as a fill light. On the left side of the camera, for additional fill light, was a 2' x 3' piece of foamcore.



◀ Here is the lighting diagram for the foil image.

Power settings (watts per second):
A=530

Once I know the correct exposure for the fire (by reviewing the images on my computer monitor tethered to the camera), I will adjust the power on my pack up or down so that I can expose the food at the same f-stop as the fire. I then turn off the modeling lights on the strobes (to keep the room relatively dark) and begin my exposure by firing the flash and then exposing for the fire. I will do several captures to get variations of the flames.

Image Post-Production

Once I have all the images ready to assemble, I look through the flames shots and decide which one to use (or which ones to combine). But chances are if the foil pouch is properly exposed, the food is too dark. To correct that problem we simply reprocess the raw file and increase the exposure. By placing the new, lighter file on its own layer, we are able to blend the two images so that the food looks great, the foil has detail, and the flames are dancing in all the right places.

► FAR RIGHT This is a very simple image, but it took a lot of individuals doing their jobs well to make the end result look so good.

ISO 100, 1/125 sec, f/8,
50 mm lens on Canon DSLR
Food Stylist: William Smith,
Prop Stylist: Nora Fink
Special Effects: Geoff Binns-Galvey

Shooting Fireworks

Shooting fire is a lot like shooting fireworks. Your f-stop is the most important setting in obtaining a correct exposure, and your shutter speed just determines how long the tails are on the fireworks. Shoot at too small an f-stop and the fireworks will be too dark—shoot at too large an f-stop and you will wash out the color. One advantage of shooting fire is that you can keep the flame in one spot for a longer period of time to build up your exposure as needed, like when you have to shoot at a very small aperture. Just like fireworks, fire is generally best exposed between f/8 and f/11 in a dark room with the shutter left open.

Grilling Out

Shooting meat on a charcoal grill is something that almost all food photographers will experience at some point during their career. And if your shot is looking down in such a way that you can see the coals underneath, you'll be forced to consider how to make them look real. Actual hot coals are not practical unless you are shooting outside, and if the coals are not hot then they just look gray and lifeless. I guess you could shoot hot coals and then strip them into the shot, but that's a lot of work, and you don't get the benefit of any reflected light that might happen when everything is lit from below. Here's an approach we used for a client.

Technique

We had a special-effects rigger/designer working with us on this job, so he took care of the coals and made sure they were positioned correctly. He also created the smoke that you see wafting up from the bottom area of the grill.

If you don't have access to or the budget for a special-effects rigger/designer, you can rent the acrylic charcoal briquettes from www.trengove.com and do it yourself, but the smoke is much harder to do alone.



▲ The special-effects rigger placing briquettes in the grill.



