



Dream of Travel Writing

Plating, Staging, and Food Photography: Bringing Still Lives to Life

Today we are still talking about photography. I know we did a couple sessions on photography and then I lost my voice and was sick and we took a break, but we're still on photography.

What I want to talk about this week, it's kind of interesting that the date shifted. I recently spoke at the International Food Bloggers Conference. There was a session on food styling and I was so excited because I could go to this session and then teach you guys everything from the session. But it ended up being an entire hour, more than an hour, just about how to food-style avocados.

If you are interested in learning how to food-style avocados, I can show you some really neat pictures that I took when I was there, but I think you guys want to know more than that. So I'm going to tell you some other things.

For those of you on the call today, we're going to be talking about food photography, but in the vein of not just food. Within the concept of still life photography. What I mean by that, and the reason that I have slanted the food photography webinar to talk about that concept is that as travel writers—and I mentioned this in the newsletter and the blog post preceding today's call—as travel writers we're often in the situation where we need to take a very on-the-fly, un-composed pictures. Pictures where we are grabbing something because it's there in an ephemeral way, it's only there for a moment. We're at a festival, somebody is speaking, we're watching somebody make fresh pasta, and we need to grab it right then.

However, there are also situations, and for us as travel writers these typically come up with food but there are also situations where this comes up, where we get to have more time. Where we get the opportunity to really compose our shots so that they're the best that they can possibly be.

While we're going to be talking about food photography because that's a lot of where that comes up for us as travel writers, the things that we're talking about you can also use if you're taking an atmospheric picture of a bike posed against the wall of a stone building in Provence that has a window box above with just the perfect set of colorful flowers that balance the bike along with the sky in the background and the grass.

What we're going to talk about is something that—a few things will be just for food—but also the concept of photography still lives more generally.



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The sub-headings for today's call: First I want to talk about what you might be doing or you may have noticed and not been able to put your finger on in other people's photos that is creating issues with the still life photography that is going on right now.

I've pulled for this webinar some photos from around and I also specifically shot a series of photos the other day at a café in Washington D.C. when we were there for a wedding just to show you some of the little tweaks that you can do in action to improve your photos.

Then we're going to talk about if you were in art school, if you had an art background, you may have heard some of these things already, but they don't come up in photography quite so often. We're going to talk about some art approaches that you should bring in to your photography to make it really pop.

Then we're going to talk a little bit about food specifically. We're going to do a little bit about food-styling secrets. If you really want to know the perfect way to style an avocado, I will tell you how to do that as well.

On the photography note, I know that we have often folks in the webinars who have a primarily photography background rather than writing and are looking to mold the writing into their photography. I've mentioned quite a few times that having that photo capacity under your belt is a really great way to sell more articles, even if you are just a writer.

There's often situations where in order to get that clip, in order to get that article published, you need to be able to provide the photos as well because the magazine won't be able to send somebody there. I myself have had my photos published in national magazines, often for this reason. Because I'm looking to get that article published and they need the photos and they say, "OK, great, you can get the photos, that means I can assign you the article."

That's one of the reasons I especially want to talk about these types of photos we're going to be doing today. Because these little tweaks, these little issues, especially for composing photos for still lives, are the type of thing where if it doesn't pop, the editor can see it. When you pitch an editor and they ask, "Can you also do the photos," and they ask to see your photo portfolio, there's just these little tiny things.

It's similar to how I've mentioned in the past that with your pitches, people being editors can often look at your pitch and decide, "this person couldn't handle this article" or "this person



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doesn't have the writing chops" or "this person isn't on" just from one little thing in your pitch that you might not have thought was so important, but it broadcast something to those editors that are skeptical and that have been burned in the past. It reminds them of something else.

What I want to start with right now is I want to go through some photos that don't quite pop and talk about why.

It's just killing me that I can't make these full screen right now. In this first photo slide, I hope you guys can make it a little fuller screen, it looks really small when I look at it here in the webinar window. But in the first photo slide, what I really want to highlight here, and hopefully you can see my screen, is that this pomegranate looks great. This pomegranate is flat. It pops at you.

One of the reasons that, ironically, we need to make photos look flat in order to make them 3-dimensionally pop to our eyes, is that our eyes are round. The world is round. But then there's these things inside our brain that are almost like algorithms that cause it all to become a flat image in a certain way so that you aren't seeing the world like you would see a 360-degree video.

If you've seen those at museums, they are quite popular these days. Often when I stand inside those 360-degree videos I feel quite disoriented. I'm not sure if any of you guys have had that experience. They had one of these at the Civil War Museum at one of the travel conferences recently. It's quite disorienting.

Part of that is because they've taken an actual 3-dimensional real image and then they've flattened it. Then they've tried to make it 3-dimensional again, not with a 3-D video, but by simply putting the video screens around you in a circle. As we've all experienced when we go to the movies and we see a 3-D movie, that also feels quite disorienting.

