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Food Shots Are Not So Candid
by Ruth Dahlberg

"HOORAY," cried Jimmie as he came home from school feeling ravenously hungry. "Mom's been photographing ice creams and meringues today." But poor Jimmie was doomed to a sad disillusionment. His clever mother and the food photographers had been using a certain kind of Dutch cheese to give the exact photographic effect of brick ice creams. Jimmie did like cheese, but it wasn’t a bit like ice cream and anyway such a big hunk of cheese was a bit too much at one time.

Substituting cheese for ice cream in food photography is a trick used to obtain good pictures of frozen desserts. The powerful lights used in this work necessitate making up foods and using food fakes and trickery. Every time we pick up a magazine we are probably being fooled by some ingenious photographer who has discovered a new idea in the field of food make-up. Just as a moving picture star has to be made up for her big picture, so must foods. Many of the cooking rules expounded at Iowa State College are thrown overboard when a food is being prepared for the camera lights. However, you must know the rules before you know how to break them satisfactorily.

Looks are very deceiving in this case and "beauty is only skin deep." The gelatine that looks most delicious may be tough and rubbery.

Fidelis Harrer, a noted Chicago food photographer, believes that any trickery or deception practiced on the reader is legitimate as long as the right effects are obtained. Pictures of pies that look delicious enough to win any man’s heart are often in reality only a pie shell filled with newspaper. Cold coffee or vinegar usually have to act the part of tempting wines and often the bowl of red cherries that is so colorful is only a sample of the variety used on women’s hats. Frozen fruits make a good substitute when fresh ones are not available.

Some cereals, like little children, often behave badly when before the camera. Cereal kernels become mushy and indistinct. To remedy this they are coated with a fine skin of paraffin.

Every food photographer knows what a miracle worker olive oil is. It is used on foods to make them shine and bring out the highlights. Roasts, steaks, and shrimps are made especially rich looking through this beauty treatment.

The appearance of the model cook who is to be starred in a food picture is also tremendously important. Any untidiness will make the food appear unappetizing. The model must be chosen with great care. Pretty hands and graceful positions help to create a pleasing effect. Yet the model must not be so striking that she, rather than the food, becomes the center of interest. The reading public likes to have a pretty girl and charming housewife show it the food.

Advertisers are demanding more and more food pictures. They have found that picturing an attractive product miraculously helps sales. As in the movies, color is being used more extensively and effectively. In addition, the production and manufacturing sides of food industries can be dramatized to interest retailers and consumers.

Food photographers have found that some food pictures, particularly those of cakes, should be close-ups. Others should be of a more general nature and merely create atmosphere. Some of the detail is lost in the reproduction of the photograph so the negatives must be very clear.

Some foods are much more difficult to handle before the studio lights than others. Chocolate cakes, meats, and rice are difficult foods to picture. Chocolate cakes are troublesome because they are hard to get in focus. A light chocolate cake is usually used as the subject for a photograph of a Devil’s food.

The brown coloring of meats does not photograph well. A tempting steak for a color reproduction is only slightly broiled and then painted with a chili powder sauce.

In rice photography, the proper background must be used. It requires a color expert to work out striking effects with dishes, background, and rice. A tray of numerous small foodstuffs lacking variety in color, size, and shape also taxes the photographer’s ability.

Stand-ins are used in this field while the stars, actual foods to be photographed, are kept on ice. A good photographer completely prepares the set-up before the food is placed in front of the camera. Powerful lights and a warm room do not keep a food appetizing in appearance.

Fidelis Harrer follows these rules in directing his food photography work:

Use only objects in the picture which pertain to the subject. Avoid nick-nacks and distracting backgrounds. Use contrast in black and white. The use of dark against light backgrounds is good. Never stand to one side of the camera in making a set-up but get the same perspective as the camera. Make all set-ups simple, not elaborate.