

PLOP & SHOOT

MICROSTOCK FOOD
PHOTOGRAPHY
FOR BEGINNERS



BY T.R.DAVIS

The “Plop and Shoot” Guide to Microstock

Food Photography for Beginners

By T.R. Davis

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Acknowledgements

First, I want to say thank you for picking up my book. It began as a series of blog posts about 5 years ago. Recently I was asked to update some of the information in it, so I decided to put it into book form.

The information contained here is a summary of how I started out shooting food photos for the microstock industry using on-camera flash techniques. It is geared towards photographers who maybe cannot afford studio equipment but own a speedlight or for those who would like to try my method to succeed at microstock. It presupposes you have a basic understanding of shooting in “manual” mode and know what the exposure triangle is. My “success” is relative. I have made a very good part-time passive income from this industry using the methods in this book for more than ten years. I make no guarantee that you will see the same success.

And thank you to the expert(s) in the industry who gave me my username and the title for this book. You know who you are.

All food photos in this book have been successfully submitted to microstock agencies and use on-camera flash techniques, and in some cases a second light. I own the copyright to all of them, as you can tell from the distracting watermarks on some of my examples. Those were added at the time, and I no longer have the original photos to replace them. Sorry.

Who am I?



My name is T.R. Davis. If you are familiar with the microstock world, I am known by my usernames of “farbled” and “photominer” in most microstock agencies and forums. Any web search should help you with that.

I am a writer, a stock photographer, and a former event and wedding photographer. I live in beautiful British Columbia, Canada.

I've been shooting microstock photography off and on for more than ten years. It is a great way to learn the technical side of photography, make some money and of course, have fun stretching that imagination. This book started as a series of posts on my blog about shooting food photography using a minimum of gear, basically a camera and a speedlight.

“Plop and Shoot” was a term coined to describe my style of photography for this industry. It started out as a lighthearted joke, and I am using it here in the same way. My style is “bare-bones” and it differs from other successful stock shooters since I have minimal outlay and expense. In that vein, I also consider time an expense and use the motto “good enough now instead of perfect later.”

Huh. But what is microstock?

Microstock as an industry came about in the early 2000's when a graphic designer decided to create an art-sharing site for all his designer buds. Later, they began monetizing it, and created one of the first microstock agencies where you could license images and art for a much lower cost than the traditional stock art companies. The mainstream stock companies licensed images for thousands of dollars to high end users that could afford the rates for unique, custom-made images.



Microstock turned that world onto its head with the advent and proliferation of digital cameras, and then added the ease of uploading via the internet. Soon every budding 'tographer could shoot and upload photos and after a bit of a learning curve, many surpassed the quality found on some of the big agency sites.

The biggest difference though was in price. Instead of thousands of dollars per sale once in a while, images were going for a dollar or two, under a royalty-free license that allowed the image or art to be used in a much wider way. The other big difference was in volume

sales. Generic images sold well and often, making those small commissions add up if you knew what you were doing. Anyone could do it if they had the equipment and a little bit of talent.

Instead of large companies, the buyers were design firms, bloggers, small businesses, magazines and newsies to name just a few. Suddenly mom 'n pop shops didn't have to hire their own prohibitively expensive photographers to get a picture of an apple, or a hammer. You could shoot just about anything you wanted, and it would sell. That world has changed a bit since then, and it's harder



to find and make HCV (high commercial value) images to sell.

It's art but not art

Shooting stock is weird. Pure art photographers don't get it usually, and I have seen many come and go when they could not adapt to a different way of thinking or shooting. Stock shooting is really about selling a photo that can represent a style or

concept and preferably can be used multiple times by different buyers. Especially in micro, volume is the name of the game. A unique, beautifully artistic and dramatic photo might do poorly because its applications are limited. Whereas a cleverly done pile of staplers could sell every day for months. It's a contrived example, but you get the point.

It's a wonderfully frustrating place

Any stock forum has a myriad of experts to help you along. They have all the answers, know what sells, what you should shoot, how to shoot it, where to sell it, etc, etc.....

They are all wrong.

Unwittingly perhaps, but none of it is completely true. The most successful stock shooters would all tell you its work (that part is true). Product in, money out. But what works for them does not often work for others, what works for a pro might not work for a newbie. My workflow might not work for anyone already in the industry. It's that simple. We all have a good (or not so good) idea of what works for us individually. But it doesn't always transfer to the next guy or gal.

Plus, we all have our own subject areas, styles, levels of quality, imagination, access, or some other differentiator. Here, you will not find hard and fast answers that will *absolutely* make you a success.



A Good Reason



I have found though, that some people get into stock photography because it makes them some money from home, and they can learn or improve their photography. Other times, it's a photographer looking to make some extra money. Two different types. One sees the photographic side as a means to an end, the other would take the pictures anyway because they are a photographer and that is what they do. The money is a wonderful extra.