The algorithm in our brain that connects to our eyes doesn't like when things are trying too hard or where they're slightly off in giving 3-dimensionality. The algorithm in our eyes likes for things to have that flatness that it's conveying to our brain, which is what makes the world in front of us not look like those weird 3-D movies or those 360-degree movies.



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So what happens when you take a photo to achieve “realist” looking photos is that you need to force your camera to create a flattened image of the round reality. This is a lot of theory and psychological, psychology theory that I’m telling you here, but the reason I’m telling you is that if there’s a tiny thing in your photo that breaks that flatness—and I’m not talking about perspective or depth of field—I’m talking about the roundness of this bowl of—I imagine caper berries, here—there’s something off about it.

Again I hope my little mouse is showing up on your screen. But there’s something off about this edge. It’s the edge of the caper berry bowl closest to the pomegranates. Then there’s even something off about the top pomegranate here.

Forgetting about the light—we’ve got some weird light here that’s making the edge of this fuzzy—forget about all of that. This bowl on the right hand side here, in the middle of the screen, is screwing up our eyes’ brain algorithm function. It’s making this picture not look flat. It almost kind of makes you feel like the table it’s on is round and the bowl is teetering off somewhere. There’s something slightly off about it.

When we are creating these composed still photos, our job is to battle against this brain-twerking element here.

I told you that I had created this series—and this is my favorite way to fix this brain-twerking thing—is to use my camera, I have a DSLR but I also have a fake DSLR and sometime of course you use your camera phone and these ones were taken on a camera phone, but when I use my bigger cameras, I actually only shoot now—I never use the viewfinder even though I used to when I photographed more professionally for work and everything in an in-house setting.

Now I typically use the actual screen because I want to be checking constantly this composition. I find that with the small view through the viewfinder you get a little disoriented yourself with that small view and it’s harder to really check these lines. When you’re taking photos on your phone it’s great because you can automatically see it on the screen, but I encourage you if this is something going on with your photos, to be taking photos on the screen with your camera, your DSLR or your point-and-shoot, so that you have a better sense.

In this photo here that I took—this is I think the very first one in the series and I actually wasn’t originally intending to do the photos with the whole table and background and



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everything. I was going to just get the food. But then I realized that it was actually quite pretty.

But the problem here is that there's a lot going on. On one hand you can see my suitcase there. But the problem with this photo specifically is that the lines are creating that wah between your eyes and your brain.

You can see up here this kind of lamp-chandelier business. The lower left-hand angle is not right. It's a bit lower than the lower right-hand angle, it seems like it's coming out at you but weirdly, not in a way that it actually pops at you directly. And you'll see the same thing mirrored down here on the table. Part of it you could almost say, "Well, the camera's tilted a little lower to the left." But the real problem here is that if I wanted to get—we're going to talk about perspective in a little bit—a perfect line on these items so that your eye felt the depth of field properly, I would need to be standing over here.

If my mouse isn't coming through, I'm motioning to the middle chair in front of the table here. I would need to be standing in a different place in relation to the table to get the lines on the table and the lamp to pop perfectly. Where I'm currently standing and shooting from is awkward for the table.

Now what if, as is the case here, your plates are simply on the side of the table and you need to shoot this side of the table? Well then you would need to get a bit closer and have a smaller frame than what I have here so that the line carrying off to the side isn't so awkward.

I took another shot doing that where I went a bit closer. You can see here that now I've lined up—oh great, you can see the mouse! Thanks; Annaliese—You can see now that I've lined up the bottom of the table edge so that you don't get that awkward table line.

Now you've got the nice line of the table going here. I've gotten rid of that light fixture at the top. Let's just go back for a second. You can see here also that the light fixture is not perfect because the lights aren't lit up properly. Even though this seems like it's composed of a lot of light bulbs I think it's bottles or something like that and there's only a light on one side and the light on the other side is out.



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Let me know in the chat box: have any of your guys ever shot stock photography, tried to shoot stock photography, tried to get your photography listed on stock photo sites, anything like that?

The thing about stock photography websites, as some of you have probably noticed, is that they have incredibly thick rulebooks, so to say, about what they require of you or don't require of you or require you not to do in your photos. One of them is that you can't have logos because photos that are being sold for stock are used for commercial advertising purposes so you can't for instance, have a Nike logo that's advertising an Adidas shoe or something like that. You can't have logos.

Another thing is that they make you remove "imperfections." What that means is, this is obviously an indoor shot, but if this were an outdoor shot, and let me have a look and see if I have one further on down in the slide dock...Here's one. If this were an outdoor shot, and this is a shot I used last time we had our webinar on photography that I'll use again for different purposes this time. But if in this outdoor shot there was a big power line going across here, the stock photography website would want you to take the power line out. Power lines are like stock photography pet peeves.