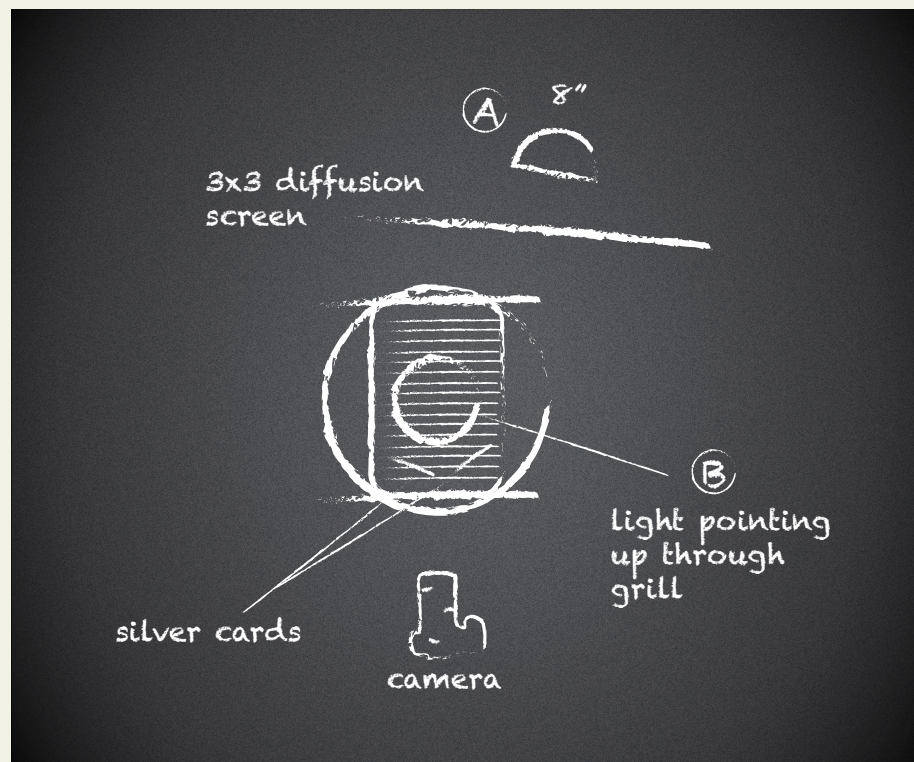


▲ In this image you can see the light underneath the coals and the way the cooking grid is attached to the top.

Lighting

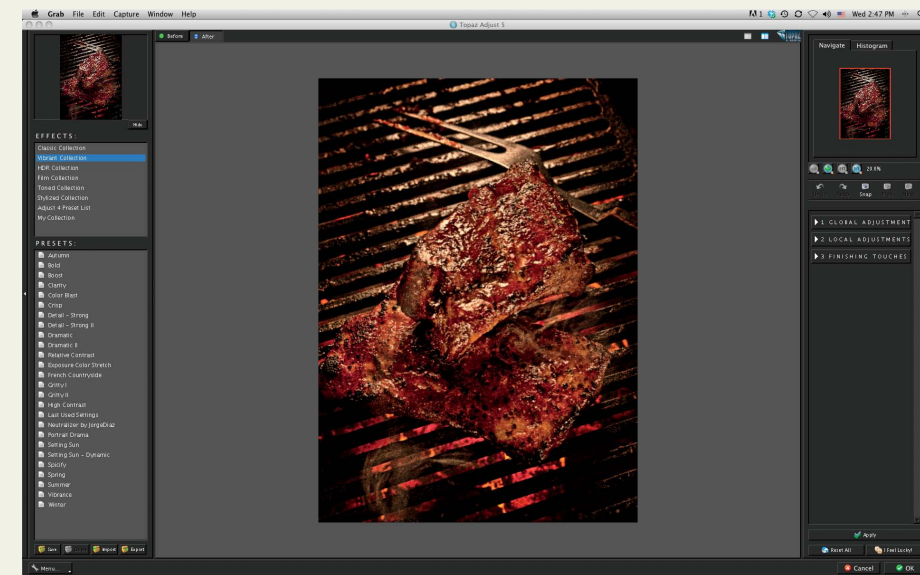
The first thing you discover about a Weber grill is that there is not enough room to fit a light into the bottom of it, so get out your reciprocal saw and start cutting. You'll need a hole big enough to get at least the top of your light into. Next you'll want to replace the lower rack that the charcoal goes on with a quarter-inch piece of frosted plastic and maybe a red or orange gel. On top of that you can place your acrylic charcoal briquettes—and at the very top, your cooking grid.

Notice how the light underneath the grill illuminates the coals just enough to make them glow. On top we used one light aimed through a 3' x 3' diffusion screen. To create some sparkling highlights and get a little detail on the shadow side of the meat, we placed a couple of very small silver cards just below where the image ends.



► Here is the lighting diagram for the grill shot.

Power settings (watts per second):
A=108, B=82



◀ Using the Topaz Adjust 5 plug-in for Photoshop to create a grittier surface. We used a layer mask so the change wouldn't affect the food—only the grill itself.

Image Post-Production

After doing some initial processing on the file in Adobe Camera Raw, we tried adding some special effects using a Photoshop plug-in called Topaz Adjust 5. Topaz Labs makes a series of plug-ins to control grain, mask images, and do lots of other things too, but we were interested in some of the “gritty” effects we could achieve using Topaz Adjust 5. After applying the effects to the entire image, we realized it didn't look right on the meat, but we loved the grit it added to the grill and also the slight desaturation—so we just masked it off of the food and only allowed it to affect the grill at the top of the image.

Heat and Anticipation

Shooting food on a grill implies preparation, heat, and anticipation of the finished meal. The grill itself implies that someone is present—no one would ever walk away from food on a grill. Capturing not only the food but also the means by which it is cooked gives the viewer more information to visually taste the photograph. These examples represent only a few ways of highlighting the grilling process, but there are many others, so it's worth some experimentation to find out what works best for you.