

Food Styling and Presentation

DO YOU ENJOY WATCHING culinary competitions on TV? Have you noticed how the food is arranged on your plate at a restaurant? Do cookbook photos entice you to make the recipe? Appearance plays a big part in the overall appeal of food. Chefs and cookbook writers think about how their menu or food item would be “plated” and viewed.



Objective:



Summarize the basic principles of food presentation and styling.

Key Terms:



balance

food presentation

food styling

food stylists

garnish

offset spatula

plating

proportion

Understanding Food Presentation and Styling Techniques

FOOD PRESENTATION

Food presentation is the process of arranging food in an aesthetically appealing manner to provide the best sensory experience. Elements and principles of art (e.g., balance, color, texture, and space) are considered when presenting food. Planning the presentation usually begins long before the food is served. Chefs begin with an idea and a sketch of the food items they are considering. This allows them to see how all the different elements would come together before purchasing ingredients and/or prior to preparing recipes.

Food presentation is visual. Customers “see” the food before they taste it, so presentation is important. A well-presented dish makes a good first impression and enhances the dining experience.



DIGGING DEEPER...

UNCOVERING ADDITIONAL FACTS: Planning Your Presentation

Visit different restaurants—in person or on Web sites. Look at the way the restaurant is decorated. What colors are used? Is there an obvious theme to the decor? Examine the menu. Does the menu reflect the same theme? Look at the menu choices and the names of the dishes. Do the names also reflect the theme? Are photos present of different menu items? Do you see a pattern emerging?

Think of a restaurant called Bob's Texas BBQ. Just hearing the name creates an image in your head of what the restaurant might look like. You might expect to see red and white checked cloths on the tables, cowboy hats on the wait staff, and BBQ ribs with a side of coleslaw served on rustic platters. Care was taken to plan every detail, including purchase of the correct plates for the theme and the arrangement of the ribs and slaw. Write down some other themes. What food items might be served with those themes? How would food be arranged to showcase the dishes?

rience. Basic principles of food presentation are planning, plating, visual appeal, texture, proportion, sauce, garnish, and balance. Proper equipment and other considerations are included in the basic principles.

Planning

The planning of a presentation design must consider the venue or theme in which the food will be served. Then assess the type and portion size of food to be served as well as customer or client preferences. Planning must note the number of customers for which the food is prepared. The ability to rapidly plate meals for large crowds helps determine the garnish, sauce, and plate size to serve the food in its desired state: hot or cold.

Plating

Plating is positioning food on a serving piece, such as a plate. Once the food items are prepared, they must be “readied” for presentation to a customer. Modern plating designs are artistic and often use unique serving pieces and unconventional arrangements of food, sauce, and garnish. Special care is taken to choose an



FIGURE 1. Traditional plating designates the starch at 10 o'clock, the vegetable at 2 o'clock, and the protein at 6 o'clock.

appropriate serving piece and to arrange the food as planned. Traditional plating is designed using the face of an analog clock.

- ◆ Starch at 10 o'clock
- ◆ Vegetable at 2 o'clock
- ◆ Protein at 6 o'clock

Visual Appeal

To attain visual appeal, the color, shape, and size of all elements are evaluated. If all items are the same color, same texture, and same consistency, there is no contrast or interest on the plate.

Color

An example of poor visual appeal is serving mashed potatoes and a whole poached chicken breast. Both items are a bland white, which adds no color interest. Similarly, serving the two items on a white plate offers no contrast.

Color and Shape

Adding a green or orange vegetable, a brown sauce, and a fresh green herb garnish to a steak enhances the customer's dining experience. The vegetable, sauce, and garnish contrast nicely with the steak and a white plate. Using whole green beans or asparagus spears would add a different shape. Also, an oval or rectangular service plate would add more visual interest.

Size and Number

Visual appeal is achieved on a plate by including different sizes of elements. For instance, if serving a whole chicken breast, you could add appeal by cutting it in half or slicing it into quarter-inch slices to change the size and appearance. Potatoes could be cut into slices or cubes or mashed to change their size and shape. In addition, odd numbers of items are more interesting than even. For example, when serving new potatoes, place three or five on the plate instead of two or four.

Texture

Different textures enhance the visual impact of a food presentation. Texture—especially a variety of textures—is an important part of a satisfying dining experience.

- ◆ A crunchy-shelled cannoli served with a creamy filling is a winning contrast of textures.



FIGURE 2. A good example of contrasting textures is the crunchy shell and creamy filling of this Sicilian cannoli dessert.

