



FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BASICS



A STUDENT CURRICULUM
GUIDE TO CAPTURE QUALITY
FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

MENU ENHANCEMENT NUTRITION SOFTWARE

TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE | COMMISSIONER SID MILLER

FOOD AND NUTRITION DIVISION

The Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) is excited you have implemented the MENU Module software and cannot wait for you to see the far-reaching positive impact it will have for you and your school(s).

This curriculum will guide readers on how to capture professional-looking food photography and can be used by many, including child nutrition directors, art/photography teachers, yearbook or Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) classes or any student interested in food photography. These appetizing pictures can be incorporated into School Café mobile app menus and can quickly encourage student engagement.



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PHOTOGRAPHY AND PROPS KIT

A fully equipped photography and props kit can save time and add creativity during a photo shoot. It should include basic household and art supply items. The lists below offer a few ideas that will help you plan, make creative choices, stay organized and stay clean during the shoot. If possible, use a large plastic container to store all of your items in one place. You can add to the kit all year round and before you know it, you will have several containers of props and useful photo equipment.

PROPS AND SUPPLIES



- Paper plates and bowls (solid colors work best), paper towels, trash bags and clean-up wipes
- Plastic utensils
- Cotton swabs, tweezers, glycerin or oil, light corn syrup and spray bottles
- Plastic trays
- Clear tape, masking tape, duct tape, glue and putty
- Blocks of various sizes, clothes pins, paper clips, scissors, rulers
- Colored pens, crayons, pens, pencils, paints and paintbrushes
- Notepads, crescent art boards of all colors
- Fabrics, napkins and placemats of all colors
- Additional surfaces like wood or metal to use as backgrounds
- Seasonal props – spring, summer, fall and winter
- Decorations
- Back to school items

MAKE CREATIVE CHOICES,
STAY ORGANIZED DURING
THE SHOOT AND STAY CLEAN



PHOTOGRAPHY SUPPLIES



- Camera, smartphone or similar capture device
- Tripod for camera
- Lighting equipment – A basic set up can include three lights, either strobe or continuous light source (remember you can use natural light from a window, as well).
- Table or surface to shoot on
- Miscellaneous reflectors to bounce light onto food – (reflectors can be silver, white or black cards that are available at craft stores).
- Diffusion material – This is material either made from fabric like ripstop, nylon, a white sheet or professional grade diffusion material designed for photography that can be purchased at a local camera store. Use diffusion material if your lights or window light are too bright for the subject.
- Computer or device to edit images after the shoot.
- Image software to edit, such as Photoshop or paint.net (basic editing tools on the smartphone or computer will work as well).





FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY AND STYLING TIPS

Food photography is a highly specialized field employing photographers with a unique knowledge of not only photography, but also culinary techniques involving food prep and cooking. In addition, food photographers generally are skilled at design and marketing. Here are a few basic tips to use as a guide while taking food photographs.



KEEP IT SIMPLE. Use a simple background and props to display a food item. Too much going on in the photo will distract from the message.

CREATE A PROP KIT. Utilize your new prop kit consisting of a couple of simple white or black plates and bowls, some simple props to create themes, some backgrounds using colored crescent art boards or paper, napkins, placemats, etc. Once the photo prop kit is created, it will be handy whenever needed to set up photos. This will help make the photography process on set more efficient. Keep it simple and use props sparingly to add interest. It is best to show a single item (or single tray with a couple of items) in a photograph. This gives focus to the item or items you are showcasing.

REPRESENT IT ACCURATELY. For the purposes of using the photographs for representation in an app, it is best to photograph the food item separately or as close to the way it will be presented on the food line as possible. Example: if salad is always served with a package of crackers, include the crackers in the picture of the salad.



ADD COLOR FOR ADDED INTEREST. If the color of the food is bland or monochromatic, add a colorful background or napkin to help make the food look more appealing. Garnishes are another good way to add appeal and color to a food item.



SELECT YOUR CAMERA. There are many ways to photograph food and many devices available for image capture. Use a camera or image capture device that you have experience using, if possible. Before you begin, the most important thing is for you to feel comfortable with the camera you are using. This will allow you to focus on the creative aspects of your photography.



USE A TRIPOD. Having a tripod that fully supports the camera is critical. Most food images are “built” from scratch and over a period of time. Food photographers use stand-in food to set the lighting, camera angles and props, so keeping the camera in a fixed position on a tripod during this process is critical to getting the shot that you want.



