

A close-up photograph of a white ceramic bowl filled with a thick, orange-brown soup. A mound of white rice sits in the center, topped with sliced green onions and small pieces of brown meat. The bowl is placed on a white plate with a blue floral pattern. In the background, a wooden chair and a white tablecloth are visible, creating a warm, indoor dining atmosphere.

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY & LIGHTING

*A Commercial
Photographer's
Guide to Creating
Irresistible Images*

TERI CAMPBELL

A close-up photograph of a white ceramic bowl filled with a light-colored soup. The soup is topped with a mound of white rice, sliced green onions, and pieces of brown meat. The bowl is set on a white plate with a blue floral pattern. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the same dish.

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TERI CAMPBELL

New
Riders



**Food Photography & Lighting:
A Commercial Photographer's Guide to Creating Irresistible Images**

Teri Campbell

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To Susie.

*Without your encouragement and support
I would never have been able to live my dream.*





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INTRODUCTION

Food and Me

On a recent trip to New Orleans I stopped at a local restaurant in the French Quarter for lunch. Whenever I go out to lunch and especially when I'm on vacation, I have my camera with me. I always ask to be seated near a window. At this restaurant, I chose my seat based on keeping the window light in front of me, or slightly to the side. That way any images that I shot would have a strong backlight or sidelight. I can always hold a white napkin next to the camera for fill light if needed. I also encourage those who have accompanied me to the restaurant to consider ordering food based on the appearance, not just taste, and to order more than they can eat—in this case calas—if they think that something might make a great picture.

You may think this is a bit over the top, and perhaps it is. But I'm always thinking about light and food. Many of these personal lunch photographs inspire me to create new lighting setups in my studio for the commercial clients that I work with. I chose to specialize in food photography almost three decades ago and I'm always looking for ways to improve my work and spark my creativity for shooting.

The Beginning

I grew up in a restaurant in Cincinnati. My mom was a waitress, and after school she often took me with her to work. She fed me dinner, and let me stay out until my dad could pick me up. As a kid, I loved hanging out with the rest of staff and being in the kitchen. The food wasn't bad either, but at that age I was more

interested in eating than noticing how everything looked on the plate. On some level that time of my life probably informed my thinking and led me to my focusing exclusively on food as a commercial photographer.

These days, I'm not only trying to capture a beautiful image of the food, but capture the feeling and emotion that surrounds it. And I have to do this visually, without the smell of a pork chop or the feel of a fork in hand. The best food images try to reconstruct those memories or moments for the viewers so they will have a visceral attachment to the food, and hopefully, the product we are shooting for the client.

The Cake Shot

My first real food shoot as a young photographer was for Duncan Hines, a brand that Procter & Gamble owned at the time. I was not looking forward to it. Up to that point, my only experience shooting food was as a class assignment in photography school. Trying to be the photographer, assistant, food stylist, and art director all at the same time was a recipe for disaster. I hated it. But my boss at P&G, where I worked at the time, assured me this would be different. He had already hired a food stylist and he was sure that I would do fine. I had never even heard of a food stylist. But once I had the opportunity to work with one, I realized that because the stylist was taking care of the food and making sure it looked great, I was free to concentrate on lighting—what I loved most about photography. I could get used to this, I thought. And so my journey started.

Digital Capture

Digital photography entered my career about 15 years later, and at the perfect moment, because as much as we all want to stay fresh and try new things, the truth was I had been working in the business for a quite a few years and I already knew what worked and what didn't. There was no sense in overexposing the image by two f-stops just to see what happened to the background—that would be a waste of film and money. But with digital, it was just a shutter click and no film expense, so why not try it? And so many new things were possible in post-processing. For me it was like being back in photography school before you knew what you couldn't do—when anything was possible.





Why I Wrote This Book

This book was written to give you a better understanding of commercial food photography and the process of creating images for advertising and packaging. It is not meant to offer multiple solutions for each problem. Instead I have focused on the solution that worked for me on particular assignments. Are there other viable solutions, viewpoints, or ideas? Absolutely. There are always other ways to tackle a problem, and if my solution doesn't work for you, hopefully this can inspire you to create one that does work.

