



Rules for Food Styling for Photographers

Adapted from: Food Styling for Photographers By Linda Bellingham and Jean Ann Bybee



Rule One:

The first rule is to never eat food that has been on set or handled as a hero. I've always said that it's bad karma to eat photo food. This rule makes good sense not only because hero food is usually handled a lot, but also because it isn't always managed in ways that keep it safe for consumption. In some instances, substances are added or applied to the food that render the food unsafe for consumption.

Rule Two:

Always read safety and use instructions for equipment that is being used for the first time and as a reminder to be safety conscious when using any equipment. Simple tools and tasks can become dangerous if you aren't working "in the moment." Always follow safety guidelines for working with knives, scissors, and other sharp-edged tools—and remember that a sharp knife is less dangerous than a dull one.

Rule Three:

As you build a hero food item, sit or stand with your eyes at camera level whenever possible. Build the hero with the camera side toward you. In other words, your eyes are the camera. Focus on the front and sides of the food that the camera will see. Don't pay any attention to the appearance of the back of the hero. The camera angle is all that matters when photographing food.

Rule Four:

Never open any container on or over the set. Instead, open containers in the prep area or on a side table away from the set. Remove food items from containers in the prep area and, when appropriate, drain any moisture from the items to prevent dripping on the set. If you are using liquids on set, cover the set with at least one layer of paper towels to contain any drips where the liquids will be poured or styled. Cleanup on a hero set is not fun and it can be a very time-consuming task.

Rule Five:

My rule for stand-ins is to provide a very loose translation of the hero. A few examples of my stand-ins are a wadded-up paper towel for ice cream and a brown grocery bag with a roll of paper

towels in it for a turkey! Not only does this strategy give me more time and creative energy to focus on building the hero, but it doesn't set a rigid mental image for the art director, photographer, or me to latch onto. There are a few exceptions to this rule and they will be mentioned in the appropriate chapters.

Rule Six:

Have a plan. Be prepared. I can't emphasize this enough: Make sure you have everything that you might need in the studio the day before the shoot. The only exception to this rule is salad greens, berries, maybe flowers, and ice if you don't have room in your freezer to store it overnight.

Rule Seven:

Learn to shop like a stylist. The quality of the items you purchase for your shoot will directly impact the appearance of your final image. Quality and perfection of each item you purchase are the goals. If you don't bring quality items to the studio, you won't bring quality to the camera.

Rule Eight:

Protect the hero food. Whether the hero items are on a table in the studio or in the refrigerator, freezer, etc., be sure they are identified as hero items and not for consumption. Once found, the hero items must be cared for in ways specific to each type of item to maintain hero quality until photography is completed.

Rule Nine:

Before you make a final capture or shoot film of your hero, double-check the set to make certain there are no visible tools, supplies, paper towels, etc., within the crop of the shot. Yes, I've been guilty of this