



# The dPS Ultimate Guide to Food Photography



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# Introduction

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What was once a weird little niche in photography is now a worldwide phenomenon. Food photography is only growing in popularity if the 32 million posts currently on Instagram are anything to go by.

Food photography is here to stay, but it's not an easy genre to master.

Our guide gives you some of the top tips and tricks to help you get mouth-watering results.



# Equipment

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## Cameras

The first thing to think about when you're on the hunt for a new camera body is the size of the sensor.

Whether you decide to buy a camera with a cropped sensor or invest in a full-frame, your budget will likely determine your choice.

The important thing to know is that your camera and lenses behave differently when they have a cropped sensor than a full-frame.

Every camera has a crop factor. This is a number used to describe how much the camera is cropping your image in relation to the standard 35mm.

A full-frame camera matches the 35mm cropped standard of a traditional film camera. It has a sensor size of 24mm x 36mm. A cropped sensor is smaller than this and is therefore cheaper for camera manufacturers to make. It doesn't match a lot of lenses and the final images look different.

The Canon Rebel, for example, has a crop factor of 1.6. This means that you multiply 1.6 times the focal length of your lens to get the actual focal length that it will look like your pictures were taken at.

On a full-frame camera, a 50mm lens behaves like a 50mm. Put that same lens on a camera with a cropped sensor, it behaves more like an 80mm.

## Lenses



Lenses are where you should spend the most significant part of your budget. You should look at them as a long-term investment in your craft.

Here are the factors to consider:

## Sharpness

Your biggest concern when shopping for a lens is sharpness.

Prime lenses are preferred when shooting food because they are sharper than zoom lenses. Zoom lenses have more moving parts that enable the zoom to function. This tends to result in lower image quality and sharpness.

Prime lenses are usually ‘faster’. They have a larger maximum aperture, which enables quicker shutter speeds.

They also give you a much tighter depth of field, enabling you to isolate your subject and get that really nice blurred background we all love in food photography.

## The 50mm Lens

The 50mm can also be a useful lens, especially if you don’t have a zoom. This lens is good for overhead shots and tablescapes. However, it can give you some distortion when taking a portrait-style shot. In food photography, the 50mm is actually considered a wide-angle lens.

The 50mm f/1.8 is often referred to as the “nifty-fifty” because it gives you decent results for a very low price. If you’re just starting out and your budget is tight, get this one.

## The 24-70mm Lens

Although primes are ideal, it’s actually very useful to have one zoom lens in your kit, such as a 24-70mm.

It’s very sharp for a zoom lens, and really versatile. Many food photographers consider this a staple in their kit.



## The 60mm Macro

If you're shooting with a cropped sensor, then a 60mm macro is a great choice.

On a cropped sensor, it's more like having a 100mm. If you upgrade to full-frame, you can use it like you would a 50mm.

This lens allows you to get 3/4-angle view shots of your subject with a nice bokeh on a cropped sensor.

You also won't get the distortion at this angle that you would when shooting with a wider focal length, like a 50mm.

## The 100mm Macro

An excellent lens to have in your kit is a 100mm macro lens. This lens is not only for macro or close up shots, although it's great at these, too.

By pulling further away from your set, you can get very nice portrait-style shots as well. The focal length will give you a great blurred background.

If you go for the 100mm/105mm macro lens on a cropped sensor you will be shooting at a focal length of 150mm.

This will be a very tight crop, which can be a problem if space is an issue.

## Tripods

A tripod is a **must** for food photography. It helps you create consistent images and frees up your hands to style according to what you see through your camera.

The biggest requirement in a tripod is stability. A tripod needs to be able to handle the weight of your camera and lens.

When shopping for a tripod, look for one with both adjustable height and orientation. This is where you have a center column that you can move.

Make sure that it has rubber feet to avoid slippage, and that it has a high payload.

Payload refers to the amount of weight the tripod is able to withstand. It needs to bear the weight of your camera, lens, and any other additions such as a bracket or extension arm.





# Food Styling

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The objective of food styling is to make food look it's very best. Most food needs a bit of doctoring to make it look presentable for the camera.

Here are some things to consider when approaching food styling:

## **Use the freshest food possible**

The food you shoot needs to be as fresh as possible so that it looks appealing in your images. When shopping for your ingredients, take care to buy the freshest and best-looking items available.