In this photo, by cutting out this light fixture where the lights aren't quite even, I've removed an imperfection. Why do we want to do that? Because imperfections draw the eye. For instance, here as I was shooting this, I was telling my husband, "Please move the suitcases; the suitcases are in my shot."

Then what happened was after we moved the suitcase but then I also decided that I want to have an even smaller frame than this. So the we got down here and I was like, "Ugh, now there are these papers or whatever these are." So we got rid of the papers. But then I was like, "Ugh, now there's a box."

Part of the reason that you want to remove imperfections is that they draw your eye and they distract from your subject matter. But here's the other thing: In art they talk a lot about crowding the scene. I'm going to go back to this main one for a second. They talk about crowding the scene.

If this was properly proportioned and there was even more food on this table and these suitcases were gone, there wouldn't be anything necessarily, then we have the light bulb



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that's out, there wouldn't be anything necessarily wrong with this photo having a lot of things in it.

I found when I was looking up still life techniques for this webinar, I found an interesting conflict: People in art school tell you not to crowd the scene when you're doing still lifes. When they show you these sample still lifes that you make at home where you take tissue boxes and phones and vary random things just to show you the composition, they have very few things.

But then if you look up Paul Cézanne, He's a French painter that's a bit impressionist, so he doesn't do things that are exactly like real life, but he did do a lot of still lifes. You'll see that those are quite crowded. And a lot of the famous painted still lifes are quite crowded. So there's this interesting dichotomy that they tell you from a theoretical level not to crowd your scene, but then the ones that work best tend to have a lot going on.

What happens, though, is that there's a need to balance those things that are going on. Part of the reason that I narrowed down to this table shot and then decided to narrow further, is that I decided that once I came to this level, even though I've gotten rid of that distracting light fixture, I've fixed the lines of the table, we've gotten rid of this little box of cards or whatever it is and my suitcases, what I found is that it wasn't that there was too much stuff per se, it was that there wasn't a focal point.

I really like for the concept of balance to talk about perspective, which we're going to get to and something we don't think of in our photos if we're not doing architecture, but perspective and also the Japanese garden.

How many of you guys, let me know in the chat box if you've ever been to a Japanese garden. I think we have the sense of Japanese things but also of the concept of Japanese gardens, of being very elegant and very designed, but also to a minute level. There are these Japanese rock gardens where they rake the gardens into various patterns and what not. But the thing that you miss unless you have been to one in person and walked around—great we've got some people that have been—is that they are off-balance but balanced.

What I mean by that is that they are not symmetrical. You won't see in the way that you might see in a French Château garden, that there are perfect little boxes and that everything has a counterpoint on each corner and that within each shape the lines are completely even.



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In Japanese gardens it's actually quite the opposite. You see very little symmetry. That's why I call it an unbalanced balance. Because there isn't symmetry, there isn't a clear, obvious equilibrium-style balance between different things. And yet everything is perfectly balanced. That is the art of the Japanese garden.

What happened here is that we've got the interesting wall things. We've got the flowers, which are beautiful and why I decided to take photos here in the first place. I've got my three little food things, which are actually themselves on the three beautiful food plates. And then we've got this table that's got this grain. It's like I said: It's quite busy, but because of that, because there's so much going on, I'm not sure what the focal point is. It's not balanced.

Then I start trying to cut it down. This is a horrible picture, which I put in here to show you the evolution. I was like do I want to do an upright shot of just some food items? So this was like a test picture. What I decided was no, it's not balanced without those flowers anymore. I really love the flowers. The flowers take the busyness of the table and pull it together somehow.

Then what I said was, "Ok, we love these things in the background, we love the flowers, we're going to switch from the bluish plate to the pink plate because the bluish plate looks too much like the table so it's not balanced because the whole bottom of the shot is all one color. But this pulls out a little pink from the flowers, then the rose up here goes into the yellow, then the light that is coming in over here from the left side kind of brings that all together."

I was like, "Ok, great. This is what we want. We've got to get rid of these ugly things. That's the next step. We haven't gotten rid of the ugly things yet." But this step, the reason why I have this one in here is that you'll notice I've turned the plate. I know some folks on here do a lot of photography and specifically a lot of food photography, but for those of you who don't, or anyone who's ever been on a press trip, have you seen people who sit there and they meticulously, and if you've ever been on a trip with me or I'm actually shooting the food you've probably seen me do this—where you meticulously turn the plate in every possible position. You turn all of the items. There's a reason for this.

You might just know off the top of your head, that this is the most artistic positioning for this particular item, but you can also be surprised because of this balance element. Even a croustade, which has its perfect little lattice on the top, is going to have a little bit of plumb that peeks up here or the light is going to glint off this particular part that's a little more shiny than another part differently.



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It's really useful anytime you have the time to do a composed photo to turn the items just as a test. You really never know. I used to do a lot of coverage of tea. Of high teas and different things like that, and I swear I would have these tiered tea service things, the way they come out, you know you have the scones on one level and the sandwiches on another and the sweets on another, and I would always think that I had the ideal, the optimized thing, and then I would just turn it just to check and there would be something better.

