



STEPPING UP THE PLATE

How professional food stylists turn cookbooks into works of gastronomical art

BY MELISSA BUOTE

Stunning food photography isn't as simple as Instagram makes it look. All the digital filters in the world can't make up for a poorly composed photo, which is why professional food and prop stylists have always been important to the cookbook industry.

Not only do stylists influence a book's aesthetic, they drive trends, from how we plate food to the types of plates we use. They know that artfully placed crumbs sprinkled on a knotty wood cutting board, a scattering of paprika, or even the dull varnish of an antique spoon can make all the difference to a photographic scene.

"Food stylists are like artists, and food is their medium," says Whitecap Books art director Michelle Furbacher, who has worked closely with photographers and stylists on best-selling cookbooks such as Rose Murray and Elizabeth Baird's *Canada's Favourite Recipes*, Anna Olson's *Sugar*, and *The Harrow Fair Cookbook*.

"Sometimes a recipe doesn't end up looking quite as lovely as it tastes, so knowing how to play up the strengths of some of



the ingredients, or how to present a dish in a way that looks more appetizing, is essential," says Furbacher.

For the most part, cookbook publishers remain hands-off during the creative process, giving photographers and stylists a wide berth. Art directors are rarely on set, but they do provide a general sense of a book's aesthetic.

"When you allow for freedom of creativity, all sorts of wonderful surprises can come up that you might never have thought of," says Furbacher. "I certainly discuss the overall look we're going for in the book with the author, stylist, and photographer before setting out, but after that I like to put my trust in the stylist's creative vision."

Toronto freelance food stylist Noah Witenoff enjoys the loose artistic reins associated with cookbook production. "There is a lot more creative freedom in the publishing world than there is in the advertising world," he says. "In advertising, we are given a specific look and feel with very little wiggle room. In publishing, there still are some constraints

that we must live within, but overall we are given a lot of freedom when it comes to how we shoot, prop, and style the food."

Award-winning photographer Ryan Szulc has made a name for himself in the food-editorial business. He partnered with Witenoff on chef Michael Smith's *Back to Basics* and James Cunningham's *Eat St.* (a companion to the Food Network Canada show of the same name), both published by Penguin Canada, and Jennifer Bain's *Toronto Star Cookbook*, from Appetite by Random House.

Szulc says the process usually starts with a casual conversation about ideas. Although photographers ultimately control the final product – they determine composition, lighting, and post-production – he likes working collaboratively with food and prop stylists. "I want them to feel some ownership over the photos as well," he says.

While publishers prefer to step back, authors' participation tends to vary. Witenoff says that however involved they want to be, he still needs to understand the author's



individual brand. “Are they more loose and casual, or more formal? These factors will help shape the way we shoot each image,” he says.

Toronto food stylist Patti Hetherington has also worked with chef Michael Smith and James Beard Award-winning television host Laura Calder on her cookbooks *French Taste*, *Dinner Chez Moi*, and *Paris Express* (published in April by HarperCollins Canada). She observes that popular cookbooks are an influence on new titles.


“I have worked for various publishers – Whitecap, HarperCollins, Penguin – and in all cases, they have taken successful, best-selling books and used them to [inspire] the style of the book we are doing,” she says.

In her experience, Hetherington – who got her start in Halifax – says photographers set the lighting and mood, whereas she oversees “the feel of the food, the author’s sensibility about food, and begins to get a prop plan happening.”

For chef Michael Smith’s *Fast Flavours*, *Chef at Home*, and *Chef Michael Smith’s Kitchen*, Hetherington wanted a rustic feel. “I combed antique shops from Toronto to the Maritimes on a road trip for those books and bought all kinds of old dishes, glassware, cutlery, pots, and pans,” she says. “These props are mainly what created the look.”

After the shoot, Smith went through the photos, weeding out ones he felt didn’t suit the project. “Generally, though, in most cases, the authors let us do our creative thing,” Hetherington says.

It was a similar situation with Calder, who accompanied Hetherington on a props shopping trip during a shoot in Paris last September. “She just let me hand-pick everything that I loved,” says Hetherington. “But, when it came time to do the photography, she had very specific ideas about how she wanted things.”

In the end, it doesn’t matter how involved authors or publishers are, the stylist’s goal is simple: the food needs to look picture perfect and good enough to eat. 



1 Patti Hetherington gives the plates and other props a final cleaning to remove any streaks or fingerprints before the placement of the food.

2 The food, which is normally prepped and cooked in a nearby studio kitchen, is assembled on a tray that can be placed on or near the set for final plating.

3 Last-minute touches, such as grill marks on the fish, are added using red-hot skewers.

4 Garnishes are carefully placed and moved around using tweezers and other precision tools.

5 Food is brushed with oil to help pick up highlights and to make it look fresh.

6 Supporting props such as forks, spoons, or, in this case, chopsticks, are added last. This is often a collaborative process between the stylist, photographer, art director, and client.