For the sake of argument, I will assume that those reading here are people who already have that photographic interest, but are stuck on how to begin, where, why, and what to expect. You can make money at it. Some can make a lot of money. Some can do it full time and make an excellent income. The majority start with a lot of energy and expense, make a little money and grow bored or frustrated because it really is work and not a get-rich-quick scheme. No different from anything else. Energy in, equals product out. The full timers I know do this all day, every day. They spend hundreds or thousands in shoot investment and hope to recoup their money with good selling photos. Others, like me, invest time and work towards keeping costs to an absolute minimum. Both are valid.

So why are you here?

I can tell you what works for me to make a decent amount of money for a minimal investment of time and expense. I can also show you some tips and tricks to get food or product photography to a level consistent with acceptance at the major agencies. I will cover things like using on-camera flash, basic layouts, using your camera, formatting, key-wording, uploading and organizing your workflow. Again, this is what works for me after more than ten years of working specifically in this industry. I will also touch on ethics and agencies among other things.



I Had This Camera...

My first DSLR was an Olympus. I loved it. The manual was easy to follow, the buttons were all intuitively placed, it was an awesome thing. It got stolen when someone broke into our apartment. Then I got another one. But later, when I started thinking about photography as more than a hobby, I switched to Nikon. Mostly because I wanted to get many lenses, upgrade bodies, etc. All the usual stuff photographers will tell you when they say buy Nikon or buy Canon. In hindsight, I wish I had stuck with Oly. They seriously

could make some fine things. Expensive though. Prohibitively in some ways. But there it is. I'm a Nikon guy now.

All that aside, the Nikon D200 was what I cut my professional teeth on. I know in my previous page that I said I wasn't a pro. I meant that I was not a full-time stock photographer. I was a pro photographer for some time. I did corporate, event and wedding photography. I was good at it. I absolutely loved shooting events. I had a knack for capturing those candid moments. The most important thing I learned (as it relates to stock) was how to use a flash. With a good understanding of on-camera flash techniques,



you can photograph pretty much anything and everything. Anywhere, anytime. More on that later.

Have a camera

For whatever reason you have this camera. It can take a decent photo and you understand at least a little of the basics of aperture, shutter speed, and ISO (the exposure triangle). If you don't have a basic understanding of those, this book probably won't be much help for you. But this book is geared towards people who have a DSLR and know how to shoot in manual mode.



Yeah yeah, you haven't told me anything I don't already know...

Yep! Since it's my book, you get to read my stories and anecdotes to get to the bit that matters most to you. It might be different for each reader, but there it is. So, if you have a camera and know how to shoot in manual mode, let's get to it. I will tell you about my workflow when I started shooting food with an on-camera flash, no big setup, no extra expenses that broke the bank, and still made money shooting only a few minutes a day for microstock.

Got your camera? Excellent.

All you need now is a table and something to photograph. I use our small round dining room table nowadays. But if you look at my portfolio at any agency, a good amount of my early photos had been shot using a TV tray. I'm not kidding.

The panic of finding a subject

Every single photo course, article, step-by-step, whatever, there is always (for me at least) that initial panic to find something to shoot. Something *cool*, that I can hold up and say "hey! I shot this and it kicks ass!" If you're like me, you're probably going, camera, table, subject? oh crap....

Not to worry. In this instance we will use something ridiculously simple. The point I will be addressing here will be about producing a well exposed photo of a product. We'll worry about saleability later. In this case, go to your cupboard and grab a can of anything. Seriously. Anything.

Natural light shooting

If you are looking for moody, artistic stuff, you won't find it here. Stock shooting is very often about over bright, clear photos that can be cut, cropped or modified to suit a customer. In this case, more is more. You want as many diverse uses as you can get out of your



image. It increases your audience and potentially, your buyer pool.

I don't usually use natural lighting for stock food. Part of that is that I've always had a flash (speedlight) for events, and when I switched my focus to food it seemed like the logical thing to do. Plus, natural light gives more nuance and shadow which, while artistic and ultimately in some ways a better photo, is not necessarily a better *stock* photo. I will sometimes work with natural light, but I have a better acceptance rate with flash and fill. We'll touch on it quickly and move on.

For microstock my way, you still want to get rid of as many shadows as possible. Ideally you also want a solid background so that a customer can cleanly cut your subject out and place it on a menu, banner ad, or whatever. If you are using backgrounds, try to keep them soft, out of focus and generic so that they can be used more widely. Some food photographers do massive table setups, place settings, people, food in use, etc. All great and saleable. But here, we'll start with the absolute bare minimum for a beginner. You add the imagination once you get the basics. As always, **THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO SELL STOCK**. This just happens to be the way that works for me personally. So, if you're looking for an argument about "so and so" says to do it differently, then go do it differently if you prefer. Ideally, you get the basics and then find your own way that works for you.

Sheesh, enough already, back to lighting

Using natural light, very often you will be using a (preferably) large window. If it's cloudy out, even better. What you are after is light **diffusion**. You want the light to be soft and coming from as many directions as possible. Think of light like water from a garden hose. A hard stream won't water your plants effectively and will in fact, damage them if it is strong enough. A softer, wider spray will accomplish much more. Same thing here.