- ◆ Slicing a stuffed, sautéed pork chop—rather than serving it whole—adds interest and allows better viewing of the different textures.
- ◆ Cooking methods alter textures. Carrots have a different texture when served raw, steamed, mashed, and roasted.

Proportion

Proportion is the relationship between the size, shape, and position of different parts of a meal on a plate. The correct proportions—between different food items, sauce, garnish and serving piece—enhance the presentation. The space between each item is also important. For example, too much space makes the food look disconnected or lost on the plate; too little space makes the food look crowded or sloppy. When creating the plate design, height is important. Food may be stacked. However, if it is stacked too high, it will become unstable. HINT: The food on a plate is often placed lower in the front and higher in the back. This placement draws the eye in and upward and has a more pleasing effect than a “level” presentation.

Sauce

Correct sauce placement is essential in creating a high-quality presentation. Sauces may be placed under, on top, or around an item to add interest as well as flavor. For instance, a green pesto sauce contrasts visually and flavor-wise with a sautéed walleye fillet. A sauce may be used atop an item, but it should be carefully placed so it does not cover the item entirely. For example, a brown gravy spooned over a portion of mashed potatoes would add contrast and flavor. Sauces are used decoratively and/or to add artistic flair. Placing the sauce in a squeeze bottle allows for better control. A bright red strawberry glaze could be made into a swirl shape beside a slice of cheesecake to add visual interest and additional flavor.

Garnish

A **garnish** is an item used to enhance a dish. It should add visual interest and flavor. A garnish should add to the overall appeal of the dish; it should not be a distraction. Most chefs would insist on an edible garnish, although occasionally a nonedible one may be used. If, for example, the theme of the meal is tropical, a paper umbrella may be added to a drink or dessert. A sprig of parsley or mint may be used. Either would add a burst of color to an otherwise bland meal. Vegetables and fruits are often carved or sliced and formed into shapes to add visual interest.

Balance

Balance is the placement of all plated items in a pleasing manner that considers visual appeal, spacing, texture, and garnish. A balanced plate has a focal point without any one item being too prominent or overpowering. Balance is also achieved in flavor, color, texture, and nutritional value. The focal point of the dish, whether it is one of the main food items or the garnish, should add to the overall feeling of balance. For example:

- ◆ A sweet and fruity sauce balances, especially spicy chutney.

- ◆ A slice of plain cheesecake served with a dollop of whipped cream could be dull. Cheesecake is more visually appealing when served with a dark chocolate glaze, fresh strawberries, and a sprig of mint.
- ◆ A balanced plate contains a variety of nutrients. Placing pasta, potatoes, and a baguette on a plate would not only be bland in color, it would also contain mostly carbohydrates.

Equipment

Use the proper equipment and tools to ensure ease of plating with a professional result. The equipment used will vary greatly depending on the type and quantity of food. Having an assortment of tools on hand ensures the plating will be presented with ease and professionalism. The basic plating equipment would include the following:

- ◆ Spatula and offset spatula
- ◆ Tongs and tweezers
- ◆ Portion scoop
- ◆ Pastry bag
- ◆ Skewers and toothpicks
- ◆ Strainer and slotted spoon
- ◆ Ladle
- ◆ Squeeze bottles
- ◆ Knives (e.g., chef, slicer, boning, and paring)
- ◆ Kitchen shears
- ◆ Miscellaneous: molds, egg slicer, apple corer, peeler, and cookie cutters

Basic Plating Equipment

Generally, numerous items are needed to assist in proper plating.

Spatula

A spatula has a straight, thin metal blade attached to a handle. An **offset spatula** is a straight, thin item with a metal blade that has a 45-degree (or a double 45-degree) bend that allows for the hand to be farther away from the food. It is used to precisely place a



FIGURE 3. An offset spatula has a 45-degree bend to easily ice the layers and the perpendicular sides of a layer cake.

salmon steak onto a bed of rice pilaf or to easily ice the perpendicular sides of a layer cake.

Tongs and Tweezers

Tongs and tweezers are tools—two long arms connected at one end—for lifting or holding objects or food items. Tongs have many uses, including gently arranging a mixed green salad. Tweezers also have many uses, including delicately placing an edible flower onto the top of a wedding cake.

