



lighting

for food and drink
photography

Steve Bavister



lighting

for food and drink
photography

Steve Bavister

A RotoVision Book
Published and distributed by
RotoVision SA

RotoVision SA, Sales, Production & Editorial Office
Sheridan House, 112/116A Western Road
Hove, East Sussex BN3 1DD, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1273 72 72 68
Fax: +44 (0)1273 72 72 69
E-mail: sales@rotovision.com
Website: www.rotovision.com

© RotoVision SA 2001

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without permission of the copyright holder.

ISBN 2-88046-570-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Book design by Red Design

Production and separations in Singapore by
ProVision Pte. Ltd.

Tel: +65 334 7720
Fax: +65 334 7721





contents

6: Introduction

lighting... for food and drink photography
the food and drink market
talents required
lighting issues
equipment matters
working together

10: styling for food and drink home economist Janice Murphitt food stylist Mikael Beckman

14: making light work more doesn't mean better controlling the contrast light isn't white daylight moods studio control which lights when? accessories that assist measure for measure

18: glossary of lighting terms

21: practicalities understanding the lighting diagrams

22: daylight / ambient

36: a single source

70: two lights

114: sophisticated set-ups

152: directory

160: acknowledgements



lighting

for food and drink
photography

Steve Bavister





lighting

for food and drink
photography

Steve Bavister

A RotoVision Book
Published and distributed by
RotoVision SA

RotoVision SA, Sales, Production & Editorial Office
Sheridan House, 112/116A Western Road
Hove, East Sussex BN3 1DD, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1273 72 72 68
Fax: +44 (0)1273 72 72 69
E-mail: sales@rotovision.com
Website: www.rotovision.com

© RotoVision SA 2001

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without permission of the copyright holder.

ISBN 2-88046-570-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Book design by Red Design

Production and separations in Singapore by
ProVision Pte. Ltd.

Tel: +65 334 7720
Fax: +65 334 7721





contents

6: Introduction

lighting... for food and drink photography
the food and drink market
talents required
lighting issues
equipment matters
working together

10: styling for food and drink home economist Janice Murphitt food stylist Mikael Beckman

14: making light work more doesn't mean better controlling the contrast light isn't white daylight moods studio control which lights when? accessories that assist measure for measure

18: glossary of lighting terms

21: practicalities understanding the lighting diagrams

22: daylight / ambient

36: a single source

70: two lights

114: sophisticated set-ups

152: directory

160: acknowledgements

lighting...

Whether you developed your photographic lighting skills by going to college, watching master photographers at work, from reading books and magazines, or simply through trial and error, you will by now have built up a solid repertoire of techniques that you come back to time and again. But endlessly recycling your set-ups quickly becomes boring and repetitive – not only for you, but also for your clients. What's more, styles of lighting change over time, and without realising it you can suddenly find your work looking dated – and neither successful nor saleable. Given that lighting is arguably the single most important element in any photograph, it's essential to keep up with contemporary trends.

That's where RotoVision's LIGHTING... series of books comes in. Each title features a selection of

cutting-edge images from leading exponents in that particular field who have been persuaded to share their lighting secrets with the world at large. In most cases we have talked to the photographer at length to find out exactly where everything was positioned and why one kind of accessory was used rather than another. At the same time we picked up lots of useful general hints and tips which have also been included.

Some of the images rely just upon daylight; in others, ambient illumination is combined with flash or tungsten lighting; and some feature advanced multi-head arrangements. As a result the LIGHTING... series provides a wonderfully rich smorgasbord of information which would be impossible for you to get any other way. It's like standing in the studios of some of the world's



most successful image-makers and watching them at work. Each self-contained two- or four-page section focuses on an individual shoot or looks at the approach of a particular photographer in more depth. Three-dimensional lighting diagrams show you the set-up at a glance – allowing you to replicate it for your own use – while the commentary explains in detail what was involved. Whenever possible we have also included additional images that were either taken at the same time or using the same technique, or illustrating an alternative treatment.