In this example, I have a white sheet (again, go get a tablecloth or bed sheet or even better, go to a fabric store and buy a couple of yards of cloth) on a small table. The **first shot** shows light from the left (my patio door) and using the internal camera meter. **The second** shows with an adjusted f-stop. Go play with adjusting it until you get it bright. See the difference? **The third and last** shots are with a bounce (reflector). The best way to figure out what your best shot is, is to play with your aperture to get what you think is the ideal shot. Dial it open, dial it closed and see what the differences are. Your goal here is to get the light is even as possible on your subject.

That, in a nutshell, is pretty much your starting point for natural light photography. With these steps a decent food photographer can make wonderfully artistic shots. You can then expand



on them in many, many ways. I suggest that if that is your goal, find a food blog that you like and try and copy some of their exposures for practice. These kinds of shots are also good for "mid stock" or RM (Rights Managed) photography.

Ok. Got your perfect can photo? Do you think it's the most boring thing ever? Good.

Here is what it might look like with food and playing with your f-stop, just a little, depending on how bright the sun might be today (everything else is exactly the same set-up).



On to flash...



On-camera flash is perhaps one of the most intimidating aspects of photography for a great number of beginners. Most of the time, I hear amateurs say they've been invited to shoot an indoor event or wedding. They immediately go buy a flash and then discover they know nothing about how to use it.

We will cover the bare bones of manual flash shooting. No TTL, iTTL or auto modes for us. We will become Flash Warriors! If you can master this, your flash will become the second most important piece of kit you own after your camera, and you will have complete confidence in shooting anything, anywhere. I kid you not.

Um, but why can't I just use TTL (talk to lens)?

TTL/iTTL is a great feature on flashes for many uses. It does the math for you when figuring out what power level your speed-light needs to be on, what aperture (yes it has one) what zoom, etc. The one drawback it has, is that it must be pointed directly at your subject to be accurate and effective. Otherwise you will be getting it right only by accident if you try and bounce it.

What happens is that big red sensor at the bottom of your flash points at your subject and give all the details to the micro computer or space alien or whatever is inside your flash. It does the math for a straight, flash to subject ratio of power REGARDLESS of where the flash head is pointing.



What the heck is bounce?



Remember when we talked about light diffusion? Bouncing your flash means that we will point it away from your subject and let the light "bounce" or diffuse before it comes back to light your subject. I usually bounce mine off the ceiling for most things. However, in a pinch you can use pretty much any flat surface nearby, preferably lighter in colour. For our purposes here, we'll cover what we need to light tabletop food in your living or dining room, with or without natural light. And yes, it is that strong. You

can be in a pitch-black room and take decent, sale-able photos if you have a flash and you know how to use it.

**The photo above was shot with on-camera flash in a dark crowded restaurant from the far side of the table at a staff party.*

Bare bones flash

Ok, your flash probably has too many buttons, too many settings, and looks like a hybrid laser. That's cool. It is supposed to. For us, we have the flashy bit (at the top) and the power level adjustment in manual mode. Grab your manual, you'll probably need it.

Power up your flash and look at the display. What you want to do is find your "manual" setting. Generally, you can do this from the

main menu for most flash units. Older or less expensive ones have a dial or switch. In any event, you want it there.

← It should look something like this.



The important part for us is the big M and the power setting. Don't worry about any other setting except these two for right now. Some will talk to your camera anyway and fill in things like aperture, focal length, etc... Just ignore it for now. Think of it like learning to drive. I'm showing you how to use the gas and the brake, that is all you need to drive from A to B. We can expand on everything else later.

Attach your speed-light to your camera and for this example, I am shooting my camera at ISO 200, F5.6 and a shutter speed of 1/250th. 1/250th is generally the sync speed for most camera brands like my Nikon, or 1/200 for Canon cameras. Sync speed means that your flash won't be too slow for your shutter speed (give it a try sometime shooting at SS 1/400th with your flash and you'll see what will happen).

Set your flash at 1/4 power and point it straight up at the ceiling. Why? So it will *diffuse*. Like that water hose we talked about, it will



bounce and spray everywhere. We like that. It means the light is coming from more than one direction, and it is softer than a harsh, in your face, nuke-em-til-they-glow, flash shot.

Take your shot.

Instead of adjusting your camera F-stop, try using the power increase/decrease buttons to get your subject lit. Depending on how high your ceiling is, what colour, etc, you should likely end up around 1/2 power or even full power. Now, pull the power back to 1/4 and play with your camera's aperture to do the same thing. Increase or decrease as needed to get the shot. Remember, your white tablecloth reflects a lot of light, so you might not need to adjust much.

But it doesn't quite look perfect or something...