Always have your scene, lighting, and camera ready before placing your food on set.

When you're adjusting with your lighting and camera settings, use a substitute in a similar color and shape as your food as a stand-in. Replace it with your "hero" (your main food subject) at the last moment, so that it looks as fresh and appetizing as possible.

## **Buy more than you need**

When shopping for groceries, be sure to buy more than you think you'll need for the shoot. Food dries out, melts, goes brown, or otherwise begins to look unappealing within a short time frame. It needs to be replaced with fresher items.

Depending on the food, you may also need a lot of the items to fill the frame.



## Plating

The most important factor when choosing the dishes on which you will present your food is the size.

Objects can look very different to the camera than to the eye and often look bigger than we expect. For this reason, it's a good idea to choose smaller dishes than you would ordinarily use.

Present your subjects on salad plates or smaller dinner plates. Large plates can dwarf the main subject and dominate the frame.

## Garnishes

Herbs and spices, and items such as croutons, can enhance your food shots.

Sprigs of various herbs like rosemary can be tied together with kitchen string to make little bouquets you can use to add context to your food story. You can enhance a plain bowl of soup with a drizzle of

cream and a sprinkling of chopped chives. The key is that your garnishes should make sense within the wider context of your scene. If you're shooting salmon with a lemon dill sauce, then don't garnish it with basil.

When using herbs, use the freshest possible and replace them as you shoot. They wilt or oxidize quickly. Cut herbs can be kept fresh in the refrigerator much longer when wrapped in some wet paper towel.



# Props

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You need to have a collection of food photography props.

A prop is any item you use on set to enhance the image. In food photography, this is typically kitchenware, like plates and flatware, serving bowls and utensils, and linens.

When selecting your props, think about your food photography style and what types of props would complement it.

If your style is really clean and elegant, or more refined, such props would not make much sense and you'd be better off with more delicate pieces.

In general, stay away from very bright colors and bold patterns, as they distract from the food. Colorful pieces can add a point of interest, but they need to work with the overall composition and feel of the photo.

Don't use a lot of props. A couple of the right props can have a lot of impact in telling a visual story, but too many will distract the viewer and dominate the image.

When selecting your props, start with one or two pieces, perhaps a neutral salad plate and a vintage knife or spoon. If in doubt, keep it simple.



# Backgrounds

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You'll need a variety of interesting backgrounds on which to place your food.

Use a variety of items for your backgrounds, like fabric, craft paper, or large floor tiles. You can also get creative and make your own.

Buy sheets of wood and paint or stain them yourself. There are also some great online resources for buying professional food photography backgrounds and they ship worldwide.

When shooting food, neutral or cool-toned backgrounds like blue generally work best.



# Lighting

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## Lighting modifiers

Whether you use natural or artificial light, you'll need to modify your light source.

One important item in your kit is a diffuser. This is a panel of sheer white material that you place at the edge of your table to soften the light that hits your scene.

You'll also need some simple tools to bounce and absorb the light. You can buy a professional 5-in-1 reflector kit, with foldable discs in a variety of materials to use in your shoots, as pictured below. The silver reflector, for example, can brighten your food, while the gold reflector will add warmth. It usually comes with a diffuser as well.

For a DIY version, you can also use simple black or white cardboard purchased from a craft or dollar store. White brightens your scene, while the black absorbs the light.



## Lighting styles

You should have an idea of what you want your final image to look like before you pick up your camera. Do you want the light to look soft and dimensional, or are you looking for striking contrast?

The greater the contrast between light and dark, the more dramatic your image will be. Often, your subject will dictate the light you choose.

The next time you shoot, photograph your subject in both soft and hard light and note the difference. How does each approach affect the final result? Many photographers tend to gravitate to one or the other as part of their style.



### Side lighting

This is when your light is coming from directly beside the food.

Side lighting is a good approach for a lot of your food photography. It works for most set-ups and is easy to use.

Place a reflector or bounce card on the opposite side to the light. Depending on how much shadow you want on the side of your food, move it closer or farther away, or use a smaller or larger reflector.

When shooting white and airy scenes, you still want some shadow to add dimension.