I also wrote this book to offer you a behind-the-scenes look at what it means to be a commercial food photographer today, and to learn about the relationships needed to make any food project successful. Things like, how to work with a food stylist or an art director, how to work with a fixed layout, or market your talent to new clients, and how to understand your role as an artist. As a commercial photographer, I am a member of a much larger team, and although I have my part to play as a photographer, my vision is not the only one that counts. I am often given a sketch or layout and charged with bringing that vision to life. Regardless of my own artistic preference or vision, this is the assignment that I was hired to complete.

What's in This Book

The first six chapters of this book detail what you need to know to set up a studio, to locate the right tools for the job, to understand the typical process for bidding and completing jobs, to work with the key players, and to find clients and market your work. The second part of the book includes nine assignment chapters, which are arranged around topics. There are also three bonus assignment chapters at the end of your ebook. These are all projects that I have completed, and I detail how I tackled specific challenges with the food, technique, lighting, and post-processing the final image.

In these assignment chapters I share with you detailed lighting diagrams and candid descriptions of the events that led to the creation of the images. I've included everything from classic American hamburgers to ice cream scoops to pizza pulls. I also share practical advice for anyone who photographs food, or who just wants to better understand the process. Whether you are a student, a professional, an art director, or just someone who loves food and beautiful images—I hope that you will enjoy this book and the insights that it offers.

What's Not in this Book

I don't cover basic lighting concepts or exposure techniques in this book. While these topics come up within the context of my assignments, you will not find these subjects or other digital photography basics specifically covered here. There are many fine books that can help get you up and running on those topics.

Final Note

Today anything is possible—food photography is more popular than ever, and there are amazing opportunities available for photographers at every level. But there is not much information available on what it takes to become a successful commercial food photographer. I hope this book helps you on your journey.

I have been truly blessed, getting to do what I love, with not just clients, but with friends. I wish for you the same success.





Looks Like Daylight

ASSIGNMENT FIVE: NATURAL LIGHT WITH FLASH

I was having lunch one day at a local restaurant, and with a new DSLR at my side I couldn't resist photographing my meal. After taking a few shots of my plate, I noticed something interesting. I reviewed the images on the tiny LCD screen. I really liked what I saw, especially the lighting. What was it about this light that was so appealing? I had purposely sat near the window at the restaurant, but as I studied my surroundings I realized that it

◀ This scene is lit by just one light and a fill card.

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

wasn't just a window, but a large group of them just to my right. And the light that came through from outside, although bright, was not direct sunlight. Toward the back of the room there were other windows too, but they were less intense.

I thought about how I could create that same effect in my studio. Then it occurred to me—if I used large pieces of foamcore to bounce my light, I could recreate the same light I saw coming through the bank of windows at the restaurant. I have always used small pieces of foamcore for fill cards to bounce light back on my subject in the studio, but rarely have I used full 4' x 8' sheets. And to get the same quality of light that the back windows at the restaurant provided, I could just bounce a light off my studio wall.

I went back to the studio and began to experiment. I discovered that by moving the light that was aimed at the foamcore closer, then farther away, I could change the quality of the light from something that had direction to a very soft light, especially if I put two or three pieces of foamcore side by side. I also found that lighting a 4' x 8' sheet of foamcore was very inefficient, as the light bounced in every direction—especially up. To remedy that, I decided to bend the foamcore at its midpoint, so that it formed sort of a bowl shape and directed the light back down at the set. The result created what I had seen and liked so much at the restaurant.

Breakfast Cereal

We don't do a lot of editorial work, but sooner or later (mostly later), what's happening in the world of editorial food photography makes its way into commercial photography. And that is what's happening now with commercial photographers and their clients, who are finally embracing a trend toward more natural-looking food shots, in terms of both styling and lighting. So being able to re-create natural looking light in the studio can be a good skill to acquire.

That is what we were presented with on this assignment: The art director wanted us to make the subject look natural and not overly lit.

