



LIFTING THE LID ON FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

By Kate Hennessy

Next time you tuck into a beef vindaloo, spare a thought for the camera. A taste sensation it may be, but to the keen eye of the food photographer your dinner is brown and toneless and nearly – but not quite – as challenging to shoot as ice cream.

Yes, food photographers see food differently. They consider aspects such as how fast it deteriorates, the transient nature of soufflé and what colours will perfectly offset the delectability of a dish. They even call the main food item a “hero”.

Yet according to the professionals, monotone curries and disintegrating desserts are not your main concern. Taking wonderful food shots depends much more on those time-worn photographic skills: lighting, composition, concept and speed.

THE MYTHS

Food photography is awash in myth. People love to wink when the topic is raised and tell you the more scandalous stories of “how it’s really done”. In honour of this popular tradition, let’s throw some of the main culprits on the table: French fries dipped in glue; cut glass mimicking sugar granules on biscuits; hair tonic, white glue or thick cream in place of milk; expanding foam filling the abdominal cavity of a plump BBQ chicken; gloss varnish spray used for that pizza-straight-out-of-the-oven effect; clutch oil replacing olive oil drizzle; hairspray on just

about everything, plus a (literally!) dizzying array of chemicals, bleach, glycerin, detergent, colourant and household cleaners. Lastly, that elephant in the room of food photography: the tampon dunked in boiling water and deposited under the ‘hero’ food item to create a pleasing steam effect.

A most unappetising list. But what’s fact and what’s fiction? Photographer Ian Batchelor supplied pictures for issue three to issue 99 of *Cuisine* magazine. He now concentrates on award-winning book collaborations such as *Fresh* and *Viva l’Italia* (with writer Julie Biuso). His corporate clients have included Nestlé, Maggi and Carnation.

Experienced as Batchelor is, however, he’s never used these mythical methods.

“Thinned-down yoghurt in place of milk, perhaps; and I have used acrylic ice cubes,” he confesses. “In fact, acrylic ones don’t float so I have special glass-blown ice cubes that are more realistic. But the rest of those methods would prevent eating the food afterwards and that’s half the fun! Fortunately, the food these days is usually very edible.”

Aaron MacLean agrees. MacLean merged his passions for food and photography after 10 years in the restaurant industry and his clients include New Zealand’s leading food and lifestyle magazines, primarily *Cuisine*.

“The biggest myth [concerning food photography] is all the crazy things people think get slathered onto everything,” says MacLean. “Product packaging photography, or 1980s food porn

1. Aaron Mclean For Cuisine



perhaps, but honestly, I've never done any of those things."

Sydney-based lifestyle photographer Anson Smart lists *Vogue Entertaining & Travel*, *Gourmet Traveller*, *InStyle magazine* and *Condé Nast Traveller* on his client portfolio, alongside corporate clients such as Woolworths, Qantas and Country Road.

"I never use hairspray or bleach but sometimes a little light water mist can make food glisten," says Smart. "Blowtorches are used and people sometimes mix water with glycerin."

Smart dismisses the other methods as urban myth then, though he does have a tip.

"Dangle some Sellotape behind the food and if you wave it quickly enough, just out of shot, it can look like steam," he says, adding: "Apparently, I have never done it."

Toothpicks, glue and various other structures to support dishes are not uncommon. "You do what you have to do to get the shot but at the end of the day, if the food's not fresh, it'll never look good," says Smart.

STYLISTS GALORE

We've all seen them. Photos of rhubarb crumble that make your belly growl; images of ravioli that inspire a weekend love-in with your pasta maker. Compare these photos to the lacklustre ingredients in your fridge, however, and it's no wonder people gossip about forgeries. So how do they do it?

The profession is divided into editorial (magazines, books and so on) and advertising (product-focused work). Editorial projects generally offer photographers more creative leeway and involve whole dishes and a theme. Think 'Christmas', 'spring' or 'outdoors'. Editorial shoots usually result in more images for the photographer's portfolio and can often open doors to advertising work. Advertising shoots tend to be both more lucrative and more creatively confined.

Food photography is a team affair. Up to 10 participants can be involved, especially

for advertising shoots, where a client account manager and an advertising agency representative might also be present. A typical shoot will rope in a photographer, a food stylist, a props stylist, a creative director and assistants to most of these roles.

"You need to love food but also work well with a team in a confined area and accept other people's opinions," says Smart.