## Backlighting

Backlighting is when you position your light behind your food.

If you imagine the face of a clock, it's at 12 o'clock. This is an ideal position for beverages or soups, as it adds a sheen and highlights the liquid properties of food.

In general, backlighting is very flattering to food. It makes it gleam and brings out its texture.

However, it can be tricky to work with because it can cause your image to be too bright at the back, and too dark at the front. Too much contrast means the back of the photo will be blown out, with a loss of detail blurring into the main subject. Not enough contrast will result in a blown out photo or one that looks washed out, which is what happens when you shoot with too much light.

## Side backlighting

Side backlighting is a combination of the first two types of lighting. It's the best of both worlds and the easiest to work with. Here, our light is placed between 10 and 11 o'clock.

With this lighting style, you get the surface shine provided by backlighting without the risk of overexposure. You also don't have to reflect as much light onto the front of the food because the light is coming at more of an angle.

When using side backlighting, you'll have to play around with the height of your light relative to your scene, depending on how you want the shadows to fall.

The closer your light source is to your set, the softer the fall-off will be.



# Camera Angles

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Camera angle can have a powerful effect on your final image.

Before you pick up your camera, you need to think about what kind of food or dish you are shooting and which camera angle will help bring out its best features.

There are three main camera angles used when photographing food: overhead, 3/4 angle, or straight-on.

## The 3/4 Angle

The 3/4 angle is when your camera is placed anywhere from 25 to 75 degrees in relation to your subject.

The 3/4 angle is a popular angle because it's so versatile. You can usually show the front and surface of the dish, as well as the sides.

You see this angle a lot in commercial food photography.

## The Overhead Angle

The overhead angle is the 90-degree angle. This has become a very popular angle lately due to Instagram.

This angle definitely has several positives. It's good for fitting several elements into a scene, like in a tablescape. This also makes it a great storytelling angle. You can see a variety of



props, ingredients, or dishes of food in the frame when you shoot from overhead. It is also often easier to compose your shot using this angle than a 3/4 angle or straight-on.

However, the overhead angle doesn't work for every type of food shot. It eliminates depth, which gives a more graphic pop to an image but is not suitable for every type of food.

With the overhead angle, what you most emphasize is the shape of the food and various elements of the scene.



### The Straight-On Angle

This straight-on camera angle is most suitable for “tall” foods, like burgers or stacks of brownies or pancakes. It emphasizes the height of a dish.

When you're shooting burgers and sandwiches, the bun or the top piece of bread hides what is inside, so taking the shot from anywhere above the food doesn't make sense.

Remember, the objective is always to focus on the best features of the food.





# Composition

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Compositional tools can help us make better photographs, however, not each tool will work for each image.

Before you begin to shoot, know the goal of your image. What is the mood? What is it that you want to convey? What is the purpose of your shot and how will it be used?

Good food photography evokes the viewer's emotions. Composition is one of the main tools that help us do this.

## Line

Line is the most basic element in visual composition. Lines lead the eye through a photograph to key focal points and elements and keep the viewer's eye focused on the image.

There are a couple of things to be aware of when working with lines. When using lines to direct the viewer's eye, they should point to the main subject, or into the frame.

Lines should also never point outside of the frame, as the eyes will be forced to leave the image. This weakens the image and can cause the viewer to lose interest.

## Rule of Odds

The rule-of-odds states that when photographing a group of objects, having an odd number of elements in the frame is much more visually interesting than having an even number of elements.

Odd numbers create a sense of balance and harmony and provide a resting point for our eyes, whereas even numbers of objects can divide our attention and compete with each other.

When there are more than five elements in an image, it becomes difficult for the mind to register the higher number. For this reason, it's a good idea to compose many elements into **groups** of odd numbers whenever possible.



## Rule of Thirds

The Rule of Thirds is intended to help you place the main elements and focal point within the composition.