Portion Scoops

Portion scoops are standard-sized scoops used to measure food—cooked and uncooked. Each portion scoop has a handle, usually with a spring release, and a scraper arm that shapes and deposits measured food items. The number on the scraper arm indicates the number of portion scoops in one quart. Portion scoops are used to ensure each plate receives the same amount of product and each customer receives the same amount of food. They may be used to shape mashed potatoes or frozen gelato, too.



FIGURE 4. A chef is using tweezers to arrange the edible flowers on this salad.

Pastry Bag

A pastry bag is a handheld, cone-shaped cloth or paper device fitted with plain or shaped icing tips for piping or depositing icing or whipped cream, mashed vegetables, chocolate, etc. onto plates or desserts.

Skewers and Toothpicks

Skewers and toothpicks serve as tools to secure and/or suspend food (as a grill spit) during cooking or plating. Skewers are typically used to hold a meat, vegetable, and/or fruit kabob together during grilling, cooking, and plating. Toothpicks have many uses, including propping items or holding items together. However, caution must be used to ensure that toothpicks are not accidentally eaten.

Strainers and Slotted Spoons

Strainers and slotted spoons are pierced long-handled tools that have many uses during cooking and plating. They may be used to lift or strain fresh ravioli from boiling water.

Ladles and Squeeze Bottles

Ladles are long-handled tools with a hook on one end and a bowl on the other. They have many uses, including filling a bowl with soup or applying a sauce to a dish. Squeeze bottles are

also a good choice to apply a sauce. They allow for exact placement of the sauce on the plate or food item.

Knives

Knives are cutting devices with sharp blades fastened to a handle. Various knives are used for dicing, mincing, slicing, and carving. Knowing which knife to use for the task is an important skill for all kitchen workers.



FIGURE 5. The pastry chef uses a squeeze bottle filled with raspberry coulis to decorate this chocolate dessert.

Kitchen Shears

Kitchen shears usually have texturized rubber or plastic handles that allow the cook or chef to have a slip-free grip. They have many uses, including being an excellent choice to separate delicate herbs or edible flowers from stems when used as garnishes.

Additional Considerations When Plating

- ◆ Arrange the “best” (prettiest or most perfect) side of the food item up and toward the front of the plate.
- ◆ Keep hot food hot, and serve it on a warm plate.
- ◆ Keep cold food cold, and serve it on a chilled plate.
- ◆ Before the plate leaves the kitchen, you should:
 - Check that the edge of the plate is clean.
 - Wipe the rim of the plate using a dampened, rolled up cloth to ensure that any fingerprints and food that has accidentally rested on the rim of the plate is removed.
 - Conduct a final visual check before the plate leaves the kitchen. Look for consistency and completeness.

FOOD STYLING

Food styling is the process of arranging food in an aesthetically pleasing manner to create the best photograph. Many of the food presentation principles apply. However, some significant differences exist. Because food arranged for photographing is not eaten, flavor and edibility are not considerations. **Food stylists** are people who artfully arrange food to make it visually appealing and tasty.

Basic Principles of Food Styling

Basic principles of food styling are planning; setting the stage, subject, background, or backdrop; and photography composition (lighting and angle).

Planning

Food styling plans often begin, as do food presentations, with a sketch. The concept sketch is created and is referred to throughout the planning process. Customer or client preferences are also considered. The intended use of the photograph—online magazine, digital image library, or culinary school-recruiting brochure—impacts the way food is styled.

Setting the Stage

High-quality photo shoots—including culinary images—consider the subject and then the choices for background/backdrop, lighting, and camera angle to best represent the item(s).

Subject

Visual images of plated foods and meals are often the primary subject of culinary photo shoots. Catering businesses may choose to photograph entire dinner or buffet menus to showcase their ability to produce attractive food in large quantities. Food preparation steps are also



FURTHER EXPLORATION...

ONLINE CONNECTION: A Day in the Life of a Food Stylist

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a food stylist? What are the responsibilities? What hours are worked? How is food made to look appealing? Learn about a day in the life of two food stylists: Dan Macey and Maggie Ruggiero.

Dan Macey's interview reveals how he creates the perfect food for a photo shoot. He has worked with national chefs and on numerous television shows. Find out more about Dan's career at <http://mainline.thetowndish.com/2012/10/a-day-in-the-life-dan-macey-food-stylist/>.

Go behind the scenes with Maggie Ruggiero—a freelance food stylist. In her interview, she discusses her schedule, equipment, and tricks of the trade. Find out more about Maggie's career at http://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/14/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-food-stylist/?_r=0.



common subjects of food photography. For example, to illustrate a recipe for a culinary magazine, each step of the recipe must be documented.