DECIDE ON A BASIC LIGHTING SET UP. In terms of lighting equipment, having three to four dedicated studio lights that can be focused using grids and having a softbox (type of photographic soft light device) to diffuse the light would be the standard set up. A basic set up would be to place the main light or softbox to the right or the left of the subject. Next, use a second light on the opposite side of the softbox to use as a fill or accent light. The third light can be used from behind and aimed at the subject to give the subject a rim light or accent light. Use your silver or white reflector cards to bounce any additional light back toward the subject to fill areas that are in shadow.



USE OF AVAILABLE NATURAL LIGHT. Natural light coming from a window can supplement any lighting set up. When taking advantage of natural light, arrange the set so that the window is on either the right or the left of the subject, giving the effect of a window or softbox light. If the sunlight coming in from the window is too harsh and bright, place a sheet of diffusion material over the window to soften the light. Next, use your reflector cards to bounce light from the window back onto the set. This reflected light is called the fill light and will help to give more light onto your subject.





CONSIDER ADDITIONAL LIGHTING TIPS. Typically, diffused window light or daylight is best. If indoor lighting with fluorescent bulbs is used, make sure to expose the image correctly. If using a digital camera, use the color balance setting for fluorescent lighting. This will keep the image neutral in color and tone which is very important for food. As a general rule, brighter images are more appetizing than underexposed or darker images. Also, study the subject and determine the quality of light that would be best for each type of food. For instance, a shiny object may need a diffused light source to make it less reflective or a subject with a dull surface may need a light source that is more specular or mirror-like to bring out the subtleties of texture.

CHOOSE AN ADVANTAGEOUS ANGLE. When photographing food, it's a good idea to spend time with the food to find the best angle. For example, if the goal is to photograph a stack of pancakes, then a lower ($\frac{3}{4}$ to eye level) camera angle will help to emphasize the stacking effect of the pancakes. If the pancakes are photographed from above, all you will see is the top pancake, thus defeating the purpose of showing a stack of pancakes.

TELL A STORY. When featuring a specific food item in a recipe, include the fresh ingredient to emphasize the "story" or theme. For example, if the recipe is a broccoli casserole and the main ingredient is broccoli, try using some fresh broccoli florets or stalks as decoration next to the finished recipe. This use of an ingredient statement reinforces the story. Or if the story is about autumn recipes, enhance the photo with a few fall decorations to add interest and to support the theme. Keeping the props to a minimum will prevent having the props overpowering the subject.



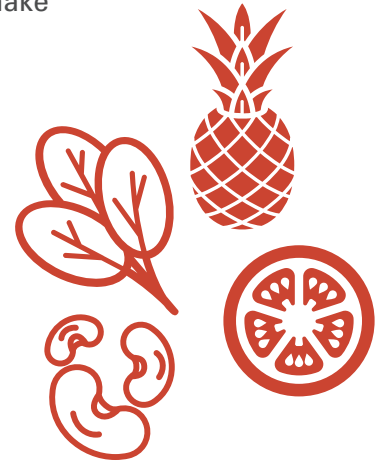
TELL A STORY. WHEN FEATURING A SPECIFIC FOOD ITEM IN A RECIPE, INCLUDE THE FRESH INGREDIENT TO EMPHASIZE THE "STORY" OR THEME.



USE FOOD STYLING TECHNIQUES WHEN NEEDED. In your photography kit, you will have items like glycerin, oil, spray bottles and paint brushes. You will use these items whenever you need to add a little moisture onto your subject. For example, if you are photographing a salad and you want the lettuce to look moist, spray or lightly mist the glycerin solution (equal parts of water and glycerin) directly onto the lettuce. For more detailed precision, use the paintbrush to paint the concentrated glycerin directly onto the exact spot on the lettuce for the desired dew drop effect. Glycerin and light corn syrup are used for this purpose because they both generally don't move when you place them on the food.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX. Thinking creatively and coming up with interesting angles or using unique props or surfaces will make it your own creation. Don't hold back — some of the best ideas come from experimenting with the focal point, camera angle and composition.

REMEMBER THAT PEOPLE "EAT WITH THEIR EYES," so if it looks good to you, then it will likely look good to others. The more interesting the photo, the more people will respond favorably to it.



