



FROM KITCHEN TO COVER PAGE

PLATING, FOOD STYLING & PROP DESIGN FOR FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

How Chefs and Designers Collaborate to Create Images That Sell the Experience



CHEF JAY VARGA

STYLIST LINDSEY LEICHTHAMMER

Meet Your Presenters



CHEF JAY VARGA

Title: Chef • Culinary Director, The JDK Group
Expertise: Culinary leadership in high-catering and hospitality, menu development, plating execution, and large-scale
Focus: Food presentation that delivers both visually and in flavor..



LINDSEY LEICHTHAMMER

Title: Planner & Food Stylist • Founder, Leichhammer Events
Expertise: Luxury event design, creative direction, direction, styling & design, visual storytelling.
Focus: Translating food and hospitality into compelling imagery.

Consistency in Production

Details are everything. Before plating even begins, consistency must exist in production.



- **CONSISTENT CUTS AND PORTIONING**
- **INTENTIONAL COLOR BALANCE**
- **UNIFORMITY ACROSS COMPONENTS**
- **FOLLOW-THROUGH FROM PREP TO PLATE**

IF PRODUCTION ISN'T CONSISTENT, PLATING WON'T BE EITHER.

Game Planning for Execution

Your plate presentation is the first impression a guest has before they even take a bite.



- **PLAN YOUR PLATE AHEAD OF TIME**
Avoid figuring out the plate right before service.
- **TEST THE VISUAL BALANCE**
Ensure the dish looks appealing before service begins.
- **UNDERSTAND HOW THE DISH SHOULD LOOK**
Know the intended presentation before service starts.

A CLEAR GAME PLAN MAKES EXECUTION CONSISTENT.

Choose a Focal Point

Every dish should have a star of the show.

Ask yourself:

- **WHAT ELEMENT DO YOU WANT TO BE THE MAIN ATTRACTION?**

Contrary to popular belief, this doesn't always need to be the protein. The focal point is simply the element that draws the eye first.



CREATING THREE-DIMENSIONALITY

Creating Height and Depth

Height and depth create a three-dimensional effect on the plate. This helps showcase your focal point and adds visual interest.

WAYS TO CREATE DEPTH:

- **STACKING INGREDIENTS**
- **LAYERING COMPONENTS**
- **BUILDING VERTICAL STRUCTURE**



FLAT PLATES PHOTOGRAPH FLAT. DIMENSION CREATES IMPACT.



SUPPORTING ELEMENTS

Supporting the Focal Point

Once you establish the focal point, everything else should should

support it. Supporting elements include:

- SAUCES
- GARNISHES
- TEXTURE
- STRUCTURE

These elements should enhance the visual appeal of the dish without distracting from the star.

Thinking About Color

Color is one of the most powerful tools in plating. Avoid plates that are made up of all the same shade or tone. Instead, think intentionally about contrast and balance. Food should look vibrant and visually appealing before the first bite.



Color Balance on the Plate



- **COMPLEMENTARY COLORS**

Colors opposite each other on the color wheel create contrast and visual pop.

- **THREE-COLOR RULE**

Main color, secondary color, accent color. This approach creates structure and visual harmony.

COLOR THEORY

Harmonious Colors

Another approach is using harmonious colors. These are colors that sit next to each other on the color wheel. This style works well when:

- **YOU'RE USING FEWER COMPONENTS**
- **YOU WANT A SOFTER VISUAL PALETTE**
- **THE DISH IS MORE MINIMAL**



Choosing a Plating Style



CLOCK METHOD

RULE OF THIRDS

SYMMETRICAL PLATING

FREE-FORM PLATING

EACH CREATES A DIFFERENT VISUAL STRUCTURE ON THE PLATE.

The Clock Method

Picture your plate as a clock. The focal point typically sits between 9 and 3. Supporting elements fall around the plate in positions such as 10–11, 1–2, 4–5, 7–8. This method works well for traditional main courses with protein, starch, and vegetables.