Background or Backdrop

Backgrounds and backdrops are often referred to as “the setting.” Photographers must consider to what degree the backdrop would be part of the photo. For example:

- ◆ Farmers’ markets may wish to showcase the number and variety of food vendors’ products. Photographers may create shots that show the street, the people shopping, a vendor, and food or other related items.
- ◆ Food is sometimes the only item in a photo. A single raspberry tart may be placed on a simple, white plate set on a white tablecloth. As a result, the backdrop disappears.
- ◆ A restaurant serving crepes may wish to associate its business with France. A backdrop of a French café gives the illusion that the crepes are the same as those sold in France.

Lighting

Lighting is important to all photography and is especially important when photographing food. Ideally, the food stylist will arrange the food in the same light in which it will be photographed. For example, if the lighting is dim and a flash is used, the food will appear washed and unappealing. Yet florescent lighting may give the food a greenish cast. Take care to adjust the lighting so no unwanted shadows interfere with the subject being photographed. The heat from lights is not as important a factor as in the past because food stylists and photographers do not always use film to capture images. Digital photography has eliminated some lighting dilemmas for stylists.

Angle

As a stylist arranging food, you must keep in mind that photographers will take photos at many angles. Each angle highlights different aspects of the product. For instance, a zoom lens and a straight-on shot photograph may be the best way to capture the knife skills of the chef and his or her creative flair. Capturing the best angle is a combination of experience and of trial and error. However, if the same subject is to be photographed from the side and/or at a distance, a wide-angle lens may be the best choice. In addition, tilting a plate slightly forward allows for the focal point to become even more prominent. The angle of the food may be altered to obtain the best photo angle.

Additional Styling Considerations

- ◆ Food items styled for photo shoots often are not eaten. As such, the food may contain inedible components. Glue, foam, shellac, and wood may all be used to assist in styling the food. For instance, fruits that do not have the sheen (shine) desired for a photo may be styled with non-food items. Coating the food with a thin layer of glycerin, shellac, or oil could achieve the preferred look.
- ◆ Props (e.g., blocks) may be used to tilt a plate or bowl or to add height to a display.

- ◆ Motor oil often is used in place of pancake syrup.
- ◆ Undercooked meat is typically photographed for cookbooks and magazines as food loses moisture when cooked to certain degrees of doneness. It also loses mass when cooked to certain degrees of doneness.
- ◆ Soap is used to create bubbles.
- ◆ Clear acrylic ice cubes are used in place of real ice cubes because they do not melt.
- ◆ Dyes and paint are used to give food a more appealing color.
- ◆ White glue is sometimes substituted for milk on cereal to ensure that the cereal does not become soggy as quickly. It could be used for a soft filling or decoration.

HINT: When the stylist is also the photographer, he or she takes as many photos as possible once the food is styled and lit. Having too many images is better than realizing the “perfect shot” was not taken during the photo session.

Summary:



Food presentation is arranging food in an aesthetically appealing manner to provide the best sensory experience. Elements and principles of art are considered when presenting food. Basic principles of food presentation are planning, plating, visual appeal, texture, proportion, sauce, garnish, and balance.

Food styling is arranging food in an aesthetically pleasing manner to create the best photograph. Many of the food presentation principles apply. However, some significant differences exist. Because food arranged for photographing is not eaten, flavor and edibility are not considerations. Food stylists artfully arrange food to make it visually appealing and tasty.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. Define plating.
2. In a traditional plating plan, and referencing an analog clock, what is the “clock location” of the protein food, the starch food, and the vegetable food?
3. How do chefs and cooks add visual interest to a presentation?
4. What are essential tools to “plate” food?
5. What are the similarities and differences between food presentation and food styling?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Set up a meeting with a teacher from the Fine Arts Department at your community college. Tell him or her you are interested in learning about design elements and photography as they relate to culinary concepts. Bring a recipe or menu ideas with you as examples of what you would like to photograph. Ask how artists would “view” these food objects. Apply this knowledge to your food presentations or when styling food. Then try your hand at styling and photographing one of your food presentations.

Web Links:



Tips for Plating

<http://blog.kitchenaid.com/10-tips-plating-food-like-a-pro/>

Plating Basics

<http://rouxbe.com/cooking-courses/the-basics-of-plating/details>

Plating Food Techniques

<http://cheffoodtools.com/2014/11/03/platingfoodforbeautifulfoodpresentation/>