

Hélène Dujardin

Plate to Pixel

Digital Food Photography & Styling





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About the Author

Hélène Dujardin moved from France to the US in the late 90s with a Masters in History, a suitcase and an old film camera. Soon after, she decided to follow her first passion, food, and so began honing her skills in various dining establishments. She became the pastry chef at a French restaurant and she stayed there for five years. Yet photography was never very far from her heart. Hélène started taking pictures of food for the restaurant staff to help them recreate her desserts when she was not on duty. On her days off, she often walked around town, photographing the beauty of common things.

Upon leaving her pastry position in 2006, Hélène launched the award-winning blog *Tartelette*, where she dedicates herself to the art of food, photography, and styling. It didn't take long for photography to become more than a hobby. Hélène progressed quickly from enthusiast food photographer to professionally working with local and national magazines. She also began photographing and styling numerous cookbooks.

Hélène's food photography and styling work has been praised online and in print by publications such as *Elle* magazine, *Forbes* magazine, *The Times Online*, *Saveur* magazine, CNN, *Martha Stewart* and more.

Her photographs reveal her passion for natural light, seasonal and fresh ingredients, a love of travel and genuine interest in people. Hélène currently lives in Charleston, South Carolina, with her husband and their two rescue dogs.



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To my brother Thierry (1962-2000)

He was, in my eyes, one of the most inspiring photographers out there. He saw with his heart. His spirit never left my side the whole time I was writing this book.





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Introduction

Follow your heart, but be quiet for a while first. Ask questions, then feel the answer. Learn to trust your heart.

—Anonymous

I know it sounds unusual, but I fell in love with food photography the way I fell for my husband, the one true love of my life. It was completely unexpected, gorgeous, unsettling. It moved me and scared me. It made me curious and brave. It left me hungry to learn more.

I was a senior in high school on a fabulous two-week excursion through Greece. On the first morning, we did the obligatory visit of the market in Athens. And within minutes, my head was spinning from the buzz happening all around me. Vendors screaming, tourists pushing, bicycles and motorcycles zooming through crowds of pedestrians ... and display after display of artifacts—and food! Oh, the food.



Ingredients used in a recipe, such as the cocoa nibs and cocoa powder in these cookies, make the perfect natural props for a composition.

f/3.5, ISO 400, 24-70mm L

Everywhere I turned, there was color; there was smell; there was taste. Instead of letting myself go with the flow and join the excited agitation of my companions, I got overwhelmed. I took a step back ... and a long, deep breath ... and loaded my camera with black and white film. I know! Love at first sight is utterly crazy, isn't it?

I had never encountered food and color like this. It had never been presented to me this way. I went home and spent hours in the dark room looking at those black and white images. I had so much to learn, but I was completely hooked! I wanted to do it again. This time in color.

For many years, I played around with photographing food but not very seriously. It was not the field I was studying at school, and there was little free time to practice. It took another ten years or so before food photography came knocking on my door, so to speak.

That knock came when I was working as the Pastry Chef of a French restaurant. I was finding it increasingly difficult to get the

night staff to plate the items I had carefully made ... according to my instructions. I would write lengthy descriptions that no one would read. I even tried creating drawings to illustrate the look I envisioned. Admittedly, my drawings were pretty bad; any three-year-old would have laughed at them. But nothing was working.

Then, one day, a light bulb went off in my head: *A picture is worth a thousand words!* I brought my Polaroid to work and started taking shots of each plated item to show the staff what I wanted from them.

After a few years like this, I was convinced that Pastry Chef was my calling, and I decided to make myself a little portfolio to show potential employers what I could do with some dough. Within a few hours of taking pictures of my desserts, I was already aware of a realization that was making me grin from ear to ear.

It was not the ten pounds of chocolate I had just tempered or the perfectly shaped sugar cages coming out of my kitchen. Rather, it was the way I was translating these pastries with images. I was manipulating the light around me to put that perfect shine on my chocolate. I was managing to tie together all that *mise-en-place* by adding a little sprinkle of powdered sugar to the top of my almond croissant. Ah-ha! Epiphany!

I can't say that the rest is history; but from that point on, everything I did led me a step or two closer to what I am doing now—whether I was aware of it at the time or not. That day truly felt like Christmas morning. Years later, my photography work still gives me that same feeling.