Rule of Thirds

Imagine your plate divided into a nine-section grid, similar to a tic-tac-toe board. Instead of centering the dish, choose one of the four intersection points and build the dish around that area. The goal is to leave about one-third of the plate empty to create negative space. This works especially well for modern main courses.



SYMMETRICAL PLATING FOCUS

Symmetrical Plating

Symmetrical plating focuses on structure and balance. Characteristics include include straight lines, clean shapes, and even spacing. This style creates a refined and and aesthetic presentation. It is often used for first courses and salads.

Free-Form Plating

Free-form plating is the art of breaking the rules. It often feels artistic, organic, and slightly chaotic, but still maintains a clear focal point. This style works well for stations or singular food presentations where the plate can feel more deconstructed.





Designer Perspective: Food Photography as Storytelling

- **SELL THE EXPERIENCE**
- **COMMUNICATE YOUR BRAND**
- **INSPIRE YOUR AUDIENCE**
- **MARKET YOUR WORK**

PLATING CREATES THE FOUNDATION — STYLING AND STORYTELLING BRING THE IMAGE TO LIFE.

Start With the Framework



WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE IMAGE?



WHERE WILL THE IMAGE BE USED?



THESE ANSWERS GUIDE EVERY CREATIVE DECISION.

Define Your Style



- **STRONG BRAND IDENTITY**

Consistent aesthetic, recognizable visual style, cohesive color palette.

- **SHOWCASING VARIETY**

Multiple looks and environments, broader storytelling, more approach.

BOTH WORK — THE KEY IS INTENTION.

Think About How the Image Will Be Used

SOCIAL MEDIA

Different platforms require different images.

WEBSITE CONTENT

Hero or banner images

PUBLICATIONS

Different platforms require different images.

MARKETING MATERIALS

Different platforms require different images.

ORIENTATION (VERTICAL VS HORIZONTAL)

When shooting, consider orientation.

LEAVING ROOM FOR TEXT

When shooting, consider leaving room for text / white space

FLEXIBLE CROPPING FOR DIFFERENT FORMATS

When shooting, consider flexible cropping for different formats.

Plan the Shoot



MAKE A SHOT LIST OR VIGNETTE LIST



MAKE A PROP LIST



TABLE SETTING



INGREDIENT DETAILS



ACTION SHOTS



WIDER ENVIRONMENTAL SHOTS

PLANNING KEEPS THE SHOOT ORGANIZED AND EFFICIENT.



PROPS

Build a Prop List

Props help support the visual story. Common prop categories include plating pieces, hard goods, soft goods and textiles, and accessories.

- **EXAMPLES INCLUDE PARCHMENT PAPER, CUTTING BOARDS, RAMEKINS, UTENSILS, NAPKINS, FLOWERS, HERBS, DRINKS, AND CANDLES.**

Props should support the story, not distract from it.

GARNISHES

Garnishes Should Make Sense

A common styling mistake is unnecessary garnish. Examples we see too often include random orchids, giant
giant
rosemary spears, bushes of parsley, and too many
microgreens.
Garnishes should enhance the dish and make sense in
in
context.



Color Theory in Food Styling



- **GREEN ENHANCES BROWN**
Green makes brown food look more appealing.
- **WARM TONES FOR HOT DISHES**
Warm colors enhance the perception of hot food.
- **COOL TONES FOR COLD DISHES**
Cool colors complement the appearance of cold dishes.
- **COLOR CONTRAST**
Utilize color contrast to make food stand out visually.

COLOR DRAMATICALLY AFFECTS HOW FOOD IS PERCEIVED.



AUTHENTICITY IN PRESENTATION

Use Real Food

The product should sell itself. Avoid fake steam, inedible styling tricks, and over-manipulated dishes. Authenticity resonates more strongly with audiences.