Who will find this book useful? Anyone looking to improve their photography, whether it be for pleasure or profit. Professionals, or anyone looking to make the move from amateur to professional, will find it an invaluable source of

inspiration to spice up their own image-making. It doesn't matter how much experience we have as photographers – there's always something new to learn. Any of the photographs here could help kick-start the engine of your imagination and get your creative juices flowing in a new direction.

Alternatively, you may be looking to solve a particular picture-taking problem. You've got a job to do and you're not sure what would be the best approach. Or you've run short of ideas and want to try out some new techniques. If so, simply flip through the pages until you come across an image that has the kind of feel or look you're after and then find out how it was created.

Art directors, too, will find each title in the series an invaluable primer on contemporary styles as

well as a source for new photographic talent. Ultimately, though, **LIGHTING...** will appeal to anyone who loves looking at great pictures and wants to enjoy them for their own sake, with no other motive in mind.



It's ironic that, at a time when people in developed countries increasingly buy their food in a prepared, processed form, ready to pop in the microwave or oven, interest in food has never been greater – as the proliferation of television programmes, best-selling books and magazine articles on the subject shows. Naturally this booming market provides opportunities for photographers either working in this area or looking to move into it. Never has there been more demand for high-quality images of food and drink.

the food and drink market

Food packaging is one obvious area of growth. In the days when people prepared meals from scratch they bought the ingredients themselves – potatoes, onions, chicken, rhubarb. Such things didn't need photographing, because you could see what they were, and hold them in your hand. With ready-to-cook meals that's not the case. Photographs are required on the box to show you what it will look like once it's been heated and served. With hundreds of different brands and thousands of different products, this multi-billion-pound industry has a voracious appetite for creative packaging images.

Of course, consumers cannot be expected simply to discover new lines in the shops. They must be encouraged to look for them through advertising – one of the most lucrative areas of food and drink photography to get into. With the enormous price of a page in a quality publication, and a poster site costing a small fortune, the fees paid to photographers seem relatively small to the companies involved. Specialist food magazines aside (of which there are an increasing number), food and drink coverage is an essential part of the mix provided by many of the mass circulation magazines aimed at women. The next time you're in a store selling a wide range of magazines, just spend a few minutes flipping through a selection and discovering how many pages are devoted to the subject, and how many images are used as illustration. Most newspapers also feature food and drink on a regular basis. And that's without considering the hundreds of dedicated food books published each year. How can you take a slice of this lucrative pie? Well, not surprisingly the competition for glamorous and well-paid work of this kind is cut-throat, so you'll need a decent portfolio of images to even get your foot in the door. The good news is that the barriers to entry

are low, and getting started couldn't be easier. Simply stop by your local supermarket, buy a selection of produce, and you're on your way.

One good way of building up your skills and marketability whilst earning a return is to become a contributor to one of the photo libraries specialising in food and drink photography. Providing they feel you have the required talent, they will normally be willing to provide you with details of their current 'wants' and give you feedback should your initial efforts fall slightly short of the mark. When you set your sights higher, and start thinking about shooting cooked food, you will probably find a friend or family member who's handy in the kitchen to prepare it attractively for you. Then, once you begin to get established, you can afford to start hiring home economists and stylists as necessary to fulfil your commissions.

talents required

Food and drink photography is essentially a specialised area of still-life photography. One of the key skills is patience – the ability to work painstakingly at putting together the perfect shot. As you're working with such a small canvas, you need to pay careful attention to detail, and be meticulously clean, as crockery and silverware will show every fingerprint and speck of dust. You'll also need to be sufficiently obsessive to want to sort through a dozen punnets of strawberries to find the three fruits that have the best shape. Naturally, you'll have to be creative, as you'll find yourself faced with the same subject time and again and be expected to come up with something that's new and exciting.

