



Take your chicken. Baste with wood varnish . . .

Those yummy pictures in cookbooks aren't always what they seem. **Andrew Shanahan** on the tricks of food photography

Here's a great kitchen tip. You know how bowls of soup in food magazines always have a few bubbles rising artfully to the surface, giving that freshly ladled-from-the-tureen appearance? Well, you can recreate this effect quite easily at home by lightly drizzling some washing-up liquid into your soups but, please, only use the best stuff; this is no time to cut corners. Next, take a plastic straw and gently blow into the soup, creating an entire bowlful of bubbles. Using a pin pop away until you are left with just those few artistic ones that will survive for hours. The taste might not be to die for but at least your bowl of soup will look just like it does in the food magazines.

In the curious world of food photography this is the sort of advice that passes for normal. After all, this is the industry that firmly believes that the first taste is with the eye. The importance of culinary aesthetics cannot be overstated. Humans are predisposed to assess food's nutritional value, or lack

of it, by its appearance – so get the pictures wrong and you could be conveying the message that this food is not fit to eat. Besides, aspiration sells. Who would buy a book of recipes for dishes resembling what they usually have for tea?

It takes a lot of people to get food looking its best. There can be up to five bodies beavering behind the scenes with their various flexible roles and responsibilities. The photographer and stylist will compose the contents of the dish and decide exactly how they want the picture to work. A props person will source, say, the perfect cake-stand and a home economist will buy ingredients and prepare the food. Finally, the client is often present to make sure that the money they are forking out – a food photographer alone can charge thousands of pounds a day – results in a drool-inducing image.

The simple reason so much work and personnel are involved is that producing beautiful images of food is not easy. For starters there is the small matter that cooked food gives off steam, which can fog up a camera lens. "Lots of things can go wrong," says

Georgia Glynn Smith, who has been a food photographer for 10 years and has worked with Nigel Slater, Gordon Ramsay and has just completed work on Allegra McEvedy's *Colour Cookbook*. "Lighting is probably one of the easiest things to get wrong. If you light a plate of food wrongly then you can make it look grey and cold. Light it wrongly another way and you see the fat and skin forming on sauces. Aside from the lighting there's the problem that if you use the wrong [type of] film then meat comes across as too red."

It's not only technical issues that hamper the shoots. According to Glynn Smith, some foods simply do not have what it takes to make it as a model. "Sausages are these rude, fatty, obscene things. I did a whole book on sausage and mash once and that was a challenge. Then there was an entire book on soups and that was logistically difficult because there's really only so many ways that you can photograph soup."

Perhaps because of these associated difficulties, the industry has developed an impressive repertoire of tricks to enhance the appearance of food. "Let's