► **FAR RIGHT** Bouncing light off a large white board makes this image feel like it was shot near a window instead of with a flash.

ISO 100, 1/160 sec, f/5.6,
50mm lens on Canon DSLR
Food Stylist: Joyce Sangirardi



◆ NOTE

Most food stylists I know prefer to use Wildroot Hair Tonic for milk rather than glue, because glue can sometimes have a blue cast, but Wildroot can be harder to find. Lately I've only been able to find it online at places like Amazon.com.

Technique

A bowl of cereal without milk wouldn't be very appetizing, but that doesn't mean you're selling the milk—you're selling the crispy flakes, and using real milk might make them soggy or cause them to sink. That is why in many of the cereal images you see, it's not milk at all—it's glue. And not always glue; sometimes it's Wildroot Hair Tonic, a perennial favorite among food stylists.

Bowls of cereal are also regularly styled by filling the bowl with a base of instant mashed potatoes and then pressing the flakes into that base. This technique will keep everything in place while you wait for your client's approval. Once everyone is happy with the placement of the flakes and any inclusions, like almonds or granola, it's time to add the "milk." Just make sure to cover all the mashed potatoes.

Lighting

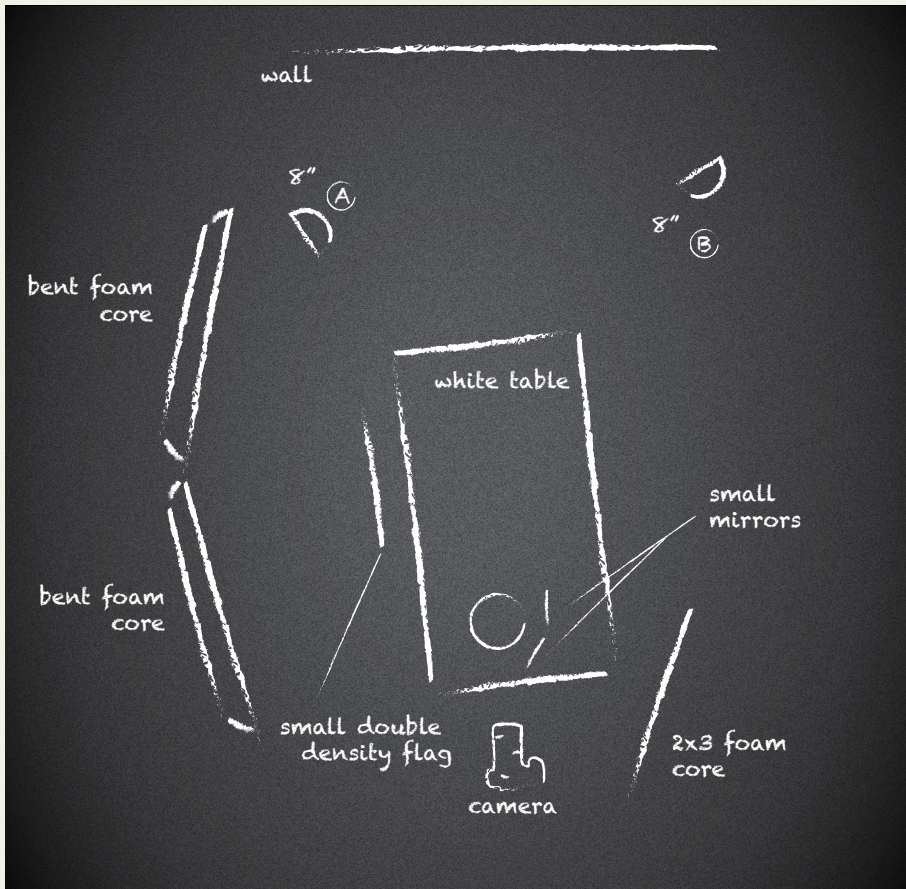
For this image, the lighting was based on what I had learned at the restaurant when I was taking pictures of my lunch. One light aimed at a couple pieces of foamcore to simulate the window light, and one light aimed at the back wall for overall fill. I did add a few small mirrors—one to illuminate the top of the cereal, and one to brighten the shadow side of the bowl. You can see the reflection of the mirror on top of the front blueberry. It helps the definition of the blueberry and keeps the shadows on the flakes from getting too dark.