Like all areas of photography, food and drink is subject to fashions and trends. Right now the most common style features an extremely narrow zone of focus, with just a tiny part of the subject sharp and the rest blurring into the background. It's essential to keep up-to-date with what's new, and the best way to do that is to subscribe to magazines that feature cutting-edge food image-making.

lighting issues

You'll need to be imaginative with your lighting, adapting it to the needs of the subject and the requirements of the client. Daylight is occasionally used, but more often it is studio lighting arranged

to create pseudo-daylight effects. Most practitioners seem to go for electronic flash, with only a handful choosing tungsten sources – although these are seeing a resurgence in the shape of the continuous HMI sources used for digital capture. As long as care is taken with subjects that might wilt or melt – such as salads and ice cream – the heat generated by tungsten heads or flash modelling lights presents no real problem, though it makes sense to switch them off when not in use.

As often as not, the lighting required is soft and shadowless, and for that reason heads are often directed through purpose-made trace screens which can be moved closer to or further away from the subject or light, giving a high degree of control over the resulting illumination. Black card scrims or flags are also widely used to block off excess light falling onto or around the subject.

Often just one light is used, perhaps with reflectors. If screens are not being used then a softbox will usually be fitted to diffuse the output. With textured subjects such as biscuits, backlighting is commonly employed, with a light pointing back towards the camera, sometimes supplemented by a fill light overhead and/or a lower-powered head facing it.

Because sets are mostly small, many practitioners use lots of little reflectors and mirrors to lighten shadow areas and place highlights where they are wanted. These are often held in place by clamps – except for shaving mirrors, which can be swivelled to direct light where required.

equipment matters

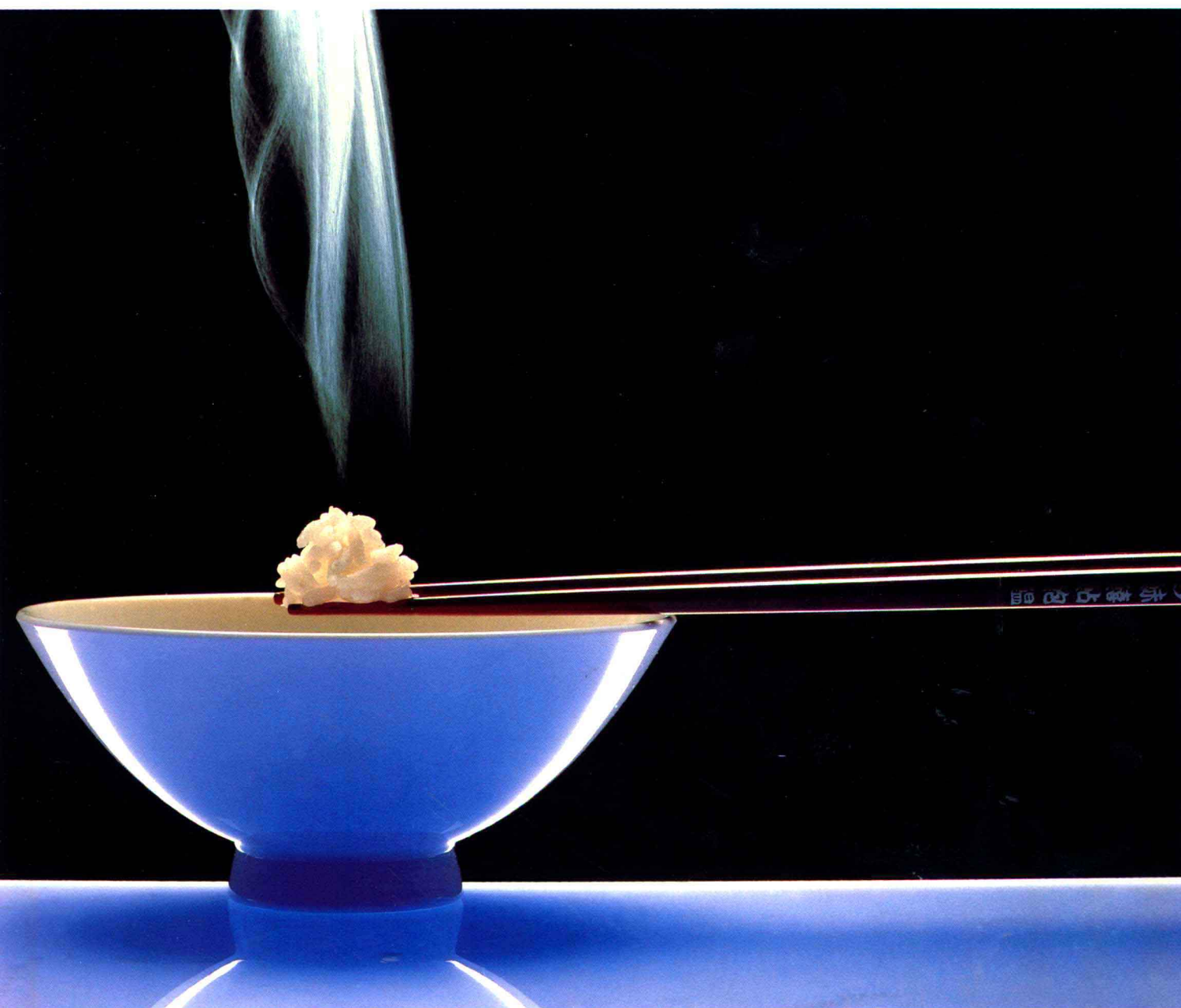
The enormous improvements in film quality over recent years have resulted in many professional areas of photography moving to roll-film cameras from large-format. Apart from a handful of exceptions, however, that's not true of food and drink photography, where 5 x 4 inch and 10 x 8 inch models continue to rule the roost. There are two main reasons for this: first, because maximum detail and clarity are required by clients, and second, because movements are usually necessary for controlling perspective and depth-of-field. Lenses tend to be standard or slightly telephoto focal lengths – with wide-angles rarely used except where more of the background is included. Longer telephotos are used where it's not possible to move the camera closer.