Ok. At this point, you can probably get away with some food shots being good enough for acceptance. This setup will work, but there are variables so you will have to tweak it each time. Size of the plate, colour of the food or product, angle you're shooting at... remember its digital. Take a hundred photos. If you learn something from each one, then it's not wasted.

Here is my supper tonight, same settings ISO 200, F5.6 SS 1/250 Power at 1/4. As you can see, it is dark. I bumped the power to one

half.



That's just one way to add more light. You can also play with your camera aperture to let more light in while tightening what is in focus. I prefer to do it that way, so that I am not killing my flash batteries quite so much all the time.

But this is about flash. So, we'll stick here for this lesson.

Let's make it prettier!

Workflow is very important in microstock. The commissions are small and while you get many of them, they may not make a photo cost-effective at times. What I do in my workflow is try to keep things simple, take good photos, and do minimal work.

How do you do minimal work?

I am glad you asked! The most important part is to get your photo as good as it can get "in-camera". All the editing tools in the world basically are there to "fix" stuff you didn't get right (yes, I know, they do other things too). Or they can add things like colour or "pop" to a dull image. I shoot in RAW format, so the images often come out "duller" than a jpg because RAW doesn't try and boost things for you.

Specular highlights

You know when, during an event or portrait shoot, you want to get those great catch-lights shining in people's eyes? Or you have seen them in any people picture in a magazine? For most product and food photography, you don't want that (there are exceptions of course). When you use a speedlight on-camera, there is nothing stopping at least some light from shooting straight at the subject. This can cause hotspots or glare. See this example below? I ate this yesterday but shot the picture right before. Then I did it again just adding one little, completely inexpensive tool. Can you guess? Can you see the difference?



I **snooted** my flash. I took a piece of black cardboard and made a light-tunnel for my flash.

This caused all of the light to go up in one direction before bouncing and diffusing (there's that word again).

A snoot can be made from pretty much anything. Grab a piece of paper, felt, rubber, or plastic and then an elastic band or some tape and you're done. It often doesn't make an extreme difference, but a decent

reviewer will notice it and sometimes call you on it. Therefore, you want things to be as perfect as you can get them. The next step is to add a new function to flash shooting during the daytime. Adding ambient light to the mix.

**Most flash heads have adjustable or twist-able heads. Use this feature to do vertical pictures as well as horizontal shooting. When I*

photographed events that was my go-to, the vertical shot. The inch or so of distance the flash had away from the camera can make a great difference in directional lighting. Shooting vertically adds another depth of difference to your portfolio and may reduce competition by more than half or more. Different makes you stand out. That's a good thing.

So what is ambient light?

It is the natural or artificial light already present in your space that you plan to shoot in. If you are shooting food in your dining room during the daytime, it is the light from your windows or house lights. In any event, shooting in a pitch-black room can be a challenge, so there will almost always be some ambient light.

So what? I thought we were learning flash? WTF?

You are. You are learning to use it better than most people can. I promise. Ok, so in our example, we shot with a shutter speed (flash sync speed) of 1/250th on our camera. What this will do it ensure that the flash is the main (and sometimes only) source of light that will count in your photo. It will be strong enough to overpower the ambient light in the room. Go ahead and take a picture of your living or dining room at 1/250th, **no flash**, ISO 200, f5.6. Unless it is incredibly light out and you have big windows, your picture is

probably pretty dark. Mine is.

Now set your SS to about 1/60th and set your ISO to about 800. There should be a noticeable difference. Why 1/60th? Generally, that is about the slowest most people can go without causing motion blur using a camera (handheld). You can go lower and slower, because a well calibrated flash will actually freeze motion. However, when you go too low you cannot help but introduce a little blur. And remember we want things as perfect as we can get them without extra work. Besides shutter speed, we can add ambient light by opening up the aperture. Try going down to F3.5 or lower if your lens will go that far.



But that's just natural light shooting!

Yes, it is. But it's just part of the path we take to get where we want to go. What we are looking to do is create a mix of ambient and flash. Depending on how much light is already present, you can get away with minimal flash.

In my example below, it's a bit too bright with my flash at 1/4 (it's 7am on a rainy day) so I need less flash, or some tweaking of my exposure triangle, or both.



What we have done now is created more opportunities for adjustment. We have that extra variable (flash) plus our exposure triangle to come up with a diverse number of scenarios. Need more of the subject in focus? No problem, go to F8 or F11. You can compensate with a high ISO, a slow shutter speed, or more flash. Do you see? Does that make sense? It's like finding 3 extra routes to get to work in the morning!

Here's where my example goes for me: ISO 400, F3.5, SS 1/60 and flash at 1/8th I think. Once we substitute in some food it should be perfect.



If you can think about the 4 variables and tweak on the fly, you can shoot any event, any subject, any meal, pretty much anywhere. As with any kind of photography, it takes practice. You have the memory card, fill it up! Do high & low ISO, play with your aperture, SS and above all, play with the flash. Bounce it off different surfaces and see what happens. Find a part of your home that works for your food shots and find the best angles (we'll cover more on that later), do completely natural light shooting and add just a pop of flash to it for fun. It can warm those colours so much sometimes. The uses are endless. For our purposes here, I generally stick with a shutter

speed of about 1/80 and an ISO of 200-400, that's my personal sweet spot. But you do not have to!



