



S T E P H E N H A M I L T O N

WHO'S Hungry?

Food photographer Stephen Hamilton faced a fig in front of TV cameras. He had a choice, eat it and risk a serious allergic reaction or tell everyone on set and halt an eight-hour production of *Top Chef Masters*. So Hamilton pushed aside the figs on the plate and continued to eat. As a guest judge on the spin-off series of the popular Bravo food competition show, *Top Chef*, Hamilton had no idea what was going to be put in front of him until the meals arrived. “Gail Simmons [another guest judge] and I were presented a plate. Figs were in season and the last time I ate them I was 12 and my face blew up. So I had to make a split-second decision. I ate them, not too many though, and I made it through shooting.”

This isn't Hamilton's first time working with the *Top Chef* series. In fact, fans of the show have regularly seen his photography on the walls since season three. A college friend of Hamilton's from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, was the art director for the third season of *Top Chef* and asked Hamilton to provide some prints that they could use on the walls of the kitchen and in the house where the chef contestants live. The association with the Emmy-award winning series has only boosted Hamilton's career, especially in the eyes some of the biggest food companies out there. Hamilton says, “All they talk about is ‘I saw you on *Top Chef*. People who want to work with you want to tell other people that you were on *Top Chef*. It's the top-rated food show on television. This show to me is just as important as my workbook from a marketing standpoint.”

At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Hamilton originally wanted to major in fashion design, but because he didn't love to sew he knew that wasn't the best vocation for him. He thought about studying fashion photography, but quickly discovered that Chicago wasn't known for fashion. When he first started shooting while in school, he shot anything he could. He interned at two food photo studios and slowly realized that he liked shooting food. “I wanted to stay in Chicago after graduation and it is a good food town. Plus, I realized that my personality fit with photographing food. I love to produce. I love detail. I love food.” So in 1991, shortly after Hamilton graduated college, he decided

By Jennifer Chen

to go out on his own. He spent \$10,000 on equipment and setup (back in the days when photography was all film-based) and started his studio.

Fast-forward 20 years; Hamilton now shoots everything digitally, embraces social media and writes two blogs—*The Restaurant Project* and *Who's Hungry?*. Hamilton launched the *Who's Hungry?* blog (www.stephenhamilton.com/whoshungry) after answering so many questions at parties about what he does as a food photographer. The most typical question/myth: All the food is plastic. “When I started assisting in the late 80s, a lot of the food was fake. When I started shooting on my own, I wanted to push that and use real food. And now the whole movement is toward more natural-looking food. Ninety percent of what we shoot is real,” Hamilton says. The *Who's Hungry?* blog dispels those fake food myths by giving readers a sneak peek into Hamilton's day-to-day life as a food photographer. With videos, photos and tips on food styling and anything his crew is up to that day, *Who's Hungry?* is a perfect place to learn the ins and outs of shooting food for any interested photographer or curious foodie. It's also a great way to show potential clients how he works. “I don't mind showing how my work is done. It gives my clients a way to see how we solve problems. I'm also careful to protect my clients when I write my blog posts and not mention any confidential details,” Hamilton says.

The idea behind *The Restaurant Project* blog started when Hamilton and his wife were at dinner in New York City. Normally when he shoots in a restaurant, he brings his best equipment and has full control over the lighting. But that night he didn't, so instead he took a picture of his meal with his iPhone and decided to recreate it in the studio. ChicagoNow.com, an online community for Chicagoans, picked up the blog and features it on their site (www.chicagonow.com/blogs/the-restaurant-project).

Though it may seem like Hamilton is a social media guru on the outside, he admits, “I still struggle with how much to do with social media. What is the right amount? Every two days? Do blogs help your business or not? The beauty of it is that it's pretty much free.” He continues, “I have some staff help me with



my two blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc., but it still has to come from me. During our Monday morning meetings, we talk about what jobs we have lined up and what we're putting on Facebook and the blogs that week." Hamilton posted a photo on Facebook, an image of figs and honey, and had a huge response: "Figs and honey remind me of being in Greece with my grandmother," said one reader. "Food photography evokes emotions in everyone who views it. Food is part of everyone's life," Hamilton goes on to say.