The static nature of subjects such as food and drink make them ideal for high-quality digital capture, so it's no surprise that an increasing number of photographers working in this area are now using digital backs instead of film. The benefits are obvious: you can see the results immediately, and move onto the next shot with confidence; you eliminate the cost of materials and processing; and the client doesn't need to have the image scanned. Film, though, retains a loyal following – and since most images are shot for publication, it's transparency emulsions that are generally used. With its vivid colours and biting sharpness, Velvia is a popular choice – but other slide films from Fuji and Kodak with ratings up to ISO 100 are widely employed. Most food and drink studios also have a stock of Polaroid materials to check on the exposure, lighting and composition.

working together

Sometimes food and drink photographers will find themselves working alone, but this is the exception rather than the rule, and most likely when the subject is a relatively simple still-life composed of raw ingredients or bottles and glasses. Once the shot becomes more sophisticated, and includes food which has to be cooked or prepared, then more often than not the studio will be buzzing with possibly a home economist or chef, a stylist, an art director, set builders and any assistants. Having many creative individuals working together in what is often a pressurised environment could be a recipe for conflict and friction, but generally shoots are good-natured affairs with each person being allowed to make contributions according to their area of expertise.

... for food and drink photography



styling for food and drink

home economist Janice Murphitt

What can home economists contribute to a food shoot – and are they essential?

They can make an enormous difference to the quality and style of the finished pictures. Usually they will have studied food technology, nutrition and development, and will know how to prepare, cook and present food so it looks as attractive and appealing as possible. However, if it's a still-life food shot, using raw ingredients such as fruit or vegetables, it may not make sense to have a home economist present all the way through the shoot. Instead you could ask them to shop for you – to go out and get the best possible examples of the foods you're using – perhaps with accompanying leaf stems etc. to make it more interesting. If there's anything that needs to be cooked or made, it's worth investing in the skills and experience of a home economist, who will have an awareness of how things look when photographed. They will be thinking about textures and colours and should know many useful techniques for getting the best results.