Here is a meal with this setup (ISO 320, SS 1/60, F2.8 and flash at 1/8). It's just a little shallow focus for stock, but I haven't done anything with it to boost it or correct things. It would get in to some agencies as is. But you get the gist. You can see that it looks "natural light" but also has a bit of flash reflecting off the rice and veggies. It is much more noticeable with a full meal with lots of variety.

And here is a very good seller of mine that I took while on vacation in Jamaica, using on-camera flash, in a restaurant. It was reasonably

light inside if I remember correctly, so my flash would've been around 1/8th. The camera settings were ISO 400, F5.6, SS 1/100.

Ultimately, the goal here is to turn your lighting into a variable instead of something you are absolutely dependent on. It gives you much more room to play, create and change a boring meal into something that makes people stop and go "Mmmmm".



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Some tips

- Using a snoot is a less intrusive way to shoot around other people. In an event or at a restaurant, it keeps your flash from blinding people. If you're shooting your meal, this can be very helpful.
- Using less flash means longer battery life. Newer cameras can get away with higher ISO's, even for stock. In my portfolio I have photos at ISO1200. Back in my D200 days, I could not exceed ISO200 for stock.
- Shoot everything you eat. Even if it looks awful. Practice! Lighting and food-staging are important. Bad food well shot can still be good stock, just like before and after photos. You know?

How do we make it "pop" then?

I will show you.



Ok, we now know some of the fundamentals for shooting with a speedlight "on-camera". It is a great starting point for those who are beginning in product or food stock photography, and those who do not have a budget for equipment yet. Done properly, you should be able to take a technically correct photo that can be accepted at most of the major microstock agencies.

Remember, on-camera flash for stock is a **starting point** for your (micro) stock journey. You should expect to tweak, play, and improve your shots to a point where you feel you should move to off camera lighting, studio lighting, or any other aspect that appeals to your creativity.

Make it POP already!

If you want to take an image that is marginal, needs some work, needs "pop", you will need to edit it. I use Lightroom for my edits.

Some use Aperture, Photoshop, GIMP, or some other product. They all do pretty much the same things but focus on different areas of digital work. My examples will use Lightroom and my photos will be in RAW format. I've found mass or bulk editing easiest in Lightroom.



Ok, you've made supper, you've got your setup, you have shot half a dozen or a dozen photos of your food. I upload them to Lightroom and then display in library view. I then go through them one by one using the flag system to "hide" the ones that I don't think are good for uploading or ones that are too similar. It's so simple that if I need to, I can "un-hide" images in case I want to edit one I had discarded.

I then select all of one dish and then add titles, keywords, and copyright information. Then I select the "develop" tab. Within this tab, I generally use these settings:

Exposure, fill light (now called Shadows), blacks, and sometimes vibrance.

I also use the crop/straighten tool if needed. The trick here is to do many edits quickly and easily. I mentioned in the beginning that I consider time an expense, therefore, to keep expenses low and maximize profit, keep your time short. If it is going to take a lot of

time, maybe consider it for a different venue. But that is up to you.

My computer displays slightly darker than most computers apparently. The colour profile is pretty close though. I shoot using auto white-balance, so I don't worry about that much. I up the exposure if needed since microstock shots are generally more acceptable if



they are brighter than you would normally have them. A little boost to the Blacks tab makes the colours stand out a little more too. Don't go overboard though. Fill (Shadows) and vibrance as needed.

Then "export" as the highest quality jpeg and save in a separate folder. Within that folder are all my stock shots, plus two more folders. One marked "pending" another named "submitted". I

move those I want to upload into pending until they have been submitted to the agencies that I want them on. After that, I move them to Submitted.



This image was accepted a few days after I submitted it to my agencies.

And there you have it. If you need an absolute step by step for Lightroom, there are some wonderful free

resources easily found online.

In the meantime, practice. Play with the features and functions. See what they do and how they work together.

Angles & Food Setups

Here's where things can get subjective. We look at different setups for several reasons. My top two are correct lighting and buyer appeal. Both are things you want to have in every stock photo you submit. Otherwise you'll have a bad photo, or worse, a photo that does not sell.

With the near endless diversity in the food niche, you can create pretty much anything and everything. When it comes to stock though, sometimes you don't know if a good idea will translate into a top seller. Starting out (which is what this is all about) you should have



a primary motive for making the food, like I do (I'm hungry) and the secondary reason should be stock. Sounds kinda silly, but stock is a tough market, and doing things "only" for stock will very often lose you money.

Therefore, it makes sense to already be doing something, and if a stock opportunity presents itself, take it. That way, you are making a little "extra" money for something you were already doing.