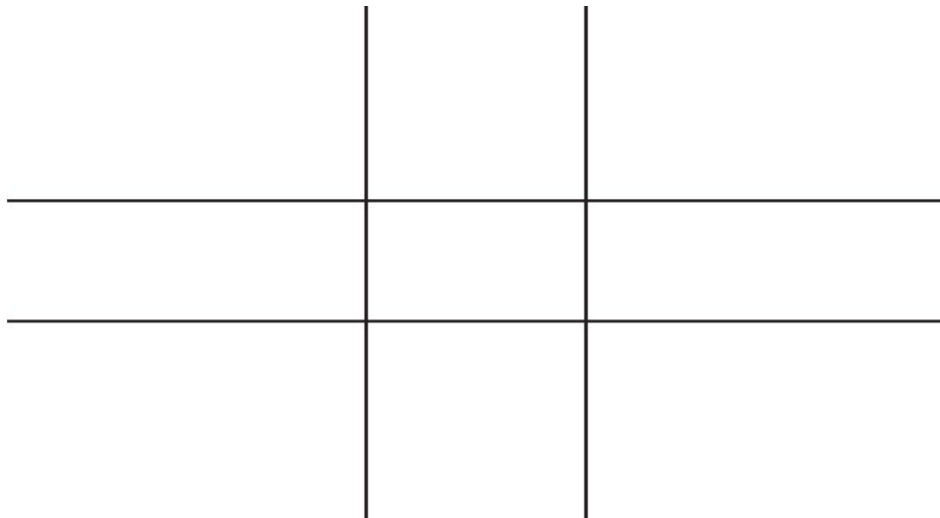
Think of an imaginary grid that divides the image into nine equal parts, like a tic-tac-toe grid. The ratio is 1:1 per rectangle.

Rule of Thirds is a great place to start. It helps add harmony to your images and helps you take the first steps in composition as a new photographer. In fact, it can work for many images, particularly landscapes.

When it comes to food photography, however, this rule can be limiting. You can end up making images that are unbalanced and awkward.

The Phi Grid is a similar concept that is more powerful than the Rule of Thirds. Both grids look almost the same, but the centre lines of the Phi Grid are closer together.

## The Phi Grid



*Phi Grid*

The Phi Grid is an expression of the **Golden Ratio**. It helps you create a balanced and naturally pleasing image.

The Phi Grid follows the ratio of 1:1.618, a ratio that is a constant in nature and one we automatically gravitate toward.

It appears throughout the natural world, from a nautilus shell to the number of petals in a flower.

You can find the golden ratio everywhere in the world around us, though no one can explain exactly why it exists this way.

You can use this knowledge in your photography. Thinking about how the eye moves through an image and incorporating some expression of the golden ratio will help you create images that the brain will recognize as aesthetically attractive and harmonious.

## **Negative Space**

Positive space is the space taken up by your main subject. Negative space is an area where your eyes can rest. It provides balance, a bit of breathing room, and emphasizes the subject.

Negative space can portray movement and give context to an image. It may also give the viewer the idea that there is a story beyond what the eye is seeing.

In food photography, there is a tendency to shoot with a lot of negative space due to text placement, particularly when it comes to magazine work, product packaging, or advertisements.

When an image doesn't make use of negative space, it can feel a bit claustrophobic and cluttered. Also, when there is too much going on in an image, the viewer is unsure of where to look.





## Repetition

Repeating elements also add interest to an image. Repetition can occur spontaneously in the subject or can be created by added elements such as props and supporting ingredients.

Sometimes patterns can become monotonous, so breaking up a pattern can create a stronger photograph.

There are various ways to create a break in pattern, such as with a break in color, shape, size, or texture. Where you place this break is crucial; you want to place it in one of your focal points or along intersecting lines.

## Color

Color is an important part of a composition. It evokes emotions and creates a sense of mood within an image.

Cool and dark colors such as navy blue and black recede, while light or warm colors like yellow bring objects forward.

Backgrounds and surface colors that are too bright can detract from our subject; they should be chosen according to the mood you want to create, as well as in harmony with your chosen elements.

Color combinations can be monochromatic when they are tonal variations within a single hue. This approach has its place, but utilizing complementary colors is a great technique to apply to food photography.

Complementary colors appear directly opposite each other on the color wheel, such as red and green, or blue and orange.

The color scheme you choose to work with will, in part, be dictated by the food you are shooting.

Your colors should also be balanced in terms of not having too many colors in a frame, which will appear chaotic.



## Texture

One of the best ways to add interest to your photographs is with texture. It adds contrast and detail and enhances food subjects.