And I remember distinctly the day I told my husband I was going to start a food blog—what I referred at the time as an *online*



Backgrounds come in all shapes, sizes and colors. Here, a recycled green vintage ceiling tile enhances the yellows and blues of the other elements in the shot.

f/4.5, ISO 500, 100mm, Macro L



Make use of light and shadows as well as complementary colors, such as blues and oranges, as natural composition tools.

f/3.5, ISO 640, 100mm, Macro L

recipe journal. I created the front page, put a recipe up and posted a little story with it. I turned to him and said, “I need a camera to take a picture ... to show people the final dish.” The next day he handed me an entry-level camera and told me to have at it.

I was a bit disappointed. Okay... I was very disappointed. I wanted the nice camera with the lenses and the cool gear. But I knew he was doing me right, and his choice was largely due to the fact that I picked up and dropped a new hobby every year or so. Little did either of us know at the time that food photography would become my career. What he *did* know was that without photography fundamentals, I’d get nowhere ... no matter what kind of camera I had.

Now that I work as full-time food and lifestyle photographer, I still marvel at what I am able to achieve and learn. I work every day. Even when I don’t have an assignment, I practice ... every day.

You may have an ultimate desire to make a career of food photography; or perhaps you just want to take a good food shot for your blog or article, master a challenging new subject for your photography portfolio, or check out the “food photography thing.” It doesn’t matter. Learning, practicing—or what I really want to dub *playing!*—to get great images that make your mouth water will be much more rewarding when you take control of all the photographic elements that get you there.

Let’s use an analogy. Unless a prodigy, you can’t expect to pick up a violin and play a melodic rendition of Beethoven Sonata No.9 without first learning music. And even when you learn how to read music and play a violin, you may never actually play Beethoven; but at least you will know the fundamentals that enable you to play jazz, rock, funk, whatever. You will be in charge of your artistic decisions.

Photography is similar. Knowing some basic photographic principles allows you to access a world of light and artistic interpretation ... to play with and enjoy, modify and create—in a way that matters to you and your audience.

The information in this book is meant to help you create a process for photographing food that begins long before your assignment and extends beyond the click of your shutter button. There are guidelines for creating beautiful photographs, but your particular process will be driven by your individual personality, equipment, style and budget ... and it will help you convey the messages and evoke the feelings you envision for your pictures.

The more you know and learn about your camera, light, composition and styling, the more capable you’ll be to get the most out of your camera gear and photography work. Your recipes are important to you and your family. Let your photography capture that spirit. Learn, play, enjoy the process!





1 ❖ Photography Basics

*Photography is the method of recording the image of an object through the action of light, or related radiation, on a light-sensitive material. The word is derived from the Greek word *photos* (which means light) and *graphein* (which means, to draw).*

—Encyclopedia Britannica

To draw with light ...

Without light, we can't see. Nor can we create a scene or make a picture. Light is everything to photography.

Yet what I love most about photography is that an individual image is the result of so many different considerations, decisions and factors. Aside from the lighting, there are decisions on what kind of camera to use, camera settings and modes, composition techniques and even photo-editing options. Every one of these elements affect the story you tell with your images.

So learn and practice the basic techniques of photography; experiment and explore different combinations of elements; erase if you must; and do it again. You'll find that your technique becomes second nature and the images you create get better and better. And the most wonderful part of all is that there're always more aspects to discover and explore. The possibilities are truly endless.



Use light and shadows to capture the mood of tea time during a rainy afternoon.

f/3.5, ISO 400, 100mm, Macro L

Light is Everything

At a workshop this past summer, a budding food photographer candidly asked me why every photographer she'd met talks about light so much. My mind started jumping in all different directions. I was so excited to show her why. But I didn't want to freak her out, so I contained my excitement and calmly gave her the very definition of photography that's printed at the start of this chapter. And then we talked about how viewers typically respond to a photograph of food.

As expected, the first thing people usually say about a food photograph is something about the dish. And the second thing they tend to notice—consciously or not—is how the light hits a certain part of the dish ... or doesn't. Light and shadows, too much or too little, will make a viewer like or dislike a photograph as much as the food it presents.