Much of the conceptual work is done in advance. A colour palette is settled upon, the props stylist sources props – linen, utensils, glassware and so on – and the food stylist sources the most attractive food.

Shoot day is about fast execution of the concept. The props are laid out, the lighting is arranged and test shots are taken to get a feel for both. If shooting on digital, the photographer will generally shoot 'tethered' (attached to a computer) in order to see the images on screen. "By the time the first dish is plated you have a plan for how the day will roughly progress," says Smart.

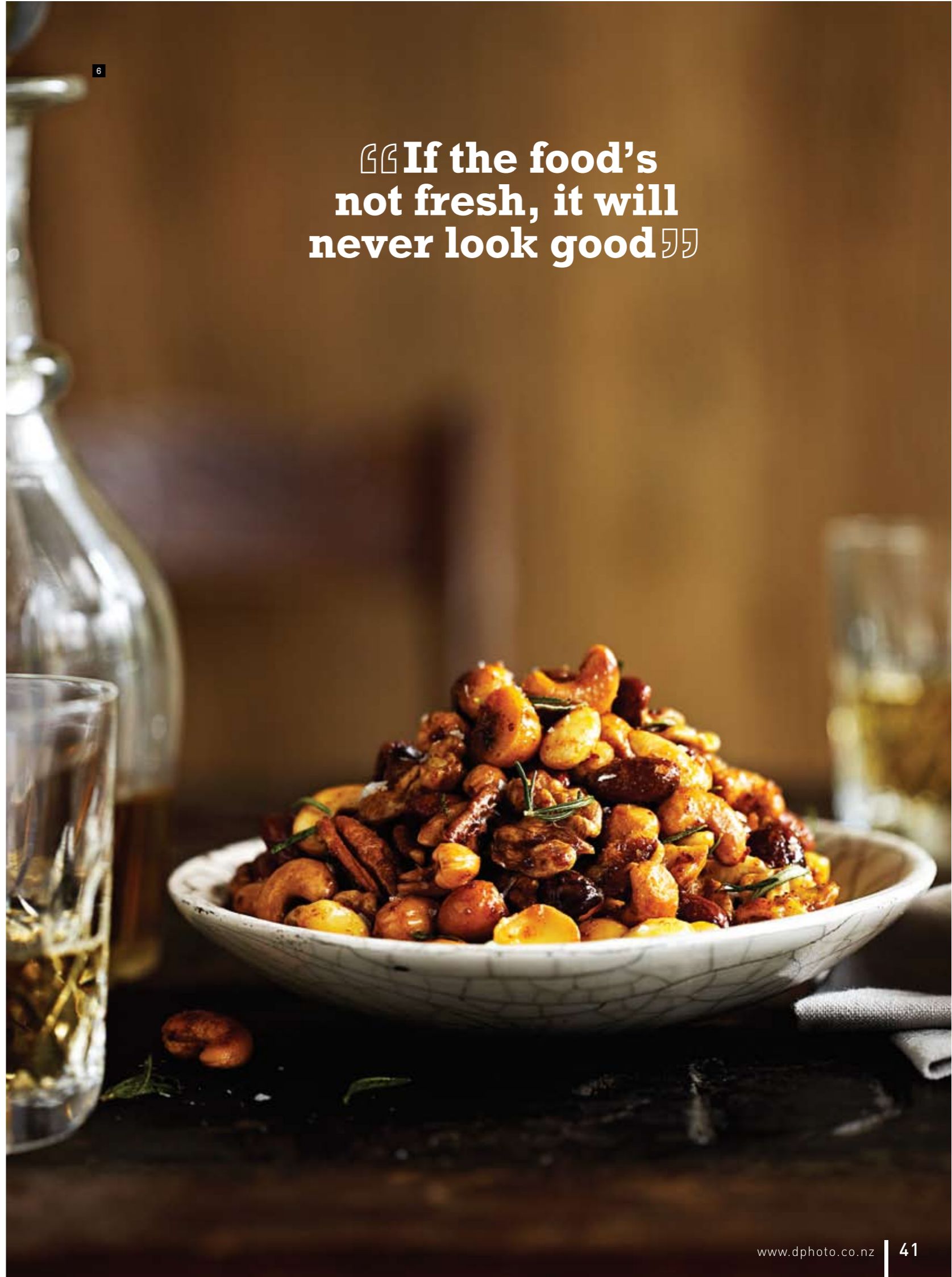
Communication skills are important, Batchelor stresses. "Different elements of food deteriorate at different times so it's important to communicate with the food stylist and be ready to capture the food at its peak."