Texture occurs naturally in food, but can also be used effectively in backgrounds and surfaces, and your props and linens, as long as it's not overdone.

Lots of texture in the food, linens, and backgrounds composed together can look too busy and overwhelm the viewer.

# Editing Your Images

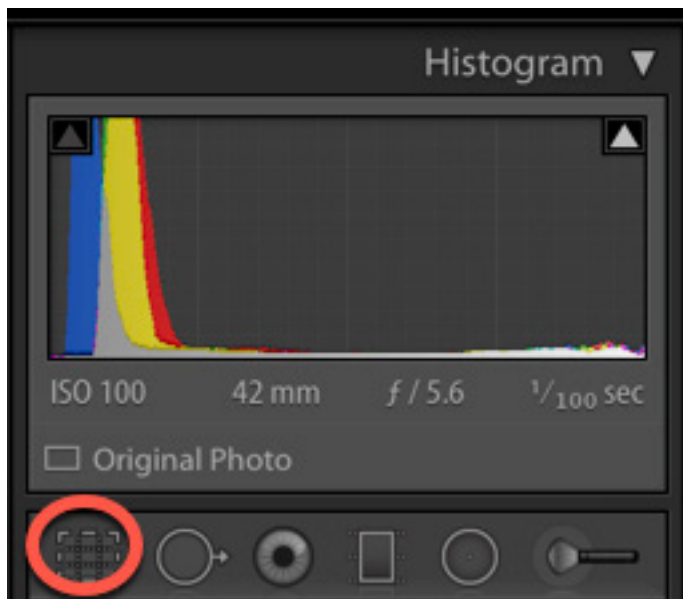
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Adobe's Lightroom is an excellent post-processing program. It's more intuitive and easier to learn than Photoshop.

I recommend using Lightroom to do your global adjustments and then to fine tune your image in Photoshop if need be. For example, if you need to work on specific areas of the image.

Let's look at the most important tools:

## The Histogram



It's important to have a basic understanding of the histogram to make the proper adjustments to the exposure and tones in your image.

A histogram maps out the tonal range of an image. Brightness is graphed on a grayscale. Every pixel in the image is assigned to a value.

Black is on the left, while white is on the right. You can find the shades of grey in between.

The distribution of the tones in the histogram will tell you about the overall exposure of the image.

A big peak in any of these regions means that the image has a lot of pixels at that particular density. An open gap in the histogram means that there are no pixels at that density.



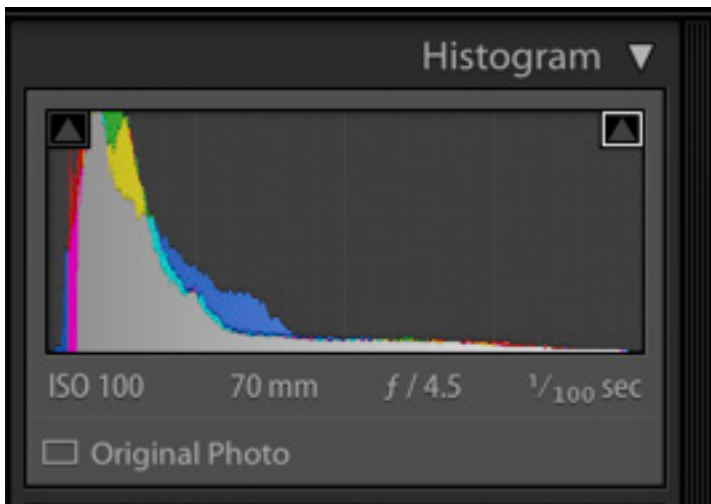
Check if you have a strong peak at the black or white end of the histogram. If you do, your image could be underexposed or overexposed.

Generally, most images look best if they contain both dark and light values. Otherwise, they may lack contrast and look flat.