Whether a fish tail is paired with the front of a boat or thick slices of artisan bread appear next to an image of golden yellow

Stephen Hamilton's Camera Bag

"For lighting, I use Speedotron and nature. I try to use as much available light as I can in my studio. For cameras, I use Hasselblad. I've had about six or seven systems from them. When they have a new camera product, they usually send me some cameras to demo. I'm not super techie, but I like seeing what are the bells and whistles with the new cameras. But most great photographers don't have a million lights. It's as simple as form and composition. My shots may seem complicated, but it's a single light source plus skim lights to add texture to the food, and that's all."



aged cheese, Hamilton carefully pairs his images on his online portfolio to visually tell a story. He elicits appetite appeal by adding drips or melts or “gooeyness” to a shot. Take one look at his stack of pancakes images with layers of syrup and a pat of melting butter and try not to drool. He also shoots wine and beer with the same attitude as his food. Hamilton says, “I like to see movement in the liquid like a splash. I always want to give it a natural look. It used to be that beer had a generic plastic beer shot, but now big beer companies are loosening up and want to see more splash shots.”

When clients walk into his studio, he knows that he has an instant to impress. So the real work begins before the client even steps foot into the studio. “Selecting the right team to work with is critical,” Hamilton says. If the client wants an ice cream shoot, Hamilton sits down with his studio manager and discusses which food stylist, assistants and prop stylists they should bring in. Typically, Hamilton has three photo assistants per shoot and hires his creative team based on his needs. “Every job is different. I’m looking for what food stylist is really going to listen and how creative they are.” From there, once the job is awarded to Hamilton and his team, he has a “pre pro” (a preproduction meeting) with the client so that all parties—the company, the agency and Hamilton’s studio—are all on the same page of the creative vision of the final shoot.

“For example, for photographing a turkey, I need to know what sides are going to go with it. So the agency and the creatives will give us their vision. I, in turn, tell them ways we can accomplish what they want,” says Hamilton. Gearing up for shooting day, Hamilton makes sure that when his clients come in, they have something to judge. “We’re 70 percent ready when they walk into the studio. I want them to think, ‘Steve heard what I’m looking for.’ Most people are visual so until they actually see what I’m doing, it’s hard to visualize what we’re talking about.” Sometimes clients suggest shooting on location and Steve instead steers them to his studio. He says, “With food, you need consistent control. If you’re on location, you’re dealing with weather and wind, which brings another layer to complicate the shoot. In my studio, I can adapt it to look like any location my client needs.”

Since real food is the star, he’s working against a ticking clock, especially with ice cream. Hamilton proudly dispels any notions that ice cream shot in photos is actually scoops of mashed potatoes. He uses real ice cream when shooting, except when he’s shooting ice cream toppings. “It slows down the process if you’re using real ice cream. You’re fighting the melting of the ice cream when you need to be focusing on the toppings.” Shooting pancakes involves several steps—photographing the actual pancakes, the syrup and finally the butter. “Before digital, it was hard to com-

pose shots like these, but now we take a drip from one shot to compose the final shot.” Most of Hamilton’s assistants are in their early 20s and “know Photoshop like they know how to get dressed.” Hamilton himself purposely avoids learning too much Photoshop, preferring to photograph instead of sitting in front of a computer. “I don’t want to rely on Photoshop to fix my lighting.

“Every time I shoot a different food, I’m thinking about how the light is going to hit it and how I’m going to make it look appetizing. I try to find a way that people haven’t seen it before,” he says. Hamilton takes his inspiration from daily life—even something as simple as cooking dinner. After chopping up broccoli stems on a green cutting board, Hamilton admired the beauty of the stems so he took a quick snapshot with his iPhone and packed up the stems in a bag with a wet paper towel so he could recreate the same image in his studio. “Every part of my life revolves around food. You have to have a passion for food to shoot it.” Hamilton loves every minute, even down to the stems of chopped broccoli.

View Stephen’s work at www.stephenhamilton.com.



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