Create a mood board as you go to ensure you don't repeat the same image, suggests Smart.

"It's easy to get lazy and follow one look but every dish is different, so find an angle that best represents the food," he says. "Anything brown and toneless like curry is really hard to shoot, so keep your photographs evolving by changing light directions and angles. And remember, it's like portraits or still life: you need to find the personality of the dish."

- 2. Ian Batchelor
- 3. Ian Batchelor
- 4. Ian Batchelor
- 5. Ian Batchelor
- 6. Aaron McLean for Dish

“If the food's not fresh, it will never look good”



SPEED IS THE KEY

But don't spend too long getting acquainted with your risotto. The appearance of food changes after it leaves the kitchen, sometimes rapidly. Speed is critical.

MacLean likens the pace to sport photography or photojournalism. "When that hot plate of food arrives, shoot it and it'll look great, hang around too long and it won't."

"In some cases 30 seconds is too long for the food to sit," says Batchelor. "Sauces can separate in an instant."

Batchelor spends a lot of time pre-visualising the outcome so that when the food arrives, he's ready.

"Ice cream used to be very tricky. Its transient nature and the 4x5 film we used made it quite a

IAN BATCHELOR USES...

Camera: Imacon digital back: a 528, 22 megapixel multi-shot back.

He attaches this to either a Contax 645 or to the Rollei X-act 2.

"The Rollei is a small view camera which offers complete control of movements on the lens and film plane."

Lens: Contax 645 uses a 120 macro and a 35mm wide.

"The 120 gives an incredible bokeh effect at wider apertures, while the 35mm draws the viewer invitingly into the image."

Flash: Bron flash in the studio; sometimes a fill flash on location.

ANSON SMART USES...

Camera (film and digital):

Film - Mamiya 67 and Contax 645.

"I prefer to shoot film with a medium-format camera as I like the format/size of image and the lens is very good."

Digital - Mamiya 645 with a phase one back; occasionally a Canon 1Ds MkIII.

Lens: Generally a longer lens and a mix between standard and longer focal lenses. Medium Format - 80mm up to 150mm 35mm Canon - 50mm up to 120mm

No flash

AARON MACLEAN USES...

Camera: A medium format digital back.

"This gets the feel and drop-off I used to get on film plus a fantastic clean and detailed file."

Lens: Generally a longer lens for straight close-ups and a wider lens to build a scene.

Flash: Mostly none, but flash and continuous artificial light when exact consistency is required.



task. Eventually, a good-looking stable substitute came along, taking the excitement away and returning it to an almost still life exercise. Now with digital it's possible to get great results using real ice-cream again."

Lighting needs to be set up and tested in advance. The biggest mistake a budding food photographer can make is being unprepared lighting-wise when the food arrives. If it's a short-life dish and you don't get satisfactory shots, re-preparing the food can waste a lot of time.

"With all food, the fresher it is, the better it looks," says Smart. "You do have some time, but things dry out and when you try to recreate moisture it never looks the same. Cooked items don't last long. Most salads photograph well but they will wilt."

Compose the image with a stand-in prop, suggests Smart, then adjust the lighting, find the right angle and put the 'hero food' in place last.

ALL ABOUT APERTURE

If you're aiming to reproduce the very shallow depth of field used in many classic food photos, you'll need a wide aperture setting and the fastest lens you can get.

"Aperture is more important [than shutter speed] as it can be used to selectively focus and hone in on an important element of the food or alternatively to ensure that the whole image is

sharp," says Batchelor.

Try setting your camera to aperture priority mode, and remember, you will need to bring your camera physically close to the food to achieve short depth of field.

"The focal point should be on the 'hero' of the image, the main dish," says Smart. "Focal fall-off helps you bring attention to a point in the image."

MacLean agrees that shallow depth of field helps emphasise the food over the background, but feels it's not essential.

"There was a trend for very shallow depth of field but at the moment it runs both ways. It really depends on the look you're aiming for. A straight close-up probably benefits more from shallow depth of field."

The influence of television cooking shows and the effects of the global economic downturn on people's wallets have made cooking at home more popular, says Smart, which has in turn affected food photography.

"It's become a lot more relaxed and the food is looking more attainable," he says. "There will be a bit of mess on the plate or on the table. It doesn't look as stifled; salads are thrown out how you'd throw them out at home and things aren't over-groomed."

7. Ian Batchelor
8. Aaron McLean for Cuisine