The other thing is that you might like something now as you're shooting but like something else later. That's another reason why when you have the time to always turn your plates. You can do quarter-turns or eighth-turns or whatever you want, but it really doesn't take that long, especially if you're doing a close photo like this or whether you're doing an overhead shot as well.

In this one you'll see between here and here I've turned the plate and so what's happened here is that, to go back to this balance discussion, the sandwich is made slightly off-kilter. We actually had a couple sandwiches and I tried to pick a more photogenic one. But this sandwich is slightly off-kilter. It's got a line that goes off this way.

Remember when I spoke before about how when lines are off they kind of pull your eyes in these weird ways? Because this line is off-kilter and there's this weird little reflective piece on this box here, the combination of this line and this line had created a weird eye-effect that we don't like.

We're going to get rid of the box in a later shot, but now that I've turned the sandwich around, interestingly, even though we know that the sandwich is off-kilter, it looks flat. I want to point this out because this is something very important.

In painting, the artist is looking at what exists in real life and physically, manually, himself or herself, tweaking it to be pleasing to the eye in a flat setting. When we take photographs, we don't have that luxury to the same extent. You can make these tweaks, like I was saying where I turned the sandwich and I tried to find the arrangement where the off-kilter thing didn't pull your eye awkwardly, but it's not like a painting where I can just make the line different. You're limited by what exists in reality.

The issue here is that sandwiches are off-kilter. Berries are different sizes or what have you. Sometimes what it is that you're trying to photograph, like this light up here—although if it



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was my house I'd just replace the light bulb—sometimes what you're trying to photograph is just so off-kilter that it doesn't work and you need to cut it out.

But sometimes you can move your camera and do some slightly weird things or sometimes you can turn it like this to fix it, but you need to be cognizant that in the world, in whatever is in front of you, there are hills or the pavement isn't even or this thing is cut slightly different than its twin. Those things will screw up your photographs.

This is part of the reason why, for instance, we turn the plate, but also why we shoot with that screen viewfinder. So you can see where your eye has done the algorithm for you. Your eye may have corrected it and given your brain different information because your brain is actually editing what comes in through your senses.

But the camera lens captures it as it is without that editing of that awkward line. For instance, something I couldn't do anything about but you can kind of do a little bit by turning the plate, is that the way that these plates are made, there's a little wave around the edge if you can see it. It's particularly noticeable right here where it comes down and pops back up again. Also I notice quite a bit this part at the front where the lip comes up.

This waving of the plate also, to me, was quite obnoxious, especially here because it draws an awkward amount of attention to this part of the flower arrangement. This is the kind of thing where if you were shooting these still photos for stock photography, they are going to notice these things and call you out on them.

This is one of the reasons why some people don't submit to stock because they think it's so annoying to go through this reviews process. But going through that process and having somebody call you out on all these random tweaky things—again if this was stock they'd make you get rid of all these little leaves here, they'd make you clean them up—helps you to take better photos in the long run in the same way that having an editor that's really a stickler for grammar or a stickler for having an interesting lead or a stickler for brevity is going to make you an interesting writer in the long term.

You can in many ways teach yourself to do this, even without going through that stock process by, like I did here, just taking this photo that's ever so slightly different than this photo, you can teach yourself by just taking photo after photo after photo of a very similar looking thing.



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This photo at the end, again I took this on the phone so it's much harder to see which the perfect ones are on the phone, this one at the end is where I stopped. I was like, "Ok, now I have the photo."

However, you'll notice something here, which is that the food looks great, and again, I was trying to photograph the food, so that's fine, but now the flowers are quite out of focus whereas in this other one that we hung out with for a bit, the plate is out of focus and the flowers are in focus. So this one I decided the food needed to pop, so that's what mattered, but I don't really love how out of focus that is.

What I actually would have done if I had both more time and a different camera, was that I would have changed the settings on the camera so that the whole foreground, which includes the flowers, could have been a bit sharper.

One of the things that you may have noticed in these things that we went through, although I didn't give you really horrible photos, is angle. Angle, angle, angle, angle. That goes back to this pomegranate that we looked at before. Why did we get this awkward curve on the caper berries? The angle seems Ok, right? Because we're shooting from the top straight down, but here's another top straight down.

This one I really like because it looks like a painting because they took the photo on top of a painting, but it isn't actually a painting. They managed to get the flatness enough that you think it is. How did they do that?

You may or may not be able to tell, but the edges here have a very distinct crop on them. Anytime you're shooting something, like back to our pomegranate and caper berry friend here, the camera shouldn't in reality be as close as it looks in this picture.

If you've seen photographs of photographers who are doing food styling workshops or who are doing food photography, you'll often notice that they are standing on a ladder over the table that they're taking the picture of. It's not uncommon for table shots—when you need to get the entire table because otherwise how do you get it in the viewfinder in the first place—but it's also not uncommon for some of these detail shots. Because otherwise you get this effect.