A cheese wire will cut gateaux more cleanly than a knife. Vegetables should be cooked only briefly, so they have bright colours and clear surfaces. Mixing glycerine with water creates nice droplets instead of just running off. And if you roast a turkey until it's golden brown, as soon as you take it out it shrivels, wrinkles and looks dreadful. But if you cook it for half an hour rather than the full four hours, and then brush over it with Marmite mixture or varnish, you get that wholesome, tasty appearance that is required.

How do home economists work?

It depends upon the job, and sometimes it's not until you get to the studio that you know what you're going to be doing that day. Everyday work is packaging and advertising, where products come to the studio and you have to show such things as a ready meal on a plate, a spoon of yoghurt with a topping, or a pie baked to look really beautiful. You're normally given a tight brief which you have to follow carefully.

With editorial, it's a case of cooking the recipes and then putting them on the plate as attractively as you can. If you haven't written the recipe yourself it will be sent to you, and you shop and prep for the shot, getting all the ingredients beforehand, so you have to spend the minimum time in the studio on each recipe. Sometimes the recipes are unworkable, especially those from leading chefs who have facilities available to them people don't have at home – and you have to figure out how you can make it feasible in a

domestic situation. With editorial you've got some leeway, and can add garnishes to improve things, but you must remain true to the written recipe.

Sometimes clients want something special, such as really gorgeous chocolate éclairs of different shapes and sizes, with different types of cream inside. This can take a day of prepping and trying it out. In the studio, I'll often be asked to start by supplying a mock-up so the photographer can check the lighting and arrange the composition. They would normally then do a Polaroid and sometimes a test shot. Once everyone is happy with the results we'll often just go for it, only doing more mock-ups and tests if the set changes dramatically. The most important thing is having the ability to correct things that may be wrong or go wrong. You can't just say 'It won't work', because everyone's looking at you to make it right.

Is there 'creative friction' between the photographer, home economist, stylist and art director?

The home economist works closely with the photographer and any other professionals on the shoot. It's very much teamwork. In my experience there's rarely any conflict. When there's a query on the food and how it should be or look, then it's normally down to the stylist, but it's the photographer, together with the art director if they're present, who has the last word. The whole team has to make sure the shot is a success.

Are food pictures ever faked?

Editorial is never faked. People need to be able to read the recipe and make it for themselves – and the picture must reflect what it will actually look like. One of the advantages of using an experienced home economist is that their extensive knowledge of food enables them to get the best out of it without cheating. In advertising and packaging work faking isn't that common, but with some products it makes things easier.

Ice cream can be a problem – because of the 'melt factor'. If you take a scoop and put it on a cone it looks wonderful – for a few seconds. Some companies are quite happy for you to make up fake ice cream using a sugar paste mixture, which looks absolutely perfect. I was recently asked to help with a shot of yoghurt on a teaspoon being lifted out of the pot, but the yoghurt wouldn't stay on the spoon, it kept running off. In situations like that you have to be able to improvise, while keeping the product the same colour and texture – and I did that by mixing in a little cornflour.

What skills does a home economist need?

A good background in home economics, because you do so often need to draw upon that knowledge, and then lots of practical experience of working with many different foods – so you're aware of the pitfalls and what to do when things go wrong.

