



Taryne Hall shows how to use coconut oil to make the food sheen.

Food Stylist: The Chef Who Paints

by Carmina Tang

The perfect appearance of food in commercials is usually done with secret and creative ingredients thought up by food stylists, whose job is to improve the looks of food so as to whip up audience's appetite.

"A food stylist is someone who prepares food with a special style and makes it look better than in real life," said Taryne Hall, a food stylist as well

as the managing-director of Relish Kitchen, a local catering company.

Having been a food stylist for four years, Ms Hall's job is to do the two-dimensional (2D) food styling work for magazines and cookbooks.

"When customers receive the burger, they often exclaim 'it doesn't look like the picture!'. However, the point is that the picture doesn't taste like the burger!" Ms Hall laughed.

She said that different people would use different ways to style a burger. For example, sesame seeds can glue to the best bun, beef can spray with glycerine and colour with motor oil to make it look juicy.

Ms Hall said she will bring along her trusty "tool" kit every time she styles for food. The kit contains an array of utensils and ingredients, which includes blow torches,



Taryne Hall demonstrates that hands are the best tools for food styling.

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paint brushes, coconut oil and food colourings.

“You need to be well prepared as clients often change their mind throughout the shoot, so you never know what to expect,” said Ms Hall.

“Of course, hands are the best tools, because it (food styling) is a very tactile work,” Ms Hall added.

Yet having good equipment is not enough to become a food stylist. Margaret Xu Yuan, the owner and chef of Yin Yang Restaurant which serves home-made Chinese cuisine, has been a food stylist for 10 years. She said a good stylist should pay attention to the editorial background of the book, where the pictures will be published before doing the food-styling work.

Ms Xu’s previous project was a cook book for Towngas. As the book had a “clean” layout, she did not use red and green as the main colour for the dish.

She added that aesthetic sensibility is an essential element for a food stylist. “A food stylist should know whether

the food should be put horizontally or vertically. The amount of background needed in a photo should also be considered,” said Ms Xu.

“For Kingford pancake flour, yellow is used on the package because it should be modern. Bright yellow could attract younger customers; pink and purple are good for styling dessert,” added Ms Xu.

Speaking of the differences between a food photographer and a food stylist, Ms Xu said, “Food photographers know how to arrange the composition and how to control the lighting, but they may not know how to handle food.”

Perry Yuen Kam-hung, 49, is the Food and Beverage Manager of MGM Grand Macau and the former president of Hong Kong Chefs’ Association.

He said that although the term “food stylist” sounds new to people, the job

has been around for quite a period of time.

With 15 years of experience as a food stylist, Mr Yuen took part in numerous commercial food shoots including fast food chains like McDonalds, Pizza Hut and KFC.

“The major difference between 2D and 3D (food styling) is that it is easier to cheat in 2D. For 3D food styling, the product needs to be shot in 360 degrees,” he said.



Eddie Leung (right) is glad to work with famous movie star Jackie Chan (left) during the shoot.

Mr Yuen said that food stylists must know how to cook and know the principles of handling food in order to enter the field.

He added that putting aside theories, experience is more important in food styling. “Just like playing kung-fu and taekwondo, practice is needed,” Mr Yuen added.

According to Mr Yuen, some production houses like to hire food stylists, since it appeals to clients when they shoot the commercial.

“Food stylists should not create food, but to enhance its attractiveness. Cheating in food-styling is a must, but it has to be reasonable,” Mr Yuen said.

Mr Yuen said that he once had to do styling for glutinous rice dumplings, and the client asked him to cut the dumpling into halves to show the ingredients inside. He had to think of a way of getting the job done

without affecting the appearance of the food.

He eventually wrapped the dumpling skin around a plastic ball and froze it to ensure the appearance of the dumpling and its fillings are still in shape after it was cut.

“It is a challenging job. A food stylist should always be open-minded and creative,” Mr Yuen said.

While talking of unforgettable challenges, 25-year-old food stylist Eddie Leung Lok-ning shares similar experience with Mr Yuen.

Having been in the food styling industry for three years, Mr Leung said that he once had a food styling job for an advertisement in which four dishes each from seven cuisines had to be prepared.

“It was challenging to finish the shooting in four days,” said Mr Leung. Yet he said he was glad to have


the chance to meet and work with famous movie star Jackie Chan during the shoot.

Mr Leung is now the chef at Elixir Espresso, a café located in Sydney.

He said although food stylists should know how to cook, they are more than a chef. “A chef only works in the kitchen, but food stylists also focus on how to make the food visually attractive,” Mr Leung said.

“Being a food stylist is really different from being a chef,” he added. “The experience is extraordinary.”

Mr Leung thinks that food styling industry has become more and more popular. “Food-styling work has become more important because the power of media is much bigger nowadays,” he said.

“This industry is still young in Hong Kong, but it is a professional career,” Mr Leung added. 



The dish was styled by Perry Yuen Kam-hung, who said that colour combination and arrangement of ingredients shall be considered.

Special techniques used in food styling:

Source: Various food stylists

1. Use mash potatoes instead of ice-cream as it will not melt.
2. Use shaving cream, toothpaste or whipped cream as a stand in for soft ice-cream.
3. Mix soy sauce and water together to make soup so that it remains clear; add a few drops of oil on top to give it a realistic appearance.
4. Put a large piece of potato at the bottom of a bowl of soup; use toothpicks to fix ingredients like meat and onion so that you can see them.
5. Add baking powder or salt to create bubbles in drinks, for example champagne and cola.
6. Use coconut oil or Vaseline to make the food sheen.
7. Use apple syrup or motor oil to give chicken a nice golden glow.
8. Use citric acid to keep the colour in things such as basil oil.
9. Pour hot oil on the upper half of a fish to make it look as if it has been cooked; actually, the fish is only partially cooked so the eyes of fish will not protrude.



1-3. These dishes are styled by Perry Yuen Kam-hung. According to the food stylist, creativity is very important. For example, strawberries of similar size are cut and placed round the dish so that the finished product looks like a flower.