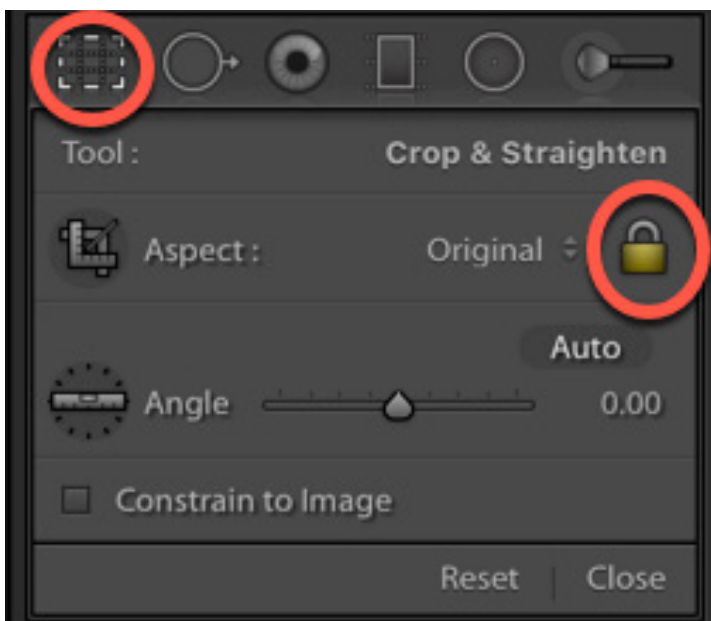
## Cropping

It's a good idea to crop and straighten your image before you start making global adjustments. To straighten an image, start in the **Transform** panel and click on -> **Auto**.

If this doesn't work, you can try one of the other settings, or do it manually under the **Crop Tool**.

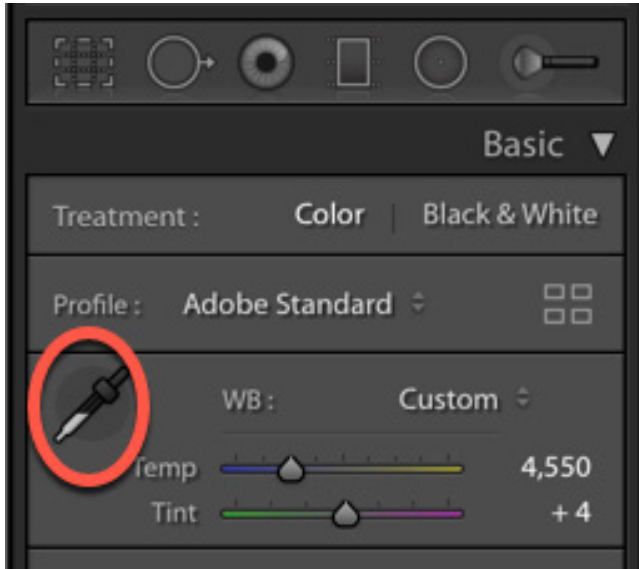


To access the Crop Tool in Lightroom, click on the grid symbol under the Histogram in the top panel. Or hit **R** for the keyboard shortcut. This will allow you to crop your image by bringing in the corners with your cursor.



Note that when the lock is closed on the lock symbol, the tool will crop each side of the image evenly.

If you would like to freeform crop, simply click on it to unlock it.



## White Balance

White Balance is a very important aspect of post-processing your food pictures.

I recommend shooting with a grey card and adjusting your white balance in post-processing. This removes incorrect color casts and ensures that your whites are truly white.

A grey card is a piece of grey plastic you can buy at a camera supply store. It is exactly 18% grey, which is what your camera looks for when metering a scene.

Take a picture with your grey card in the scene. In Lightroom, take the White Balance eyedropper and click on the grey card.

It will automatically read the proper white balance.



## The Basic Panel

This panel is where you may end up doing a lot of tweaking before you settle on a final look.

**Exposure** affects the brightness of the range of tones in your image, however, playing with your shadows and highlights, and your whites and blacks will give you a more precise balancing of tones than simply relying on the Exposure slider.

Check if the bright areas look muddy, or the shadows still need more light. Move the sliders to points where the image looks good overall.

You will likely need to go back and readjust your exposure slider once you have made edits with the other sliders.

## Vibrance & Saturation

**Vibrance** is also an important slider in editing food photography.

It's a better editing tool than **Saturation** because it's more subtle. It adjusts the less saturated colors without intensifying the already saturated ones.

