

Whetting the Appetite

David
Bishop

By Jennifer Chen

With the explosion of cooking shows and the popularity of the Food Network and celebrity chefs, food has evolved from the simple consumption of calories into a culture in and of itself—teaming with “foodies” and food writers.

It’s no wonder that food photography has also exploded in culinary capitals all over the country. New York and Chicago-based food photographer David Bishop captures not just simple shots of food but instead meals that whet your appetite. In each of his images shot for magazines like *Food & Wine* and *Bon Appetite*, Bishop’s work is incredibly eye-catching. A blueberry muffin bursts with flavor, buttery and warm, while a bowl of Jell-O sparkles like gems and the grill marks of a steak appear to sizzle right before your eyes.

With over 25 years experience in food photography, Bishop draws on





rented for \$300 a month, in an extra room.” During the day he would work and assist other photographers and at night he would create his still lifes. He took his portfolio around and eventually landed an eyeglass frame product as his first work. After that, Bishop says, “I lucked into a catalogue company. The guy loved my work and that’s how my career began.” By starting his photography career in catalogue work, Bishop shot tens of thousands of pictures—a concentrated learning experience. “Catalogue work taught me how to approach most problems very quickly.”

Food photography presents a host of challenges different than working with models or even commercial products. One of Bishop’s favorite food stylists, Doris Cluster, sums it up best: “Food is alive when you first get it and it begins to die immediately.” What draws Bishop to the work is that every set he works on poses a unique challenge. Bishop continues, “There are unlimited ways to approach the same task.”

Working with major corporations like Nestlé and Tropicana, Bishop approaches his work very differently than dealing with agencies. Says Bishop, “When you’re working directly with corporations, they know their product. As a photographer I have to respect that.” If a corporation requests that the protein be the main feature, Bishop works with his food stylists to ensure that the flame-grilled steak or turkey in a stacked sandwich is the focus of the image. Technology has changed the collaboration

a wealth of knowledge to help him direct his shoots and solve on-set problems with ease. When he started in the photography business, he assisted hundreds of photographers, often working seven days a week to learn from the best. Originally hailing from Allentown, PA, Bishop made the move to New York City at age 17 to study at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City. Once at school, Bishop assisted photographers who had darkrooms. Says Bishop, “I would work for free for the use of a great darkroom. I was like a vampire because I spent so much time in there.”

While he had great teachers in college, an internship with a fashion photographer changed his view of school. Bishop learned “so much in two weeks with him” that he decided to drop out of SVA and start his career. “I set up a still-life studio in my five-room railroad apartment, which I





Behind the Scenes: Jell-O Shot

For his glistening bowl of red Jell-O, Bishop illustrates how his lighting skills and his depth of food experience work hand-in-hand.

“When shooting food, the idea is to enhance the product. I don’t use a red kicker card, for example, because I would rather have the food stylist to enhance the Jell-O with the right color. I use multiple smooth silver kicker cards behind the glass container of Jell-O. The smooth silver kicker cards are designed to give a glassy or liquid product a transparent look. I make sure each kicker lights each square of Jell-O properly. Then I focus my lights through the transparent paper fabric, to the white surface underneath. The light bounces back though to give a transparent glow to the fabric. Focusing my lights is similar to how a child plays with a magnifying glass and tilts it in the sun to get a sharp, bright ray of light. My lighting is a combination of screen and focusing spotlights. The focus lights are for the fabrics surrounding the Jell-O to create a shimmer effect.” He continues, “Jell-O is a unique product. It’s like glass. If you can photograph glass, you can photograph Jell-O.”

process. Years ago, Bishop would take Polaroids of his work to show clients to get their approval. Now with digital cameras, his images appear within seconds on a large screen monitor. Comments Bishop, “Now that we live in a computer society, everyone knows what to look for.”

The main key to Bishop’s fantastic imagery is his lighting techniques. He says, “Pre-Martha [Stewart], lighting for food photography was darker and moodier.” Before Martha Stewart became a household name, Bishop explained that food photography was shot much darker. With the popularity of Martha Stewart came a new era of photographing food—with more emphasis on light and bright colors. Bishop bought a focusing spotlight because he liked that he could precisely focus the light exactly where he needed it. Spotlights became his main source of illumination and therefore Bishop purchased a lot of them. He found that the more control of the lights he gained, the more he wanted. He jokes, “My assistants used to tease me



that if there was not one light left then we weren’t done.” With more light sources, Bishop found that he could bend the light; the more he worked with his light sources, the more marketable his work became. He also feels that appetite appeal and light are strongly linked together.

Another strategy he employs is the use of sheer fabrics. Bouncing light off the

soft folds of the fabric gives “more luminosity from the light source,” says Bishop. Tactile quality is another important part of Bishop’s food photographs. You can almost reach out and touch his work. Bishop explains his style, “When you look at my food, there is a theme to it. My photography tends to have a combo of dry and textured, wet and drippy. It’s really about sex appeal, not in an overt way, though.”

Another key for making his images pop is working with the right food stylist. When choosing a food stylist to work with, Bishop acknowledges that there is no shortage of talent in the cities where his studios are located—New York and Chicago. When given an assignment, he prefers to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the food stylists he knows. “I think about whether they are better with ice cream or baking or proteins. Also, attitude is important. Working with someone you enjoy working with, you naturally do a better job,” Bishop explains.

In terms of equipment, Bishop shoots with a Hasselblad and uses Phase One Capture One software. Bishop chooses to utilize top-end equipment to give him the quality he is looking for. Recently, he taught a studio lighting class at SVA and was “grilled” by the students when he didn’t show up with a light meter. Comments Bishop, “I said I’ve never owned one. I know my light and my exposure. If it’s not right, I change the ratios.” Bishop also explains that most of the work he does is done on set. “A designer may design a sandwich on a plate then decide that the plate should be bigger.



Behind the Scenes: Grilled Steak

“The steak was real and shot in the studio. With flames, it is a hit-or-miss experiment. First, I position the lights and get test shots without the flames. Then I turn off the modeling lights, throw a match onto the artificial charcoals, which are coated with pyrotechnics, and set my lens to bulb. I open the shutter between ¼ of a second up to 2 seconds and shoot a lot. From these shots, I’ll determine the best flame shot. As soon as one steak turned black, we got a new one. We used four different steaks to accomplish this shot.”

“This and the Jell-O shot (pg. 104) were done pre-digital on 8 x 10 film. I used the best quality lenses—Schneider Optics. I also use Speedotron 2400 watt-second power packs as fill lights for diffusion. I adapted Calumet focus spots for close focusing, which is not what they are originally intended for. The Calumet lights are not manufactured any more so I search for them on eBay when I need new ones.”

So we shoot it, take the sandwich off the plate, shoot the plate and make the plate bigger by taking multiple exposures. I do all JPEG retouching on set.”

When asked to choose between New York and Chicago for the best food, Bishop unapologetically chooses the Chicago hot dog. He shares, “When I opened my Chicago studio, my first shoot was a classic Chicago hot dog, fully loaded.” With his talent, experience and eye, viewers will

certainly see more tasty treats and savory meals photographed by Bishop splashed in food magazines and ads across the country.

You can view Bishop’s work at www.dbishop.net.

Jennifer Chen is the features editor for both Rangefinder and AfterCapture magazines. She has written for Bust, Every Day with Rachael Ray, Audrey, VegNews and is a theatre critic for the online publication, Edge.