**BE CREATIVE
AND HAVE FUN!**



PREPARATION

One of the keys to a successful food photography session is preparation. This includes understanding the food you are about to photograph and knowing when it will look best. Being ready to take the photograph at the right time requires time management and a strategic approach.

Because food involves many processes for preparation, the more you know about your food subject, the better. Using that knowledge will help you plan ahead for the time you need to allow for food preparation and staging and make the photo shoot go more smoothly.

PRE-PRODUCTION GUIDE

WHAT: Decide ahead of time WHAT you are planning to photograph. Before the day of the shoot, make a list of the items you wish to photograph and decide how these items need to be prepared. If you have a cooked item, familiarize yourself with the cooking process and the time needed to fully prepare that item. If, in the same photo session, you decide to photograph a fresh salad and a frozen dessert, estimate the time needed to prepare the cooked item, the salad and the dessert and then estimate the time it will take before the item is no longer fresh-looking or has melted. Knowing this ahead of time will let you know how long you have with the item on set before the food no longer looks appetizing. Timing is critical in food photography.

HOW: Deciding ahead of time HOW you want to photograph the food item will help make the shoot more efficient. It is important to decide what you are shooting and plan how you will present that item. Do you want to show it on a plate or in a bowl? Does the item need to be presented cold or hot? Additionally you can decide to use props to support a story idea or theme around the food item.

WHY: Next, decide WHY you are choosing this food item to photograph. For instance, if the food item is part of a campaign showing healthy foods, you can use themed props that reinforce the campaign.

Always remember you are telling a story. The difference between a good image and a bad image is presentation and content. By telling a story, you are creating a connection with people. This is a key concept found in food marketing strategies.

ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU ARE TELLING A STORY. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A GOOD IMAGE AND A BAD IMAGE IS PRESENTATION AND CONTENT.

WHO: Another important element of photographing food is having a reliable team. With all the moving parts involved with this type of shoot, having a photography team will help make the shoot successful. Gather your team and divide them up based on their talents and interests. Each participant should be fully committed to their work before the day of the shoot. Give each participant specific tasks and job titles such as prop stylist, food stylist or photographer. The following are specific tasks that can be assigned to team members:



- Research the items to be photographed.
- Gather props and other items for the set.
- Prepare the food for the photo shoot.
- Style the food on set.
- Set up camera equipment, lighting and computers.
- Take the photographs.
- Perform post production work on the images created.
- Place the images in a layout or post to the Web.

Having this team in place ensures that everything is planned out prior to the shoot. Each role on the team is important and each role supports the goals of the overall project.

WHERE: Lighting should be a primary consideration when deciding where to shoot the food you have chosen. If the availability of lighting equipment is limited, a space that is well-lit with diffused window light can work well. Typically the space does not have to be large, but it should be near a kitchen. Having access to a sink for clean-up is very important.

WHEN: Lastly, decide when to shoot and coordinate schedules with everyone involved with the shoot. Any kitchen staff needs to know ahead of time so they are prepared to help. Involving the kitchen staff will also give you a resource for researching food prep and cooking factors for your food.

**HAVE FUN AND ENJOY
THE PROCESS!**



DAY OF THE PHOTO SHOOT/ON-SET WORKFLOW

DETERMINE SHOT ORDER

On the day of the shoot, gather the team, lay out all your props and story concepts, establish the set and lighting and determine the shot order.

During the shoot, teamwork and workflow will be critical for a successful day. You will want to base your shot order on the types of food you plan to photograph. For example, if you choose to photograph a cold salad, a cooked protein and a cold melting dessert you will need to refer back to your prep times, cook times and determine your best window of opportunity to photograph each prepared item. It is best to have these decisions finalized before the actual shoot so you can make the best use of your time while on set.



Next, while the first food item is being prepared in the kitchen by the food styling team, the photo team can be setting up the lighting and camera angle for the first shot. While this is going on, the props team can be setting up the set for the first item. One important note: It is helpful for the photography team and the props team to know what the first item looks like and how the first item is being presented to the camera, so the food styling team needs to provide the photographer with a stand-in for the final food item at this time. This stand-in will help the photographer determine what type of angle and gauge the lighting to use for a particular food item.



DURING THE SHOOT, TEAMWORK AND WORKFLOW WILL BE CRITICAL FOR A SUCCESSFUL DAY.



FOLLOW A SMART WORKFLOW AND HAVE FUN WITH IT!