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Something that's become quite trendy—and I don't actually have one in the slide deck but I can just pop one in really quickly so you can see what I'm talking about here—is this concept of the packing shot or the placement shot. Here's an example.

In this photo here, you'll notice that we've got a little bit of shadow that obviously shows that there's some kind of angle going on that we're not directly exactly over the top of this thing, but it looks pretty flat, right? This here, I wouldn't say it's a perfect example of a still life per se because the issue with this composition is that it has—to go back to this photo here—it's got that things where there's a lot going on and there's no focal point.

The light gives us a kind of obvious focal point up here, but I wouldn't say that these items give up a focal point. But you'll see in this shot—this is another very common example of the type of still life going around that's not food. These are used commonly in Instagram a lot, especially for companies, but also bloggers are doing a lot of them now in their posts. I'm sure you've seen them. I see them on stock photography websites.

The problem that I have with a lot of these photos is that they've gotten the angle right so you can see that it does look properly flat. They do a lot of workshops on how to do that, however, the composition is off and just not there. It's more of a collection of things.

While angle is very, very important, because otherwise, like back to our caper berries and pomegranates, you get the weird eye effect, angle isn't everything. Next to angle, the most important thing is composition.

I found when I was reminding myself of art techniques, a quote from a painter who said that a well-composed scene is half painted or something like that. That's the thing. Like I said with this one over here, they've got an interesting background, they've got the wood, they've got a collection of some things that have some interest to them, they've got different colors, but there's something about this that just doesn't pop. Especially when we compare it to that lovely flower that I showed you before.

That looks like it could go on your wall. It looks like a piece of art. But even still, I've got some other photos in here that we'll get to in a second. But there are various reasons why this guy doesn't pop. It largely has to do with the busyness, but there are other compositional issues there.



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Let's talk about composition. I mentioned this also in the newsletter and the blog post preceding this call, but there's so much more than the rule of thirds. I bet you guys have heard this, but in case you haven't heard of the rule of thirds, I'll just explain quickly.

We often, if you have been photographing for a while as I'm sure you all are whether you publish your photos or not, we all photograph as we travel with family or for work, I'm sure you're all familiar, at least anecdotally, with the rule of thirds. Which is if you want to be really nit picky, you could say that this isn't quite thirds at the moment, so I'm going to make this perfect rule of thirds for the purposes of this discussion.

The rule of thirds means that if you were to imagine lines that go across and create nine squares out of this rectangular painting here, that at the point where each of those lines intersect then you would have something of interest.

In this case, again, I did it without necessarily meaning to, but you have this line and this line hit the flower and this line and this line hit the food that we want to focus on. This kind of diagonal composition is very common in these still type photos for this reason: you have something in the foreground at 1/3 marker and something in the background at 1/3 marker and it creates a depth of field to have something on one that's further forward than the one in the back, but you also satisfy this rule of thirds.

The problem, though, that I have with the rule of thirds is that it leaves out something very important, which I just mentioned, which is the depth of field. I see in a lot of travel photographs when people are taking things and they sort of checked the boxes so to say of those 2/3 lines, but they haven't created any depth between the two of them.

By doing that, what happens is that they actually end up with something that is flat in real life but slightly upsets our eye when we see it. Even though it's sort of flat in real life, the items aren't exactly next to each other. One is slightly behind the other.

Then perspective—which I'll get to in a second—perspective comes into play in the depth of field, that space, that back-ness, back and front-ness between those two objects, creates and awkward line that our eyes don't always see because it looks flat to us because of that algorithm in our brain. That algorithm in our brain is correcting it, but on the camera it looks a little awkward.



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The way to do rule of thirds is to move a little past it and take that rule of thirds and then incorporate depth.

I showed you earlier on that same poor picture of that cheddar biscuit sandwich and flowers that we've been using, but I'll show you another one here. This doesn't do 1/3 exactly. If you look, the lines don't perfectly go, but you'll see this creates a really ordered, sort of depth of field through the repetition here. This pomegranate does, as well.

With the rule of thirds, if these three pomegranates were next to each other, but not exactly next to each other, but there were sort of satisfying these two things but they were in the same plane, your eye wouldn't like it, it wouldn't be happy.

One of the things that often helps to create a more harmonious or pleasing rule of thirds is elevation. Sometimes elevation doesn't exist in real life. For instance, you'll see here, this one looks to us like it's higher up than the one in the foreground. That's really just because of the perspective of the table, how the table looks like it gets taller.

The preferred way is to do that with actual elevation. In this case, we've got the sandwich that's on the plates that's low, then the flowers that are up. If you want to create a still life with just a couple objects, you want to take the rule of thirds, add depth of field and then add elevation preferably on the back object.

