



**Michael Powell**

Michael trained as a press photographer and has worked for countless Fleet Street titles, which includes a 10-year stint at *The Times*. He started shooting food 10 years ago and has shot everything from pavlova to Pavarotti. He has been a finalist in both the Pink Lady Food Photography Awards and Arts Photographer of the Year. [www.michaelpowell.com](http://www.michaelpowell.com)

# Food, glorious food

You don't need a lot of expensive gear to shoot great images of food, as **Michael Powell** explains

**W**hile browsing in a charity shop recently, I came across a recipe book from the early 1980s. Leafing through it I was struck by how few recipes were illustrated with photographs. The few that were included, however, were studio lit, formal, shot around f/22 and immaculate to the point of sterility. Some of the dishes didn't look real, and probably weren't, since all kinds of techniques were deployed back then to tart up tarts and fluff up pheasants. Instant mash, for example, was commonly used in place of ice cream as it was often fluid under the studio lights.

Thankfully, people soon realised that cookery didn't need intimidating Haynes-style manuals, as best-seller lists overflowed with recipe books written by chefs who understood that most people were too busy or too tired to spend half a day preparing supper. The recipe seemed achievable, and with an emphasis on photography it looked it too. Writers and chefs started talking about flavour, freshness, informality, simplicity and speed.

I work mostly in editorial, illustrating tasty recipes that don't require *MasterChef* and Michelin-star talent to cook it. Almost all of it is shot inside the home of the chef and very rarely in my studio. Flash gear usually stays in the car boot, as natural light is so often a perfect partner to natural food. Bouncing, reflecting, directing, flagging and generally controlling it to suit the food is my objective – and it's where the fun begins.

**Lighting**

Photographers often baffle others by pointing out nice light, perhaps the setting sun's raking effect and long shadows. That second-nature observational skill is a vital asset when photographing food, so if the light is gorgeous

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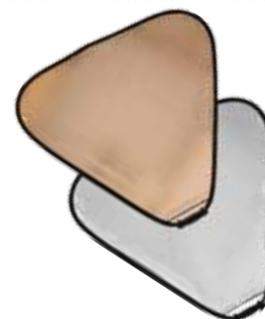


Natural light is often the perfect partner when it comes to making food photography look authentic

**KIT LIST**



◀ **Tilt-and-shift lens**  
I use a Canon TS-E 90mm f/2.8 tilt-and-shift lens. I can control the plane of focus with the tilt, and the position of the subject in the frame using shift. With food, I often bring two elements of a dish not positioned together into focus and leave the rest untouched. It is manual-focus only and reminds me of the old FD lenses I used in the 1980s on a Canon F-1.



◀ **Reflectors**  
I use everything from a tiny shaving mirror to a Lastolite 1.8m Panelite. The gold and white TriGrip is especially useful as I can place the straight edge on a table where the round ones slip off. The gold side is great for 'warming up' pastry.



◀ **Wi-Fi card and iPad**  
I like to react quickly to the light, so I prefer not to shoot tethered. A Wi-Fi SD card set to best JPEG is a simple way to let everybody in the room see what I am shooting. The CF slot is set to record raw only.



◀ **Expodisc**  
I find inaccurate food colours as jarring as colour casts on skin tones, so I set custom white balances using an Expodisc for good colour rendition and to speed up my raw workflow later.

**Wet Wipes, lens wipes and kitchen roll**



A cheap bit of kit here, but still essential. Food is messy, greasy and sticky, and is easily transferred to your gear, so the Wet Wipes are for my hands, the lens wipes for my iPad, and the kitchen roll for touching up unwanted spots and spillage on plates and props.

in the sitting room at 11am, I'll be set up and ready, but by 4pm I might have moved to the study on the other side of the house via the kitchen and landing.

Often I'll shoot a dish, then spot completely different light when taking the plate back to the kitchen and quickly start again. I often need to shoot pictures that can be used seasonally; Easter cakes, asparagus for spring, turkeys for Christmas, and always at the wrong time of the year. I once shot a bonfire-night-themed soup in June in a downstairs loo, complete with sparklers to get a long enough exposure. Food goes off quickly, so I like to get the safe shot and then start experimenting.