Make the Dish Read Clearly

The viewer should immediately understand what they're looking at. If a dish is hard to identify, use ingredients to clarify it. For example, with mushroom soup, add visible mushrooms to reinforce what the viewer is seeing.

BACKGROUND ELEMENTS

Background Matters

The background plays a major role in the image. Good options include natural wood or stone, real tables, styling mats, and neutral surfaces. The background should support support the food without competing with it.





KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Lighting Basics

Lighting is one of the most important elements in food photography. The best option is usually diffused natural light.

- **WATCH OUT FOR:**
 - Overhead lighting creating harsh shadows
 - Direct light making images too warm
 - Heavy shadows making images too cool

When shooting indoors, use professional lighting and diffuse it to mimic natural daylight.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Composition & Perspective

Composition helps guide the viewer's eye. Consider angle, texture contrast, balance, and negative space.

COMMON PERSPECTIVES INCLUDE:

- TOP DOWN – FLAT LAYS AND SPREADS
- DINER PERSPECTIVE – EXPERIENTIAL TABLE SCENES
- STRAIGHT ON – EMPHASIZES HEIGHT AND DRINKS



Make It Feel Real

The most compelling food images feel authentic. Focus on natural placement, real environments, and genuine interaction. The goal is to make the viewer feel like they're part of the experience.



IPHONE EDITING

Quick iPhone Editing Tips

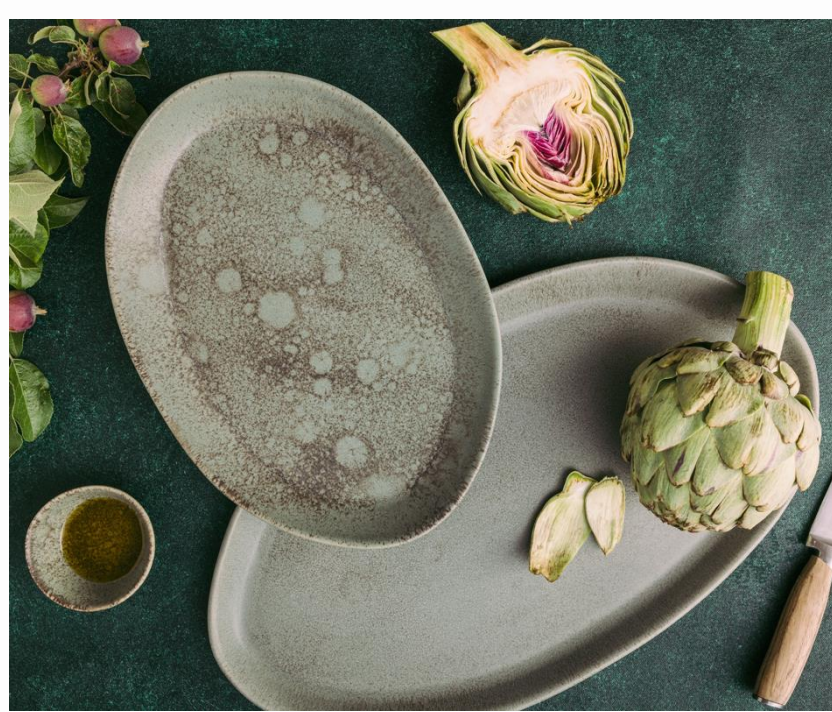
You can do a lot with built-in phone tools. Useful adjustments include:

- **PORTRAIT MODE**
- **TEMPERATURE**
- **CROP AND ORIENTATION**
- **DETAIL AND SHARPNESS**
- **CLEANUP TOOLS**

Apps like Facetune can help with minor corrections.



EDIT LIGHTLY — FOOD SHOULD STILL LOOK REAL.





Say Hiiiiiiiiii

Jay Varga

@ jvarga@thejdkgroup.com

📷 Chefvarga22

📷 TheJDKgroup

Lindsey Leichhammer

@ hello@lindseyleichhammer.com

📷 @lindsloves_

📷 @lindslovesevents