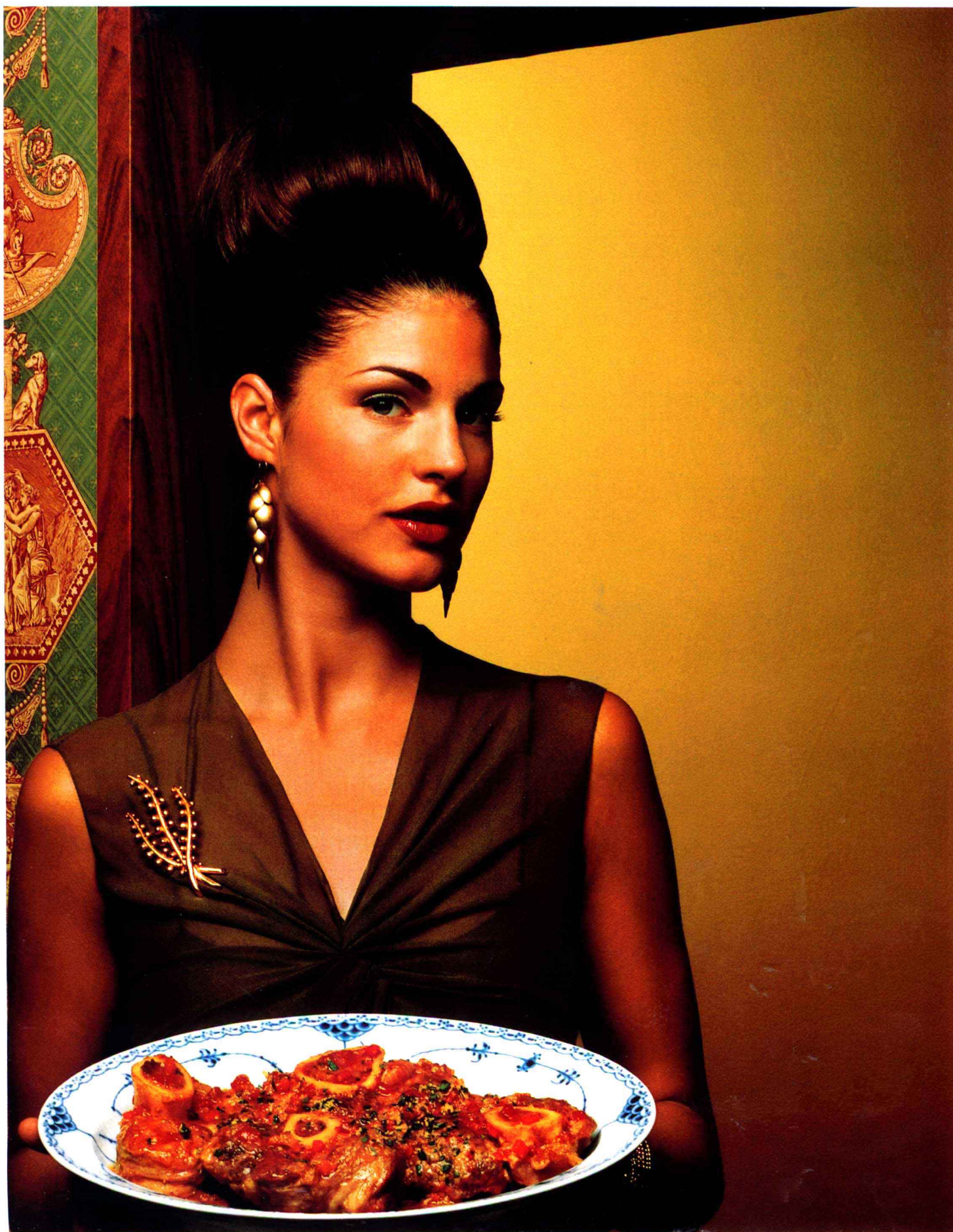
You've got to be well-organised. If you're shooting a succession of different meals in the course of a day, you need to prepare and cook them so they're ready when the photographer wants them. It's also important to have plenty of spares in case there's something wrong with the first one, along with component parts such as gravy or vegetables. With pies, I would always cook at least four, plus one that I can break up and take things from. You've also got to be able to plan ahead. You can't just think, 'Today I'm doing a roast turkey', because you might also need stuffing balls, bacon rolls or roasted chestnuts. If you go with nothing, you have nothing to contribute. You have to go equipped.