Assessing light and figuring out how to use it in food photography is very much like courtship and the pursuit of capturing someone's heart. To find the right light, you must observe,

explore and discover. The beauty of digital photography is that you can erase and start over. It's never a waste of time, but rather a learning experience—much like dating ... except, of course, the erasing part.

Whether your ambient light comes naturally or from artificial sources, there are many ways you can capture and apply it. Several key points come into play, including where to find

quality light, how to direct it for your purpose, and how to incorporate shadows and *high key* (very bright) notes. (See the Glossary for the definition of specific terms used throughout this book.)

The elements of lighting and how your camera settings and modes work with your lighting circumstances are covered in Chapter 3 (Natural Light Photography) and Chapter 4 (Artificial Light Photography). And please, refer to Chapter 2 (Camera Settings and Modes) as we explore other photography elements. Everything works together to create your photographs.

Camera Schmamera: Does it matter?

After you read the next chapter on Camera Settings and Modes, you may think that this book applies only to people with a dSLR camera, that it's not for those with a Point and Shoot (P&S). But that's not the case.

Whether you have a dSLR or a P&S, the basic principles of good photography remain constant. To create beautiful images, you need to understand light, shadows, composition, aperture, ISO, white balance and other fundamentals. And even when you become well-versed in these areas, the choice of camera seldom matters to how well a photographer executes basic techniques. I see gorgeous photography created with P&S cameras, and I see terrible photography from dSLRs. It's not the camera that makes the photograph. You do.



Take full opportunity of bright summer light to show a clean crisp atmosphere in a scene.

f/3.2, ISO 640, 100mm, Macro L



All of these cameras work; we just need to work on making time to use them all!

f/1.8, ISO 400, 50mm

So why invest in a dSLR, you may be wondering. Well, frankly, it's a control thing. A dSLR simply offers more creative control. And, I have to add, the reproduction quality of a JPEG taken with a dSLR will usually be better than one taken by even a high-end P&S, because of the higher data-recording capability offered by the better sensor available in dSLRs. But more on this later ...

For me, it was first about the control. I remember the day I picked up my little pocket camera, handed it to my husband and said, "I need to upgrade." What I needed was a proper lens and better sensor. At that point, I had learned and used every

function my camera offered, and I was ready for more control. Again, this was after I knew that camera—what each bell and whistle was and what it did.

So, if you're just getting started, don't let yourself be dazzled by special features, cool accessories and size. Photography is pricey. Obviously, most photographers no longer invest in film and developing materials/services, but there are P&S cameras that cost as much as entry-level dSLRs nowadays. And then there are the extras: the lenses you'll want, the memory cards, flash units and so much more.

So I strongly recommend that you do your research before choosing a camera. I definitely know that the itch that comes with wanting camera equipment can be stronger than reason; but especially with electronics, it's important to know your options ... and be clear on what you actually need.

Think first about your budget and about how much you can realistically afford to spend on a camera, potential upgrades and photography equipment. Think about what you currently own and the repercussions of switching to another brand. This is important, because each brand speaks a different language. When giving camera recommendations, I always qualify my advice saying that I "speak Canon—not Pentax or Nikon." These brands are different and they each feel a bit different.

So read as much as you can about your options, and decide which is right for your budget and your situation before purchasing a P&S or dSLR of any brand.

A final bit of advice here: Despite the convenience of online shopping, nothing compares to hands-on experience with a camera. Go to a store and hold a few different makes and models to find out how they feel.

If you go the dSLR route, I suggest that you take the time to rent a few different bodies with one basic lens ... and see how you like each option. A camera is not just a pretty toy or a seasonal purchase. It's an investment—usually a substantial investment. And I'm not just talking money. I am in love with my Canon cameras. They offer an extension of the way I see things—from my heart through the lens. I'm so glad I explored the options and found the camera that was really right for me ... before I committed!

Know the Basics

No matter what brand or model of camera you choose, certain key settings and modes will be available.

It's critical for a photographer to know how to use these universal tools of the trade. And it's not easy. These elements can be isolated to generate specific results, but they need to work together in a controlled and balanced way to create the magic you want to see.



This image captures the simplicity of a morning scene at the breakfast table.

f/2.8, ISO 125, 24-70mm L

A typical day at work ...

f/1.4, ISO 400, 50mm