That charity-shop cookbook from the early '80s is testament to the skill and inventiveness of large-format transparency studio photography, albeit with a little fakery. I wouldn't have fancied biting into



Keep an eye out for interesting backgrounds and props to enhance your shots

the apple painted with nail polish, or the ice cream made from Cadbury's Smash, so it stands to reason that as much as great ingredients produce great food, lovely pictures are easier to create of lovely food. If you can't wait to reach for the knife and fork, that means it will probably photograph well. Virtually all the food created is eaten during and at the end

**'I once shot a bonfire-night-themed soup in June in a downstairs loo, complete with sparklers to get a long enough exposure'**



You don't need a good food stylist to take great shots, as inspiration is all around

## Food styling

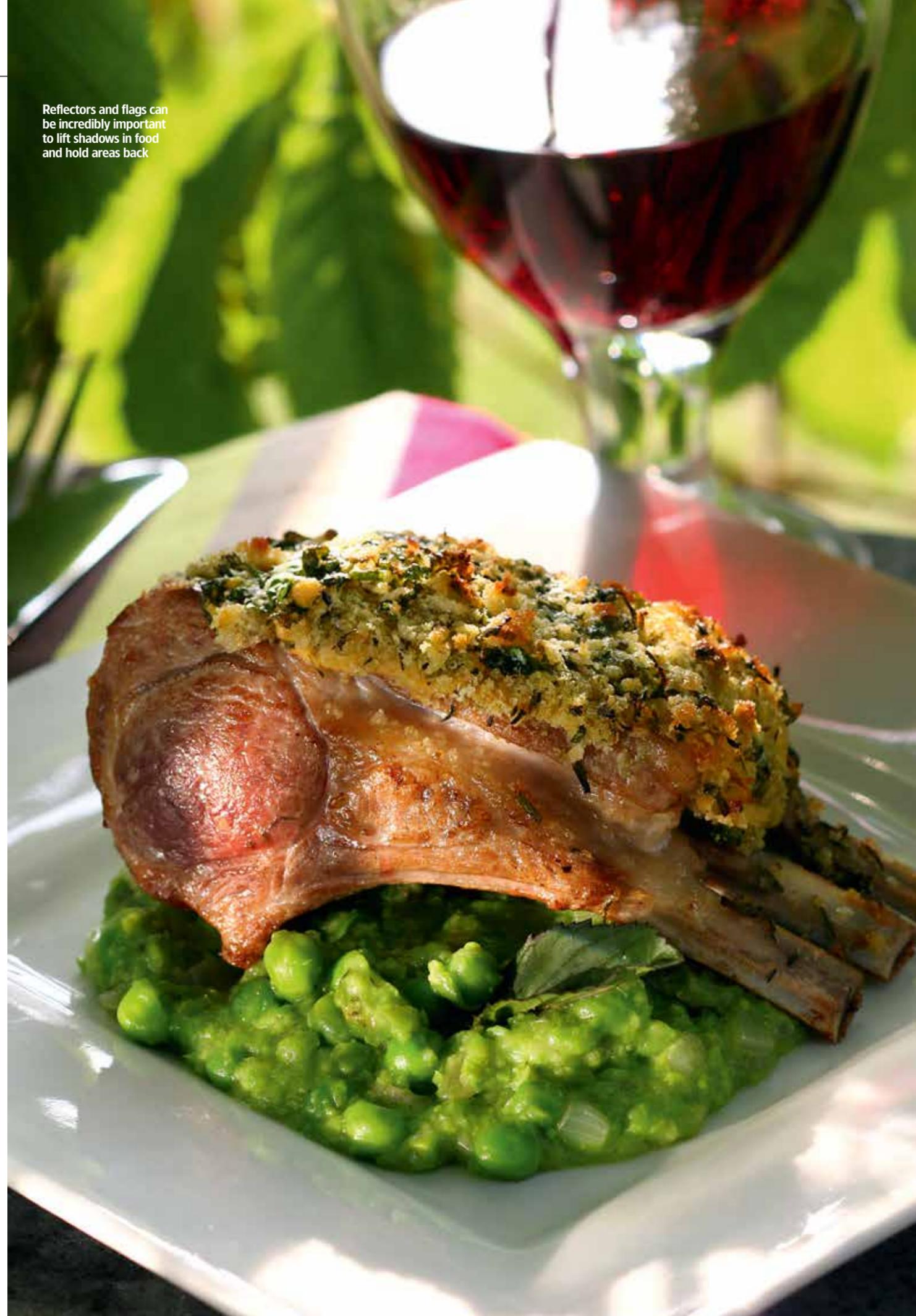
FOOD follows trends like anything else, so styling constantly evolves. Not everyone has a food stylist to hand, but luckily inspiration is all around. Food and interiors magazines are crammed with ideas. Shabby chic interiors have been a popular design trend for some time, and you can see its influence in food