▲ Here is the first shot, without any milk in front.



▲ Here is the second shot, with milk in front of the flake. This area was copied to the first capture to create the final image.



◀ Here is the lighting arrangement for the cereal image.

Power settings (watts per second):
A=94, B=285

Image Post-Production

You can always add more milk. That's why it's better to capture images in stages, rather than wait to make your first exposure until you have just a little too much.

We go even further, capturing the image just before the milk is added. That way if the stylist mistakenly gets milk on a flake that we wanted to be dry, we don't have to start over; we can just use the Clone tool in Photoshop to bring back the dry flake using the previous image.

For the cereal image, we captured the milk at a variety of levels. The first shot was the overall winner, but we liked that there was milk visible in front of the flake on the second shot. So we copied that area into the final image.



▲ RIGHT I accidentally discovered the beautiful light that was waiting for me at my front door.

ISO 100, 1/4 sec, f/3.5,
50mm lens on Canon DSLR
Food Stylist: Jacqueline Buckner

▲ LEFT Here is an additional capture of mushrooms in a similar composition.

ISO 100, 1/4 sec, f/3.5,
50mm lens on Canon DSLR
Food Stylist: Jacqueline Buckner

My Front Door

Another opportunity to hone my skills in working with natural light came while I was preparing to shoot a promo with a food stylist. I had gathered a few props that I wanted to share with her, but I hadn't started setting up any of my lights, and the table I planned to use (a recent purchase) was still sitting by the front door. So I just dragged the table into the light that was coming through the glass of the door and spread out my props.

I only did this so she could see the props clearly, but when she brought over the onions we were planning to shoot and started to arrange them on the table, I grabbed my camera and took a few quick shots. After looking at the images on the screen, I knew we needed to shoot them right there at my front door. It didn't take long to get a couple of beautiful shots. In fact, we captured a very similar composition using mushrooms—assuming we would decide later which one we liked better. But we love them both!

A few days later, I listened to one of my regular clients describe the type of image they were after for an assignment. I realized that what they wanted was virtually the same thing I had done by my front door. But shooting by the window wasn't an option. For one thing, the setup made it difficult to open the door to the studio, and besides, I needed something that was easily repeatable. So I took my inspiration from that shot and thought about how I could re-create it.



Lighting

Although I was comfortable mimicking natural light in the studio, there was something different about the shots I had done at my front door. The only thing I could come up with was those darn window blinds. They directed the light across the set rather than allowing it to wrap over the top of the subject. So I began lighting by placing two large pieces of foamcore on the left side of the set, but this time I also added a black flag to play the part of the window blind.

When I shot the onions I didn't use any fill cards at all. I didn't care if the shadows went black—in fact, I kind of liked it—but for this assignment we were going to need some fill light. Instead of shining a light against the back wall and filling in all the shadows I had been trying to create, I place a 3' x 3' diffusion screen on the back-right side of the set and put a light with a standard 8-inch reflector behind it. I used the same table and props as I had in our promo shot by the door, at the client's request.

▲ LEFT I moved my workstation close to the setup so I could shoot tethered.

▲ RIGHT The only light modifier besides the window blinds was the black card used to shade the side of the cutting board.



◀ LEFT You can see the black flag that I used to keep light from wrapping over the sandwich.

◀ RIGHT The liquor bottle next to the turkey burger was there to shade the bottom bun and keep it from getting too bright.