That's kind of like a very simple recipe for quick rule of thirds still life. But one of the other really important things is to ensure that you have a focal point.

I mentioned how between this photo and this photo you can see if you look at the flowers while I change the slide that I've changed the focus on the flowers to be to the front piece.

Again, here there's focus, but it's on the flowers. But that's weird, because we automatically want to pay attention to what's in the foreground and if that's out of focus it kind of confuses our brain. So you usually want to focus on the foreground. But sometimes the focus is not in the most forward part of the foreground if that makes sense.

In this case, there's a very clear difference between the driver or rider in the foreground and the background, which is moving because of what the photographer has done with the focus.



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This is not exactly a still life, but I chose it because I wanted to talk to you about perspective and I love how this shows it.

We've seen so many and while I was looking up diagrams that show you perspective and they were all architectural and I feel like the concept of perspective in architecture you can kind of get without thinking too hard about it, but incorporating it into other settings is work, it's hard.

This has a bit of an architectural line element because it's got this little rail track here. You've also got the forest, you've got his little cart, you've got a lot of different lines that are going on here to create this perspective.

Here's why I wanted to talk to you about perspective in still lives as opposed to just landscape and architectural shots: because perspective, proper perspective is what creates the difference between this and this and this. Or this other shot here where I was saying that the line of the table and the line here isn't quite right. Even though this one I think it is in some ways better than a lot of the ones I see published on blogs.

You still see how in this one the perspective, even though this line is slightly off, that the movement of the perspective is so solid. This is one of the things a perspective does and why it's important in still lives: it creates movement. But it's a still life; it shouldn't be moving. Not true. If a still life doesn't have some sense of movement or energy to it, it doesn't pop; we've missed that pop.

This is the ironic thing: That you want the composition of your still items to create a visual effect of movement. That's done by this depth of field, rule of thirds, elevation play that we talked about, but it's also done by these uses of perspective. Perspective can be done through tables or through different elements of elevation and depth of field, tables and still lives are a great one and you see those in a lot of still lives.

Here, for instance, obviously these pomegranates—I don't know why I have so many pomegranate photos, sorry—but these pomegranate photos are obviously on some sort of surface, some sort of table. They're probably on a floor in a photography studio. But you don't see the end point; it just becomes dark at the back.



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The interesting thing is that because of the way the light is cast you can still see a bit of a straight line and then this edge over here as if it is a table. Then the shadow here, you can see how it lengthens that way, and that way and that way, it still creates that sense almost of movement. That's important—In this case, of course we have actual movement—but that's important because that sense of movement, that sense of pop allows our eye as we look at the two-dimensional photo of a three-dimensional thing, it allows that algorithm to understand how the three-dimensionality of those objects work.

I know it's so psychology and so much science, but we want things that are still to pop and part of the way to do that is to make them look like they have an energy and that's done by giving them a sense of movement. That sense can be composed by perspective, by shadow like we did here, there's several different ways to do it. But one thing that's very important to watch out for—In painting they call it kissing and I think that's a bit of a silly term but we can also just call it touching even though the items aren't actually touching—in the two-dimensionality of the painting or the photograph they appear to be touching.

That was one of the reasons that I pulled this photograph. You'll notice between the pomegranates here and these little steel, what do you call them, watering cans here, they don't look like they're touching in the same way. What I mean by that is you'll see here that the red of this and the magenta and the pink of this appear to be on the same plane.

Remember when I mentioned before, when things look like they're on the same plane but they're obviously not on the same plane, your eye doesn't like it and it gets a little unhappy, but here there's a very clear shadow or coloring on that watering can that separates it from the next watering can. Here it's a little fuzzier, it's a little flatter and here on the top of that one it's even flatter still, but at this long edge of each watering can there's a really nice darkening that makes it clear to you that these items are on different planes.

One of the things about composition is that when two items are in some way, due to the depth of field, on top of one another, it's very important to check the kissing. This is one of those things that it really helps you to do with your screen on your camera because your eyes aren't going to do it in real life. They're going to fix it for you a little bit. But when you see it on captured on the camera and on the flat screen you'll see this kissing effect, which can create that sort of awkward sense that the depth of field isn't quite right.

I've talked a little bit about perspective, but I want to give you a trick that if you haven't been schooled in some way shape or form in perspective, a good way to experience it.



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I live in NYC, but I didn't live in cities until I was in college and I moved to Italy to go to the University of Florence and study Italian Literature. I remember being in Florence and walking around and there's one particular square where you just stand at a spot and you're like, "Oh my god, I understand perspective." There's just something about the difference in height between the street and the buildings.

If you haven't had that aha moment, like "I see how to put perspective together," I recommend that if you live in a city or the next time that you go to visit a city, try to find one of those quintessential gridded areas and take a moment when the traffic light allows you to, or for instance in NY we have park avenue where there's a park in the middle where you can stand on and I know other city's have something similar. But take a moment to stand in the middle of the street and just look up and down and side to side and see how that perspective plays out in real life.