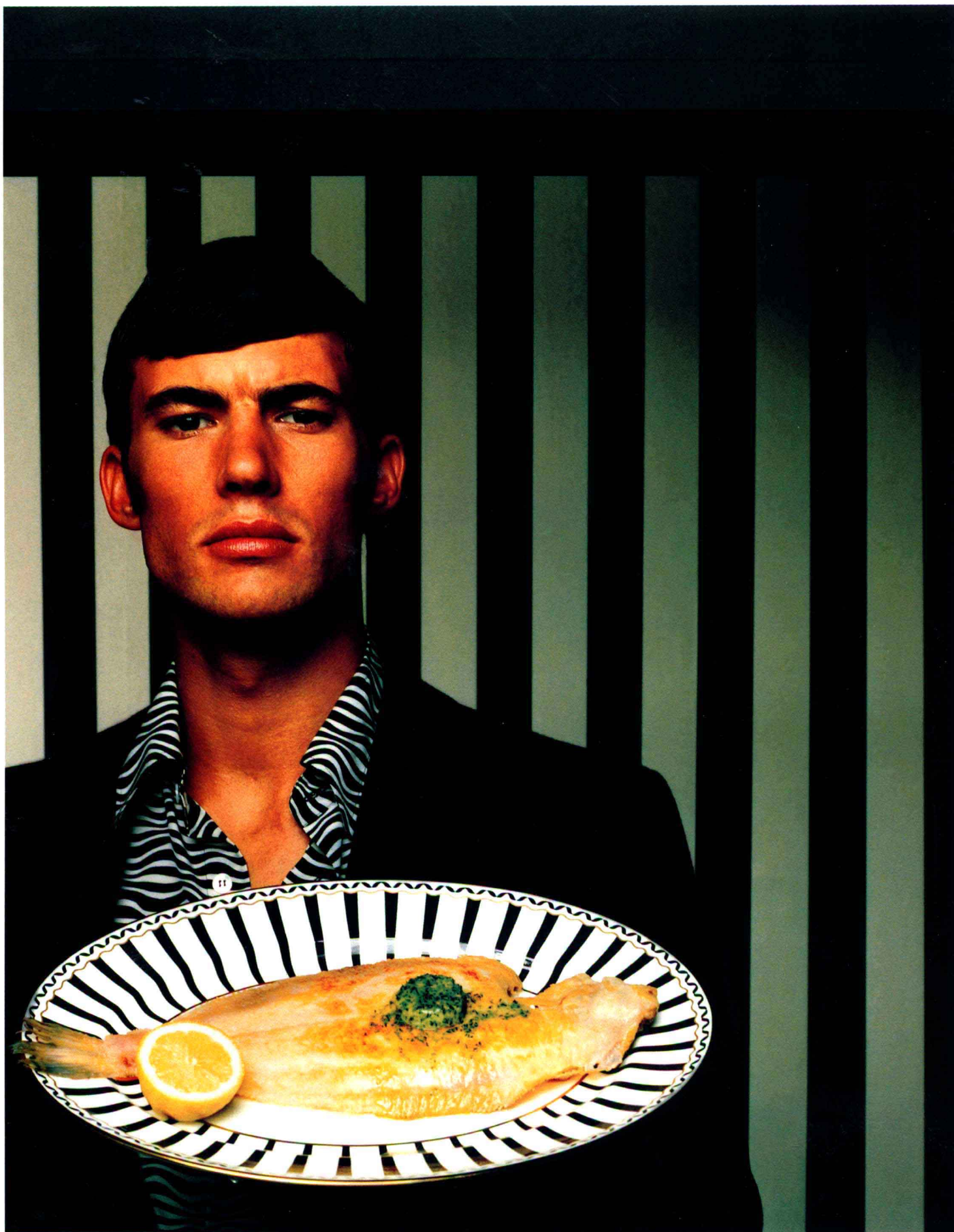
A home economist also needs lots of stamina and energy, because you're on your feet all day long. You may have been out at six in the morning shopping for the best produce, and it's not unusual to be working well into the evening. Some shoots can last up to 15 days – you need to make sure you don't start to wilt. A good home economist would also never think, 'That will do'. They will always be striving to achieve the best for the client – whatever that takes. If a shot doesn't work, you've got to be ready to start all over again.