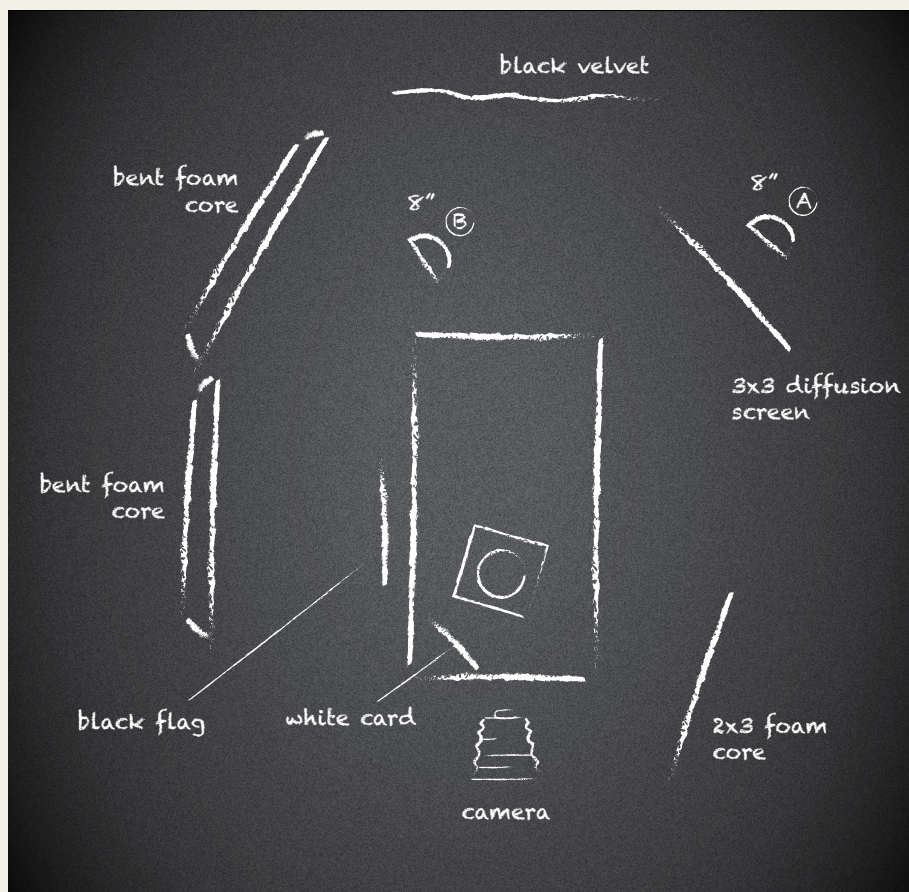
- ▲ I think they make a nice couple. The onions were shot in natural light and the turkey burger was shot using strobe in the studio.

(Left) ISO 100, 1/4 sec, f/3.5,
50mm lens on Canon DSLR
Food Stylist: Jacqueline Buckner

(Right) ISO 100, 1/125 sec, f/16,
90mm lens on Sinar P3
Food Stylist: Barbara Coad

- Here is the lighting arrangement for the turkey burger shot.

Power settings (watts per second):
A=94, B=1140



Wheat Field

We needed to create a field of wheat that would be used as part of a logo for a local bakery. How do you shoot a wheat field in the studio in the middle of winter? Fortunately, we knew where to go to get the materials.