Because when you see it in photos it's already been adulterated by the camera lens and it doesn't have the same effect. You really need to see it in really life. So if you haven't had that aha moment in real life and how to translate it, I recommend taking a moment to do that yourself.

A couple food-related tips for you that I want to say. This photo, as I mentioned, it looks like a painting. It's on a painted surface, is such an interesting example of background. With food photography, you get into these interesting things where we get, this isn't quite so common to have the plain background, but you get a lot of tables, right? The photo I took for your guys earlier had the table that had that really interesting looking coloring. We have a little bit of brown and a little bit of green. Here in the retreat house we have a lot of natural wood tables that have a lot of really interesting knots and different curves and things like that on them. Food photographers love tables, right?

But there are so many other different backgrounds that you can do. When you find yourself in a restaurant or something when you're traveling, you might be in the situation where you just have a crummy table. Some things that you can do in that situation, on the one hand if you want to be really prepared you can travel with cooler stuff.

I don't recommend traveling with a whole piece of painting with you, but you can travel with some different cloths or for instance, I had this notebook called the Day Designer, which has a really cool cover. But another things you can do is you can take out your napkin, you can unfold your napkin and you can fold it in an interesting way on top of the table or you can



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just take your food outside and you perhaps they have wooden tables outside that you can take the photos on.

Another thing that you can do is you can ask them for additional plates if you put your plate on top of a different plate it can at least create some interesting levels and different sets of colors with your photos. But the most important thing when you are doing food photography to remember, is that the background, the food, none of it matters if the light is not there.

I want to talk about this for a second because if you haven't gone to school for photography, the minutia of creating lighting can be a bit daunting. So I'm not going to give you a full course on how to do photographic lighting because honestly you don't need it. You just need to understand that your photos need to be lit, period.

What I mean by that is that can you take photos of food or what have you in a dark bar or restaurant? Sure. But you need to pull up a light source. You need to grab a lamp or a lantern or a candle and create a source of light in your photo. Diffuse, practically non-existent restaurant light is not a great way to get great photos. Part of that—I'm going to skip the next slide and come back—is the shine.

I'm sure this has happened to all of you and I've had so many times where I'm on a press trip or something and I give up on taking a particular photo because the food is so shiny in the light that I have available. Literally if you are in a setting where you have a plate of food that is very, very shiny, you sometimes need to just give up. If it is not daytime and you can't take your food outside, the only two ways to deal with shine are to inflict natural light upon it as opposed to inside light because natural light is much more diffuse or you can try to use reflectors, but you've got to get rid of the shine.

You can pat it down with paper towels just like you do with pizza and if they are kind of appalled by that notion you can just explain to them what you're doing and then they'll probably bring you free food because they'll realize you're a writer.

But it's really important to notice shine. I see a lot of photos going up on Facebook and Instagram going up these days on food. Even in daytime but that are taken inside where the shine becomes the focal point; where you can't even see what the food is because the shine is such an issue.



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You can often if you know you want to photograph something if you're in a restaurant where you see the plating is really good, you can often help a little by giving the wait staff a heads up in advance. You can say, "Would you mind not putting so much sauce on that or could you not put so much olive oil or could you put the sauce on the side" and that allows you to do some plating on your own.

In terms of the light, like I said, shine can be combated with natural light because it's more diffuse, but generally well-lit pictures simply don't happen in restaurants that you're visiting at night. So one of the best ways to get good food photos is to make the majority of your eating or your eating outings when you're traveling be during the day.

This can be hard because during the day we want to visit museums or take pictures outside or do other things, but if it's important to you to get good food photos, I highly recommend doing that during lunch rather than at dinner. I said on the prior side the "Lunch secret." The other great thing about doing that is if you want to go to some really splashy restaurants, especially on your own dime, doing them at lunch time allows you often to let you have the same meal for 70 percent of the price and sometimes much less than that.

Especially if you're in Paris and you want to go to some of the Michelin restaurants, they have lunch menus as well. They cost much less and you'll get better photos and who doesn't want to photograph that immaculately arranged French food?

Time of day also affects the light. The seasons especially do as well. I'm even feeling it here. I'm sitting in the retreat house. Is it really 4:30? My backyard is completely dark and it's not even winter yet. What's happening?

The time of day goes in concert with the time of year. If you're traveling and you know you want to get a shot of a particular thing or you want to visit this restaurant and you want to photograph the food and you specifically planned to go there during lunch, you have to think, Ok, well, I'm going there during lunch. It's winter and it's a city, so the sunlight might actually only even make it—because of the tall buildings—to street level at a particular part of the day. And depending on the orientation of the city and the buildings and everything, that might be 11:30 or it might be 1:30.

These are some things that you sometimes need to scout out, as in paying attention to the light and when it falls and where it falls and when you first arrive somewhere to make sure



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that when you are going on outings or going out eating or just going around to do some street scene still life shots, that you are having the potential to get natural light in the first place.