A home economist obviously needs to keep up-to-date with food trends and fashions, which can change dramatically – especially now there are so many food programmes on television. And I guess at the end of the day a good home economist will simply have a passion for food.

How do you go about finding a home economist?

In the UK, the Association of Photographers (www.aop.com) lists home economists and stylists. Alternatively, contact an established food photographer and ask if they could recommend someone to you.





styling for food and drink

food stylist Mikael Beckman

What does a food stylist do?

The stylist will normally be responsible for the overall look and feel of a shot, and will bring in all the props required – such as crockery, glassware, cutlery and little things such as napkins. Sometimes the brief you get from the client or art director is extremely specific. McDonald's, for instance, have a manual, and they know exactly what they want. There will be four to six pieces of onion, a certain number of french fries, and so on. In those cases the styling is a technical rather than a creative exercise.

Often, however, the brief is more open, and the requirement is to create a new look for a product. You don't know at the beginning what the end result will be – it's a journey of discovery for all concerned. Of course, it's not acceptable to create the same thing for different clients. You have to keep coming up with something new, and that's the challenge of being a stylist.

What's your creative process?

The first thing you do is think about the product – who will buy it and why. You do some research and some analysis. It's important to know as much as possible about the customer: whether it's a man or a woman; what age range they are in; what their economic circumstances are. Then there's the question of what the client is trying to achieve? Is it to educate? To create a feeling? To encourage sampling? Then, once I have the look in my mind, I can go out and start looking for all the props I need.

Where do you get props from?

Over the years I've built up a collection of things which I know from experience work well – and that will be true of many stylists. I have over 20 different plates, for instance, all different designs – though most of them are white. Undecorated plates help the food stand out, making it look fresher and tastier. Darker plates can easily kill the look of the food. Having a pattern around the edge of a white plate can be an excellent compromise, giving you the best of both worlds. One exception is with foods from different cultures, where you might use coloured plates to create a feeling of authenticity.

With editorial – where it's customary to give a credit for props – manufacturers, distributors and stores are keen to be featured and are willing to supply products without charge. Experienced stylists will have lots of press officers' contacts, and will easily be able to get the things they need. With advertising, other products are rarely mentioned, so it's necessary to hire them. This is not normally a problem as the budgets tend to be bigger and the cost will have been allowed for. There are plenty of good hire places where you can wander around and find the things you want. Often I'll remember things I've seen before that I know will work and go back and get them.

What can a stylist contribute to a shoot?

Using a stylist means the shot will hang together, that all of the elements will co-ordinate in creating the look and feel required, and present

the food at its best. Nothing will jar or distract. For these reasons the result will be a far more polished and professional image. For those same reasons, it's important to have either a good chef or a home economist as well.

What's the relationship between the stylist, the home economist, the photographer and the art director?

It's important that all these creative people work together as a tight-knit team, and for each to respect the contribution the others are making. What usually happens is that the stylist will start by telling everyone else about the look they have in mind, and through discussion you end up finding a way together.

What skills will a good stylist have?

They will have up-to-date knowledge about food trends: how is it prepared and presented in different kinds of restaurants; what's on the plate or what's served separately; what style of plate, glass and cutlery is in and appropriate for the subject and setting. Also, what kind of things people are eating – what's in and what's out. They will also have a contact book bulging with phone numbers, have lots of creative ideas, and be able to work well as part of a team.

How do you find a good stylist?

The easiest way is to look at magazines that feature food photography. The stylist will usually be credited and editors will normally be willing to provide contact details.