photography. Textures are important right now, and the right food shot on stressed wood and vintage materials can look stunning.

Keep an eye out for interesting backgrounds and props, ready to bring them out at a moment's notice. Whether it's natural stone samples from a builder's merchant, unusual

surfaces from junk shops, fabrics from curtain makers, period plates and cutlery from antique dealers, napkins from a supermarket – all can lift a shot. Unexpected colours work well too. I see a lot of blue props in contemporary food photography and I think it works well because so little food is naturally that colour.

Reflectors and flags can be incredibly important to lift shadows in food and hold areas back





A 100mm macro lens is a great choice for food photography, offering a decent working distance

of the shoot. A talented chef and food stylist can make all the difference because, as well as having culinary skills, he or she is able to spot a potential problem on a plate when my brain is full of white balance and not whitebait. Rachel, who creates much of the food I photograph, has a hilarious skill for spotting rude shapes in food. She should have hosted *That's Life*.

**Approach**

I have achieved similar results to all the techniques mentioned here using just studio lighting, but somehow the pictures lacked the edge of realism required to convey home-cooked food. I still use a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III, which I adore. I find the full-frame sensor ideal, especially when using the Canon TS-E 90mm f/2.8 lens. I try not to overuse its tilt-and-shift mechanism for effect, but it is really useful when controlling depth of field. We went through a very shallow depth of-field trend for a while, but I tend to shoot mostly around f/4.5 and, where necessary, I use the tilt to bring parts of the dish that are important into focus, such as the main ingredient and perhaps a garnish or an accompanying



Turn off your camera's AF and try subtle movements back and forth until you achieve focus

dish further back in the frame. I often shoot for editorial clients, so sometimes creating out-of-focus space in the frame pleases editors who like to overlay text. Another fine lens is the Canon 100mm f/2.8L Macro, which combines close focusing with a nice working distance and image stabilisation. I don't like using tripods and shoot handheld as much as I can before grabbing a monopod or tripod if light is fading. The usual rule about avoiding shake by using a shutter speed in excess of focal length applies more so with these lenses. I pride myself on a steady hand, but try to avoid slower



Taking a look straight down can work particularly well with flat foods, such as tarts and pizza

than 1/125sec when shooting handheld. My pictures are often used on trucks and exhibition stands at a width of three metres, so I have to be strict with myself when daylight tails off. The EOS-1Ds Mark III has two card slots and I usually shoot raw, but with food there's often a team around me (possibly including the client) who want to see what is going on. I dislike working tethered as I need to be able to suddenly set up elsewhere for better light, so I use the SD slot with a Wi-Fi-enabled card that allows me to ping fine JPEGs to my iPad, which then gets passed around the house. AP

**Budget alternatives to the Canon TS-E 90mm**



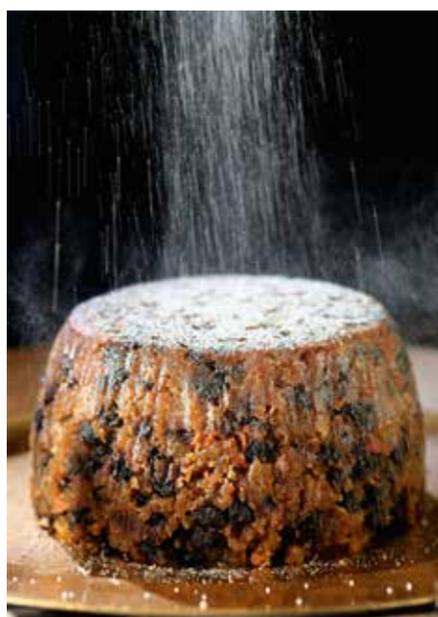
**Canon EF 100mm f/2.8L Macro**  
Hardly a budget lens at €600, but almost half the price of the TS-E, and it features IS where the TS-E doesn't.