In terms of interior versus exterior for lighting, I try to always sit in the window wherever I am, both for just me to get the natural light, but also because then you have that really nice light source on your food. What I've found is that often if you go for lunch in a lot of restaurants, especially in Europe or other older cities like that, the ceilings are so low that there's no light in most of the restaurant for much of the day if not the entire day.

You also really need to think about, if you're photographing food, if you are in a position where there's no exterior, if it's possible to photograph in the interior, if they have window seats. And this is the kind of thing where if you're doing a story where you need to get shots of something specific, it's worth calling ahead to ask or to ask them to reserve a specific table for you so you can make sure to get the shots you need.

That's where you also have to think about geography. I talked about cities and how the buildings are tall, they might obscure the natural light from going in different windows, but also, depending on where you are, you might think "Oh, it's winter," so I'll only have X, Y, Z hours when I can get photos, but that might not actually be true.

My friend from Finland who's actually driving up for the retreat this weekend, she said in Northern Finland on weather.com when you look to check the weather they don't have a sunrise time, they have a sunrise date, which is in three months in the future. You have to be really mindful of how the seasons play into the north or southern-ness of where you're shooting.

Now reflectors, I promised that I would mention them, but I don't really need to say too much about them. If you're in the situation where you have some natural light but it's coming very strongly from one area, so like it's coming very strongly from one window but the rest of the restaurant is very dark so your plate of food has too much shine in one side. What you can do is very simply take a piece of paper or a notebook or something white out of your bag or ask them for something white, and use that—and you're going to, again like when we tilt our plate, move it around a little bit—but use that white surface to reflect some additional light on your food so it can be lit from more than one angle.

When they shoot food in various clinical food settings, they try to get light from all around to get rid of shadows. While that creates a certain effect, I think often, to go back to when we



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were talking about movement before, it can be nice to have a certain amount of shadow as long as it is soft.

A couple of other food points. Some of these come from the avocado workshop at the International Food Blogging Conference that I mentioned. If you have shiny food, we talked about doing the pizza pat, but if you have an apple or some sort of produce that's very shiny naturally, you can also give it a rub down.

In the food photography workshop she talked about doing this with avocados because they naturally are a bit wet. So there's often food you wouldn't necessarily think of needing a rub down. Pastries, for instance, that have been baked and aren't necessarily soggy, per se, that do in fact need a rub down because they have some natural hydration internally whether it's butter or a fruit or something like that. Apples for instance, anything that's cut that has its own hydration source, they will start to slowly leech that liquid out just like when you're cooking and you try to get all the water out of the onions.

Those are the kind of things you want to pat down before you take pictures of them.

Another one is the edit. This is something they talked about with avocados that I thought was quite clever. If there's a little divot in your food somewhere, you can take that same napkin that you used for the rub down and, just like you would do in Photoshop, you just smudge another piece of food over that divot so that it fills it in.

This obviously works really well on things like avocados or bananas that are kind of smushy, but you can get away with it with a lot of things. Like with pastries I often see little marks and you can do very similar things. You can also take some butter—but be careful with shine—but if you're working with desserts you can take some butter and put it in that little spot and put it over it. You put some cocoa powder on it if it's something dark.

We talked a little already about busyness, but I want to talk about it specifically about food. Because you can see this in the restaurant shot that I did earlier. There are often a lot of textures and colors and different elements going on in food shots. So it's really important—I know this one isn't food but it's so pretty I feel like it should be edible—it's really important to think about if the element that you're photographing has enough depth, has enough layers, has enough shadow, has enough movement that it doesn't need anything else going on with it. Or if it's just a sandwich with some pimento cheese and a tomato and some lettuce on it and it could use some other things going on.



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I've mentioned this food photography McGyver-ing—and they seem to have spelled his name wrong a bit earlier—but it's really important that when you do have something a bit inane that you're trying to take a picture of, to figure out what props you have at your disposal.

Like I mentioned when I was at the bakery in D.C. I did have those really interesting plates, but the problem was that the plates were way more interesting than the sandwich. If I had done an overhead shot, you would just see the really plain cheddar biscuit with the toothpick in the middle and then the really crazy colors of the plate and it wouldn't really show off the food at all; it would just be showing off the plate.

While it is really useful sometimes to pick up props that come with the food, sometimes it's side dishes, sometimes the way it's plated, sometimes that is the too busy part. Sometimes you need to move the food off the plate it came on and find a better setting for it. You can do that by talking your napkin, there's some really basic napkin folds that you can do but you can also just fold it in half or just slop it around and nestle something in the middle.

You can also take the flowers from your table, you can combine flowers from a couple different tables. You can use the menus, you can pull a candle, there are lots of things floating around in restaurants that you can incorporate. Those are my food-specific tips.

Thank you so much and I hope you guys have a really great weekend!