The props team too, will be able to revise any chosen props to better match the food item. For example, if the food is highly reflective, like gelatin dessert, the photographer will want to use a light source that is more diffused so that the gelatin dessert does not look too shiny. Or if the food is a fried chicken tender, then the photographer may want to use a more reflective light because the surface of the food is more dull and will need a more focused or intense light to show off the texture of the breading on the chicken.

Once adjustments have been made using the stand-in, then the food styling team can bring in the “hero” food to be photographed. This “hero” food is also called the “beauty,” meaning the final prepared (beautiful, best version) food for camera. It is important to note that the “hero” should accurately reflect the real food served in schools.

After the first item is photographed, hand over the image file to the post production team for retouching, archiving and placement in a layout or uploading. Save everything! Next, proceed with the other items to be photographed in the same sequence. Timing and pacing is crucial to complete all shots in the planned photo session.



UPLOAD YOUR IMAGES AND ENJOY!

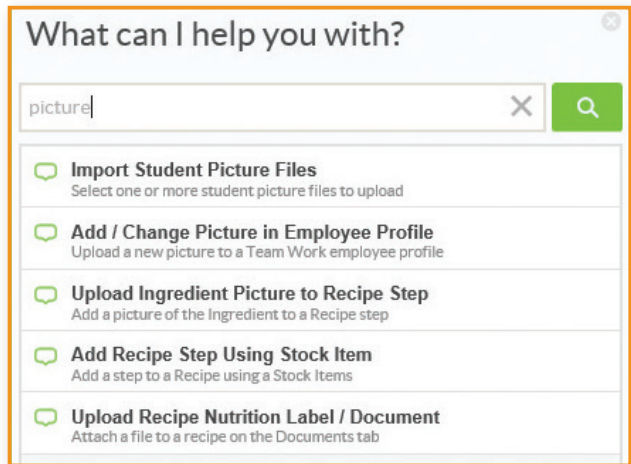
FOOD STYLING TIPS. In your photography kit, you will have items like tweezers, glycerin, oil, light corn syrup, spray bottles, cotton swabs and paint brushes. You will use these items whenever you need to work closely with the food. For example, if you are photographing a fresh salad and you want the lettuce to look moist, spray the glycerin solution (equal parts of water and glycerin mixed in a spray bottle) directly onto the lettuce. For more precision, use the paintbrush to paint the concentrated glycerin directly onto the exact spot on the lettuce to emulate a drop of water — glycerin and light corn syrup are used for this purpose because they both stay put wherever you place them. Use this technique sparingly. The tweezers are generally used to precisely move the food in small increments. The food stylist and the photographer will work closely together on set when precision placement of water drops and similar adjustments are needed.

POST PRODUCTION TIPS. At this stage of the process, you will already have the raw files (or basic images handed over from the photo team) and you will want to retouch any obvious unwanted blemishes on the food or set. It is best to make adjustments to the food in camera before post production to keep the retouching to a minimum. Also, try to keep the color balance of the original captured food so that the image accurately reflects the real food. Too much manipulation in color, contrast, sharpness, etc. can make the image look strange. Save all your work and use a file format that works best for you. Saving to a jpeg file can work for most applications.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR UPLOADING PHOTOS TO MENU



For instructions to upload your photos into MENU's School Café, search "picture" within the Amigo help feature.



Amigo will then walk you through step-by-step instructions for loading pictures into School Café.

schoolcafé Make Your Menu Look Great

Want to make sure your SchoolCafé menus look neat and clean? Use this guide to help you make changes in Menu Planning to update published menu labels and information.

You can update Menu Item

- Name
- Picture
- Category Name

Your Nutritionist updates

- Calories
- Carbs (Nutrients)
- Allergens
- Contributions

Menu Item Name & Picture
Ingredients > Menu Item > Menu Item tab

To change Menu Item name

1. Enter new text in the **Marketing Name** field
2. Click **Save**

To change Menu Item picture

1. Click **Upload Picture**
2. Select new image file
3. Click **Upload**

Menu Item Category Name
Configuration > Menu Item Categories

To change Menu Item Category name

1. Click **Edit** (✎) in the Menu Item Category name
2. Enter new **Description** text
3. Click **Update** (✓)

USE YOUR NEW PHOTOGRAPHY SKILLS AND BEAUTIFUL SCHOOL MEAL PHOTOS TO ENGAGE WITH STUDENTS AND PARENTS.

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