Technique

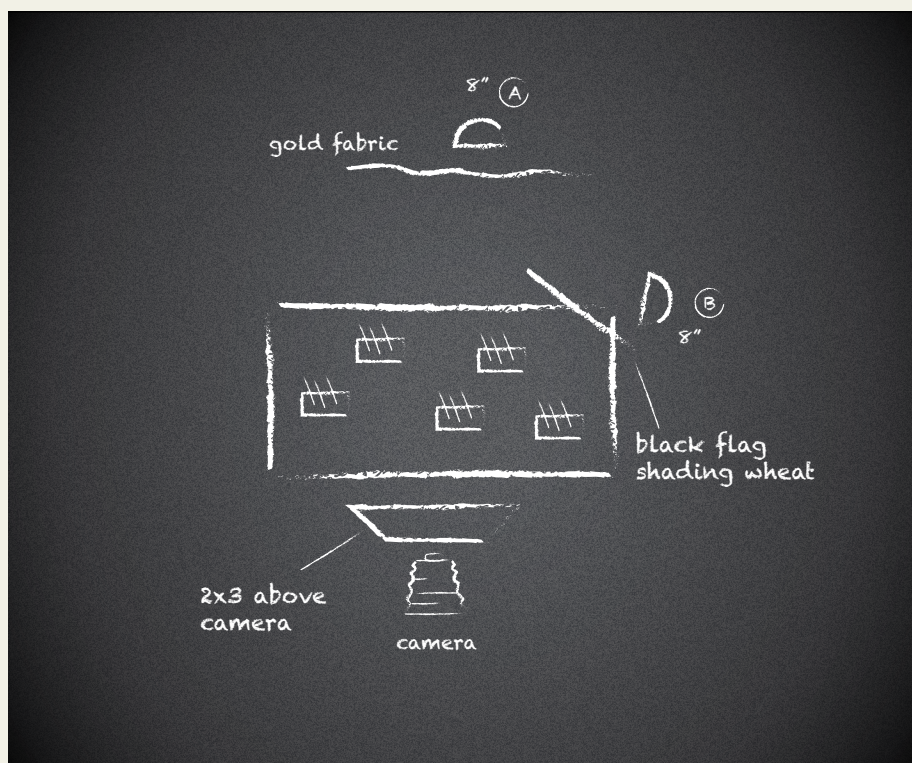
The first thing was to buy as much wheat as we could (fortunately most craft stores have plenty of it year-round). Next, we used several Styrofoam blocks, the same kind florists use in vases to hold flower arrangements, and stuck our wheat stalks into them. By spreading out the Styrofoam blocks, both sideways and front to back, we created an illusion of depth—even if it was only 2 feet deep. Next, I positioned the camera so that I was looking slightly up at the wheat field, and behind the set I placed a golden fabric that kind of sparkled in the light.



▲ TOP Here is the image without Knoll Light Factory.

ISO 50, 1/160 sec, f/8,
90mm lens on Sinar P3

▲ BOTTOM The image with Knoll Light Factory applied. Notice how much more depth the lens flare creates.



◀ Here is the lighting arrangement for the wheat field.

Power settings (watts per second):
A=95, B=95

Lighting

To illuminate the fabric, I placed a single light with an 8" standard reflector about 6 feet away. Behind the fabric and slightly above it was another light with an 8" standard reflector aimed directly at the wheat—and by proxy, the camera lens. For fill light, I placed a 2' x 3' piece of foamcore above the camera.

This backlight created a way for me to shoot into the sun and flare my lens, which in turn might make it feel as if the wheat field were much larger than it was.

Image Post-Production

This image didn't require much in the way of post-production. Even though the image felt backlit and the light was shining into the lens, the result didn't have the dramatic lens flare I was hoping for. So I used Knoll Light Factory to create it.

Knoll Light Factory is an Adobe Photoshop plug-in that allows you to create your own amazing lens flare. You can see the before-and-after images on the previous page for the wheat field project.

It's not an amazing comparison, but it doesn't need to be. We're talking about really good shots becoming amazing ones—and that difference is usually found in the details and in the extra effort.

Pasta and Clams

This was the last shot of the day for an assignment, and probably the most relaxed. I wanted to get a shot for my portfolio that felt more like the end of a meal. The kind of image that makes you wonder, who ate this? What type of person are they? And are they still here?

► **FAR RIGHT** One light source makes this scene feel like daylight.