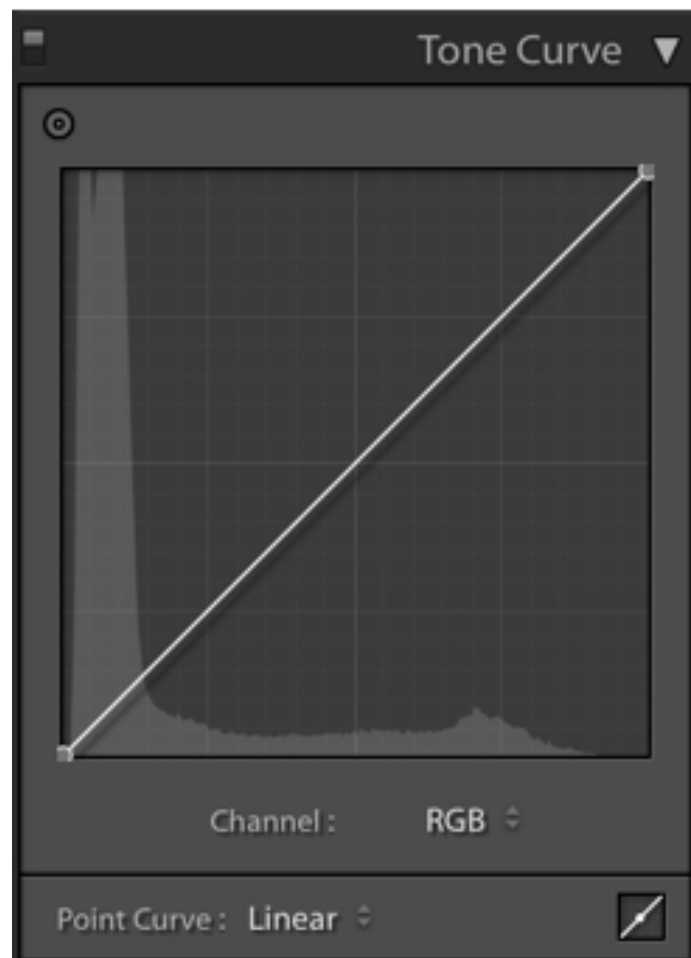
Vibrance will first boost the saturation of the muted colors and then the other colors.

Whether you actually use the saturation slider depends on the image. In general, a conservative approach is what works best when editing food photography.

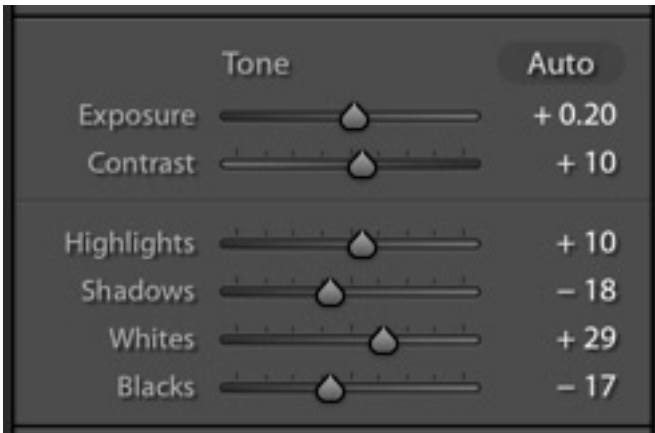
If you decide to use this slider the slider, nudge it up a tad, to about +5 or +6.

## Tone Curve

New users often find the **Tone Curve** challenging, but it's one of the most powerful tools found in Lightroom.