That really does sound silly

On the surface I agree. It's just semantics. However, I can tell you that my actual stock costs for shooting the food in my portfolio are negligible. The food was already there regardless of me having my camera out. Do you see what I mean? Remember, the average sale commission is well under a dollar. If you spend 30 bucks on a steak "just for stock", you might never recoup the cost if it doesn't sell well. And



forget about profit. Therefore, why not have steak for dinner, and if the opportunity is there, take a few photos for free and make a little pure profit.

You have a meal

Great! The fun part is trying to make your meal look as appealing as possible to a buyer. If you have no idea who your buyers are,

that's ok. If you do have a niche picked out (health food bloggers or small restaurants for example) then hopefully you will have looked at a few in hopes of seeing a trend, style, or market that you can exploit. Personally, when I started shooting food I never bothered. We ate (and still eat) things that we enjoy making. Nowadays though, we do look at, or create trends, in my niche markets.

Most food photographers that I've talked to or studied start with two simple angles; 45 degrees and 90 degrees. You can think of them as "look at or look down". The 45-degree shot is most common, mimicking where a person's eye level would be when they look at a plate of food. The overhead shot is a bit more artsy and I like it a lot. In my experience though, 45 degrees is generally a better seller.

Here are a couple of examples:



The 45 degrees. To be truthful, I'm not a scientist so I don't measure. This is the natural shot for me because of where I stand or sit. You can also factor in the depth of the bowl, distance from the table or any other variable. This shot was ISO 800, SS 1/100, F3.5 with flash at 1/8. This was a meal I made at one of those cooking classes people go to. Shot in a large room with 30 other people milling about.

And this is the overhead of the same meal. I really like the way these come out, and they are useful to buyers. They are also easier to light because they allow for a shallower DOF since everything is at one distance. That means you can increase SS, reduce flash or ISO, or some combination of that. It gives you **options** and you like having every option you can get!



Why do you try to shoot "on white"?

Well, one reason is that I allow buyers the opportunity to cut the subject out from the background, so that they can use it "in" a design. The other is that staging for a larger, more artistic, holistic, family-style, authentic, food experience takes a lot of time and effort and

imagination for me. And remember, time is money. I get a better ROI (return on investment) when I shoot on white or a neutral background. **This does not mean that you shouldn't try anything that strikes your fancy.**

What about the actual "food" setup part?

You know, it can be a lot of fun since you finally get to play with your food again. :) Joking aside, every meal can be composed in a way to show off the best or most appealing parts of a dish.

For example, a burger with the top part of the bun on can be difficult to completely light using the on-camera flash technique you just learned. However, if you turn the burger into an open-faced meal, you can show off much more.

When I talk about staging food, I am not talking about all the tricks and props that food stylists sometimes use to "dress up"



a meal. I don't change anything with my food, and it is always edible at the end. I'm a purist that way. The things that I can change are the actual physical layout on the plates, the lighting, and the dishware.

Usually it's simple stuff, like a dark bowl for a light-coloured food. Variety with your colours is also a pretty big thing, try and get beautiful and fresh vegetables to the forefront for stir-fry, risottos, stews, etc.

Can't cook? No problem.



Although not being able to cook, or having someone who can cook for you, can be a pretty big thing for a food photographer, it's not the end of the world. It is easy to find easy-to-make or ready-made foods to photograph. Beside is some take-out that I re-plated and photographed, since I don't have a deep fryer (sadly not allowed to have one).

Now remember, you have a digital camera and a stationary subject. So, get up and walk around. Do

different angles, focus on a different part of the plate. Make the side dish the star instead of the protein. Do the two angles that I mentioned above, plus as many more that you can think of. I often find a hidden gem of a shot when I am editing. A buyer might just

need a shot of a piece of crispy chicken skin (using the picture above) and crop out everything else.

You make it sound easy, but my shot sucks



As with everything in photography, it's about your own personal creativity. If you're like me, sometimes it's a struggle to feel creative. What I do is shoot the food I have in front of me anyway. Get in the habit of shooting every meal that you can. You will be surprised that after a while, fiddling with your settings starts happening automatically. I can't teach you that, it takes practice. Lots and lots. If you're really stuck,

invest in a cupcake or two and shoot them for hours. At the very least you get a cupcake at the end of it. ;)

Above all, keep the speedlight on your camera if you are serious about trying this my way. Start with a default setting that works for the space you will be shooting in the most, and tweak as needed.

On to keywording

Keywords and meta-tagging are an important part of stock photography. In some ways, it's the most important part. The information written into your photos is what will get it in front of your potential customers. Therefore, it is vitally important that your keys are concise, relevant, and appropriate.

Titles

Descriptions

Keywords (keys)

A decent title is something that will appeal to buyers, but also describe the photo. Try and stay away from adjectives that don't do anything useful like "hot" when describing soup (its usually hot, no need to tell people), or "green" when describing salad. Try and



think more like an advertiser.