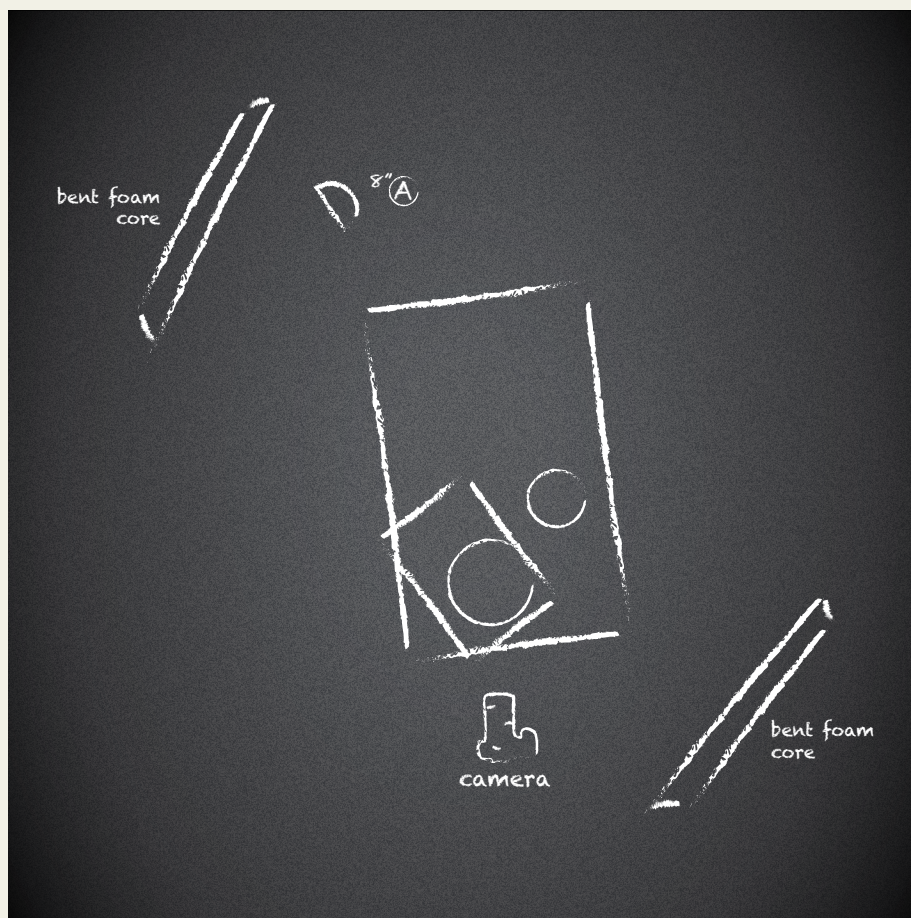
ISO 100, 1/125 sec, f/8,
50mm lens on Canon DSLR
Food Stylist: William Smith
Prop Stylist: Nora Fink

I asked the food stylist to take the lead and create a dish of his choosing. Meanwhile, the prop stylist began assembling the props, and I worked on lighting the set. The simplicity of the food and the props plays an important part in creating studio images that look like they were lit by natural light. Being spontaneous and not fussing too much are also factors in making images that feel relaxed and attainable.



- Here is the lighting arrangement for the pasta and clams shot.

Power setting (watts per second):
A=190



Technique

Storytelling is part of the creative process. Telling yourself a story about the person or place you are photographing can help guide your choice of props or the style of light. The time of day, the season, the location, or even the person you imagine eating the food can affect how you approach your lighting style.

For this shot, I imagined a shack near the sea with no electricity and a few dirty windows. I believe that a nearly finished plate tells you more about the person who ate it than a full plate that has not been touched by a spoon.



Lighting

To recreate the natural light I envisioned coming through the window of the shack, I placed a bent piece of foamcore on the left of my set and positioned my light close to it. This would help the light to appear more directional, like the late afternoon sun coming through the window. On the right side of the set, I used another piece of bent foamcore to address the shadows overall—I only wanted enough fill to barely read the detail they held.

Every picture tells a story, and the simplicity of natural light that shines through this image is exactly what I set out to create.

Get Out There

Some of my favorite lighting techniques have come from simply paying attention to my surroundings every day. I notice the lighting on my plate—the direction, the diffusion—and I ask, what makes it special? I think about what time of day it is and whether the lighting is directional or diffused. If you want your images to look like they were shot using natural light, then you need to study what you see, and consider how you can then re-create it in the studio. Some of the best ideas are out there waiting for you.

▲ LEFT A very simple set for the pasta and clams shot.

▲ RIGHT You can see how far away the lights are from the set. I didn't use a tripod for this image. I just walked up into the empty space and took my shot.

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