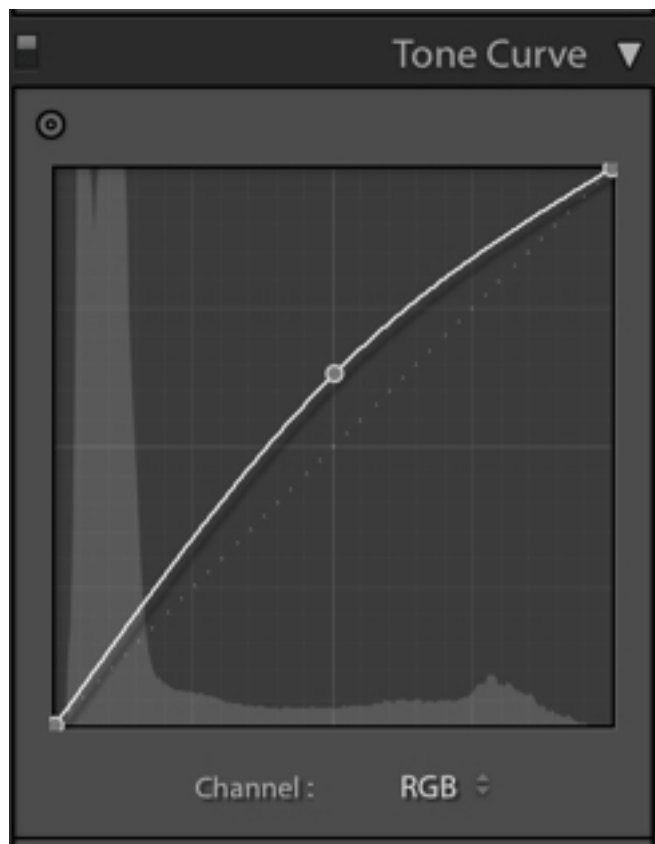


The Tone Curve is a graph that maps out where the tones in your images lie. The bottom axis of the Tone Curve starts with Shadows at the far left side. It ends with Highlights on the far right end. The mid-tones fall in the middle, in a range from darker to lighter. They get darker as you move lower, and brighter as you move up the axis.



You can control the lightness and darkness of your tones. Adjust the Point Curve itself or the Region Curve.

The Region has sliders for each part of the tonal range. As you drag each slider, the curve, and the image both change.



To make adjustments with the Point Curve, click on the area you want to affect. This will create an anchor point at which to control the tone.

Dragging the point up lightens that tone; dragging it down darkens it.

Assess the mid-tones in your image to see if they are already bright. If not, click on the middle of the tone curve and bring the point up.

If they are too bright, bring the curve down. Check the other parts of your image.

If you're just getting started with learning the Tone Curve, play around with the Region sliders first. Take note of how the various sliders affect the curve.

Whichever approach you choose, be sure to watch the histogram as you make changes. This way you'll make sure that you are not losing important detail.

## HSL

HSL stands for **Hue, Saturation, and Luminance**. This is where you balance the colors in Lightroom. Color adjustments are usually more subjective than tonal adjustments. This is because color gives a photograph a sense of mood.

There are two ways to make color adjustments in this panel. You can adjust them all at once under **HSL/All**. Or each color individually under the **Color** tab at the top of the panel.

The **Hue** tab or section at the top of the panel is where you choose how warm or cool you want each color in your image to be.

For example, I find that greens almost always look off. I slide the greens slightly more towards the left or right to get them looking more realistic.

To add more warmth – meaning more yellow – to your greens, slide it to the left. For a cooler hue, sliding it to the right adds more blue.

The Saturation slider in the basic panel adjusts the color of the whole image. But the saturation sliders here adjust each color individually.

If you adjust a color to be more saturated, this will affect the saturation of that particular color throughout the whole photo. Whether you're working in the basic panel or the HSL panel, saturation requires a light hand.

Lastly, **Luminance** affects the brightness of the color. These sliders are more valuable than the saturation sliders, so work with these first.

Editing in Lightroom is all about balance. The same goes when working with Hue, Saturation, and Luminance adjustments.

## Sharpening

Sharpening should be the last editing step. It adds contrast between pixels and edges, which creates definition and a more refined look.

However, you don't need to apply sharpening to the whole image because, in food photography, there is not much point in sharpening the props and the background. The focus is on the food, so that is what you sharpen.

To do this in Lightroom, mask out the image to select the areas of the image you want to sharpen. Hold down the **Alt/Option** key while clicking on **Masking** in the **Sharpening** panel.

Lightroom will show you where the sharpening is being applied in white. Your image will look like an x-ray. Slide it to the right.

The further right you go, the less the image will be sharpened.

You will find that you will be in the +70-80 range for sharpening for food photography.



# In Conclusion

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There is a lot to learn when it comes to shooting food, but hopefully, this guide has given you an overview of what's involved and some ideas about how you can improve your images.

The more information you have, the more empowered you can be in your creative decisions.

Above all, lots of practice is what is going to take you to the next level in your food photography.



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