For example, instead of this title:



chickpea salad on a big plate,

try:

fresh, healthy chickpea salad with seasonal vegetables and cheese, promoting organic food choices and balanced lifestyles

For descriptions, try very hard to have differences from the title or flesh out the title further. Some agencies will not accept duplicate information in the Title/Description fields. In the example above I would likely write something like this:

farm fresh, gluten free summer salad made with chickpeas or garbanzo beans, seasonal vegetables, and fresh feta cheese,

promoting healthy diet and balanced lifestyle choices for health-conscious families

Not every site uses the information in these fields in their searches, but they will eventually, and it's a good habit to get into. Try and



max out the number of characters you can use. It differs by site, so sometimes using short sentences can work in your favour as well.

Keywords are what gets your picture in front of buyers. I sometimes use keyword programs to generate a list of popular keys, but then I will edit them down quite a bit so that I can add search words that will be unique to my image, and not to others in the same subject.

Why? Because using popular keys **guarantees** competition, they wouldn't be popular otherwise. Remember you are first competing solely on search placement. If you have nothing unique or special in your keys, then you may not even get seen by a prospective buyer. However, if they add that one keyword that virtually no other stock photographer uses, you can appear right up there with the best sellers. It sounds more difficult than it is, and it

happens far more often than you might think. Especially for ethnic foods.

You may also want to avoid some of the more generic keys that "everyone" adds. Things like "photo, nobody, white", and the like. Everyone uses them to the point where they are less useful than you might think.

Generally, you are allowed at least 50 keywords. Use them up if you can. But please keep them relevant.



**yes, even this one sells*

Hey! You've broken every rule you have here!

Yes, my work has been an evolution (or a work in progress) since 2005 in some places. In the beginning, keywords were fast n' loose with the rules as they

are written nowadays. I have many pictures that likely were not keyed correctly or as accurately as they would be today. That's what happens with the internet. It is there forever. :)

Being humble, there is always someone better ...

One of the most enjoyable things about photography is that there virtually are **NO LIMITS** to how you utilize your imagination with technologies available to you. You can take stills, interactive gifs, movies, audio, music, whatever. There are a million things people have not yet tried, and it blows my mind every time one little door is opened by someone who doesn't see the limits.

Conversely, in the microstock world, there is almost always someone better. Whether it's better technical quality or imagination, odds are that when you start your journey, someone took a better picture of what you're trying to achieve.



Thanks a lot! You suck for saying that.

The point I'm trying (badly) to get across, is to not get too hung up on your photo. I have seen innumerable people defending their photos against critiques and reviews far beyond the point of being reasonable. **Your stock photos are not your children.** They are “work product”. Treat a critique and a review as a learning tool to make you a better photographer.



Take for example this photo, one of my first forays into

food photography. I was lucky at the time that it even got in, but I was on a streak that week. It is poorly plated, poorly edited/cropped, and looks fake. It tasted great, but that did not translate to the photo. A good food photo should make you hungry, this one doesn't.

In hindsight, I can see the faults clearly. I had, before submitting, put it up for critique and it got some very honest opinions. I must admit, I was a bit crushed about it, and I wanted to tell people that it was awesome, my family said so! I said so! However, I took a

deep breath and looked past my own opinion, and it turned out that the advice was solid.

What I started doing was analyzing photos that I thought were similar in style to what I wanted to achieve, and then worked at duplicating the layout and lighting. Using only my speedlight, I found that while I couldn't always get things the same as some studio quality shots, I could in fact, get pretty darn close. And in the learning, I started using different setups, additional lighting ideas, and developing my own style and unique skill sets.



Here's one I did a while ago, and the difference is noticeable. Besides adding an extra light behind (while still using on-camera flash), the plating and cropping helped make this one “pop”.

The end of this ramble is that there is always room to improve, to change and advance. Critiques are usually coming from a good place, so treat the majority as solid advice. If you don't know which expert

to listen to, then look at their work and see if the things they have done justify them being someone you should listen to (this applies to me as well btw). Sometimes, it's just people blowing wind. You can usually tell just by the nature of the critique. There are always trolls everywhere on the web.

The most important thing is to not let yourself get discouraged. This is work. Fun work, creative work too, but at the end of the day you are producing a meal to be eaten, and a product to be sold. If you never improved and advanced your skills, I think that would be a pretty sad thing. Don't you?

Where to submit? Why? How many?

So, you think you're ready eh? You've taken a dozen or so different, great photos and you want to start rolling in the cash. What is the next step? Well it all depends....

Really? It depends?? Sheesh, thanks for that glowing bit of wisdom...

Yes, it depends on many things. What kind of niche will you explore? What quality of photo you produce, is it more suited to a mid-stock or RM site? How about exclusivity? Do you want all your eggs in one basket?

What would I do? I would submit probably to the top 4 sites out there that payout regularly for good artists (at the time of this writing they are Shutterstock, Adobe, iStock, and Alamy). You can find the list at some microstock forums, just do a search. The “best” one I have found is a forum for contributors from all around the world called MicroStockGroup (www.microstockgroup.com) sometimes referred to as MSG. The forums can get kind of raucous, and there is a spirit of elitism in some of the characters, but there is a lot of

information about every microstock site out there. So rather than me listing my favorite sites here, check them out at a forum.