**Tamron 90mm f/2.8 Di VC USD Macro**  
The latest incarnation of this popular lens features both image stabilisation (VC) and Tamron's Ultrasonic Silent Drive (USD) for fast and quiet AF.

**Canon EF-S 60mm f/2.8 Macro**  
For those using a cropped sensor to create a short telephoto, the Canon EF-S 60mm f/2.8 Macro USM is a great alternative.



**TOP TIPS**



**Work around the subject**  
This is the first piece of advice I was given when studying photojournalism more than 30 years ago, and it applies to food photography too. For commercial shoots, I have to focus on the most important ingredient, but sometimes a better shot lurks elsewhere in the viewfinder: the crumbs, the pastry's texture, the beads of oil. This Christmas pudding shot was elevated by using a sieve to drop icing sugar. A slow sync speed was used to capture correct daylight exposure with a very small burst of flash from a radio-triggered Speedlite and a FlashBender attached to highlight streaks of falling sugar.



**Reflectors and flags**  
I carry a lot of Lastolites, including a TriGrip and even a 1.8m Panelite, but my most frequently used reflectors are actually cheap mirrors, and the small shaving ones are brilliant at putting detail into darker foods and shadows. For these Chinese-baked chips with satay, I balanced direct sunshine from the right with a small mirror from the left. A black foam board flag was used behind the food to hide a distracting background and add contrast.



**Turn off AF and get moving**  
There's a lot of depth in food front-to-back and top-to-bottom. That critical point of focus is easily missed by AF, and if the food is low in contrast the AF can frustratingly start to hunt. You don't have much time before that beautifully prepared fresh dish starts to resemble a heat-lamped motorway services meal. A contrasting focal point, such as herbs or croutons, can help with liquids such as soup. If the AF had settled on the wrong part of this crouton even slightly, the shot would not have worked. I liken it to the unsettling effect that focusing on the furthest eye has in portraiture.



**Change angle**  
Much food looks great shot at the angle we are used to seeing just before diving in with cutlery. However, take a look straight down too, particularly with flat foods such as pizza and tarts. A really low angle can add drama to taller and piled foods, but watch the background. These pasties were first shot on a dining table before we decided we liked the shapes seen from directly above. A small mirror has been used from the bottom to beam daylight back into the shaded side of the pasties.



**Be adaptable**  
Changing light and weather can scupper your plans, so be prepared to change shot entirely if necessary. This means being in control of your equipment and having the technical skills to change tack completely. This parsnip and ginger winter pudding picture was a sudden change of mind, where I had to quickly balance daylight, very low power flash and flames from the hastily made fire. I needed a fairly slow exposure to catch the flames (1/25sec) and didn't really have time to set up a monopod or tripod, so I steadied myself and the camera on the back of a dining chair.

**Beware of seeking perfection**

I DO USE Photoshop, but as with so much photography it often really is quicker to sort a compositional problem at source. Cover up a chip in you china with food and blot a splash with paper by all means, but remember you can end up removing the very thing that makes the dish appealing. When you have the safe shot, try digging in with cutlery as if about to eat to see if the shot improves.

**Pink Lady Food Photography competition**



THE CLOSING date for entries to the Pink Lady Food Photographer of the Year 2016 is 7 February, so there's still time to get snapping for the world's most prestigious celebration of all that is special and significant about food photography and film. The competition is open to everyone – professionals and amateurs – and awards £10,000 worth of prizes. The overall winner scoops the crown and £5,000, as well as two nights' accommodation in London to attend the exclusive VIP awards ceremony at London's Mall Galleries in April 2016, attended by all the finalists and winners. Visit [www.pinkladyfoodphotographeroftheyear.com](http://www.pinkladyfoodphotographeroftheyear.com)