But... I'm lost... Where?



Start with the top micro agencies listed on a forum. They, with enough volume and quality, have the most consistent payouts for many stock submitters. It is a long, hard grind for someone starting out to hit regular payouts. Without something really setting you apart from the rest, you will need thousands of images in your portfolio. There are exceptions, and a gifted and creative individual can do just as well with a few hundred, and conversely someone who can only get the technical

part right might take many thousands more.

**Above is my infamous cheese shot. It's ugly, its bland and unappealing. But it sells consistently since 2011. Why? It is useful.*

The challenge here is to be unique, but profitable. If you can't get that edge in imagination (where I struggle) then work on technical and keywording skills. There are many roads to success here, but most of them are a long hard slog.

When do you start and how many?

Every agency has a minimum requirement. Sometimes its three, sometimes ten. Really, when you think you've done the best job you can, on at least that many photos, why wait? You can (usually) re-apply if you don't get in.

Feeding the beast

Long time shooters starting at new agencies all say, "don't upload your entire portfolio all at once". A lot of factors go into searches, including time

and date of submission in some places. Ideally, you do weekly uploads. The key for many is consistency. Whether its five images or five hundred, weekly is *currently* the way to go. This may change.

This is also a good way to get familiar with uploading, ftp, keys, etc.

Let's do more flash work, I'm not sure all of you have it yet.



More Flash...



I was helping a friend get better with their food shooting for stock with some critiques, so I thought this might be useful and relevant. Remember a bunch of posts ago, we covered a little about what you are trying to achieve with your stock photo. I broke it down into a few easy steps that help turn a decent photo into a decent selling photo.

I did some shots last night over supper that will help illustrate my workflow, and how I go about doing things. I used an inexpensive soft box plus my on-camera speedlight, but I could have easily gotten sale-able photos just using the speedlight. The fundamentals remain the same though. So here we go.

What you want to do when taking a photo for stock?

Make it useful to as many different buyers as possible. If you have "just food" that can be put into as many different scenarios or designs as possible, you have made it better for multiple buyers. One way to do this is to isolate your food. make it the only subject, no cropped sides so that it can be used without needing to ride an edge.



Make it easy to adapt to external design elements. An isolated image, or an image easy to isolate like this one, allows a designer to use it actually "in" a design as opposed to just being a picture in an article.

Cropping. When is it useful? It can be used as a design element riding the edge of a page or border. The other idea a crop can display



is a leading edge. You can use the food to direct the reader's eye to the message your customer is trying to convey.

Additionally, you can create white space or ad space yourself within your image. Sometimes it's easier to show a buyer where the ad potential is in your image.

Learn from your photos. If you're like me, photography is fun. It's what you love doing, so keep doing it! If you have a meal where it is easy to do like my wings example here, re-plate it

a few times and re-shoot. Instead of having one plate with a few stock images, I now have three or four different shoots, with a few each. I've quadrupled the earning potential from one meal.



There you go, a few tips about plating for selling.

A word about ethics...

What could there possibly be to write about when it comes to stock photography and ethics? I mean really, we are all creatives. Ethics should be a concern for people who deal with money, or confidential information, or something...

A lot of stock shooters, when starting out, use friends and families for modelling. candid shots that came out nicely can often sell very well. But there are pitfalls and caveats to working this way. Stock agencies are, for the most part, purely software run, where a human eyeball very often does not enter the equation when a buyer is perusing the library or buying a photo. Sometimes, it is up to the photographer to police their work online, to ensure their photos are not used inappropriately.



What is sensitive use?

Sensitive use is one of those terms' agencies may use to license your photo for uses that fall outside the regular agreement. While most uses can be benign, some will include being used in contexts like political statements, sexuality, and other areas where you may or may not be pleased to see your favorite niece or nephew being the face of. It is extremely important that you take the time to read

about sensitive use before agreeing or opting in to sell your images under this license. I no longer do “people” stock photography (except for fingers in the work like the photo above), so I am less worried about it.

What about editorial?



Editorial is a great place to make money in stock. Like fashion, it can run the gamut from red carpet shooting to street photography, to paparazzo shooting. The limits in this area are the laws of the lands you're shooting in, plus your own personal ethics about taking photos of people who may or may not want their photos taken.

Poaching

Poaching ideas is a sad fact of life in microstock. Any good seller generally gets copied and copied again. It's unfair, it's against copyright law if it's too close to the original, and it is horribly unethical. Using another artist's work **for inspiration** is wonderful but copying another artist's work is beyond the pale. Even though it's a worldwide industry, successful micro artists are all connected, and we find

these things out quickly.

There you have it, on-camera flash techniques for microstock food photography. I hope you found at least something in here useful.

Enjoy and happy shooting!

