



FP 101-4

Composition



As we have been talking about technical and practical details in the first three lessons, I thought I would take us in an artistic direction with this week's lesson on Composition.

What is Composition?

This is a fantastically huge topic that can not really be discussed in one post (how ever long). It is about nothing less than everything that fits inside your frame and all that is implied outside of the frame.

The human sensibility for composition springs from various physiological modes of experiencing our world which have evolved across the eons. For example, we perceive "edge" very strongly and we subconsciously infer a continuation of that edge outside of our viewable world. This would have conferred the ability to infer that a lion sat behind a bush from the small outlined silhouette of an ear at sunset. Those of us with that talent survived to have babies that did the same. Repeat this for just about everything about who we are (except for relatively modern activities like web surfing or making crème brûlée or encapsulated mango juice egg yolks).

As a consequence, a lot of how we consume and react to in a photo or other composition is deeply rooted in our subconscious and can be hard to articulate or to even grasp.

I think this is why many of us have a hard time understanding and manipulating composition. This is also why it will take a bit of practice at developing an "aware" or "open" eye to the world around us and the compositions others have made to begin to direct our own intentional compositions.

This might take some work on your part but if you are interested in studio and food photography this is a must.

Talking and writing about composition is OK but DOING good composition requires DOING. It is like zen; reading a 1000 learned books on zen gets you exactly nowhere while sitting and doing nothing gets you, well, nowhere, but in a zen way.

Right, so that might not make sense to you if you are not on the zen path but my point is that one can go much further by learning a few bullet points or First Principles of Composition and then DOING art that shows your hands and eyes how to do it instead of your thinking brain.

Composition Mechanics

When you get a chance, please take the time to read the wikipedia entry on Composition, it will be helpful as a starting place

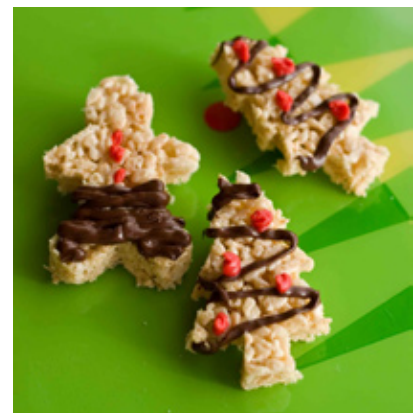
You will learn that there is a toolbox of elements that you can manipulate to form your photograph (or painting, etc).

- **Line** - the visual path that enables the eye to move within the piece
- **Shape** - areas defined by edges within the piece, whether geometric or organic
- **Value** - the lightness and darkness throughout the piece, characterized by tint, tone, and shade
- **Texture** - surface qualities which translate into tactile illusions
- **Color** - hues with their various values and intensities
- **Direction** - visual routes which take vertical, horizontal or diagonal paths
- **Size** - the relative dimensions and proportions of images or shapes to one another
- **Perspective** - expression of depth: foreground, middle ground, background
- Source

Today I am going to talk about just ONE concept that will guide you well in food photography -

The Energy Spiral

I will hit on more composition concepts in other posts.



Things to keep in mind:

- Our eyes like to read left to right
- Your photo has energy and direction
- Our eyes will follow the flow of energy and line in a photo
- Encourage that flow to move from left to right
- Encourage that flow to move in a spiral to your compositional focal point

At right, you see an image of a stack of toasted cornmeal mush with molasses being poured over it. If you do not know what cornmeal mush is, I blogged about this before in “Sweet Summer Solstice: Dribbling Night onto the Sun”. I used really cold molasses so that the dripping would go slowly, allowing me to catch some interesting details.

I have used a red arrow-circle in the image below to suggest the spiral of energy.

There are a variety of strong-line factors (blue and white cloth pointing to horizon, the edges of the stacked bowls, the horizontal edges of the cornmeal mush, the vertical drips of the molasses). There are several focal points: the dribble pattern in the butter on the top of the stack, the mid-air drip on the middle right, and the specular white highlights on the upper left part of the stack on the molasses.

The spiral energy is started by the observer with the bias to start in the left part of the field and then the energy flows from that bias across to the right by the drip and the dribble pattern, down to the mid-air drip, sweeping down across the stack bowls and then back up to review the interesting dribble.

Finally, the apparent effect of gravity seems to be important in food photography. Because of this, try not to tilt your food image too much.

Excessive tilt, like you see in ever more popular and quite mundane Wedding Photography, doesn't make for an appealing Food Photography experience - nausea from seasickness induced by a plate or table tilted too much either way is a food turn off. If I see a tilted plate I get this mild panic that it looks like the food is going to slide off (which distracts from the image). Same thing with images of beverages that are tilted a bit much.



Create motion in your photo

Take Home Message

Open your eyes to the composition in all the art and photography around you and you will be rewarded with more striking photos.

Your Tasks

- Notice the energy in well made photos and seek to emulate it. Start with the energy spiral we have discussed today!
- To do this, take some time to cruise the portfolios of working food photographers. I have put a list of just a few at the bottom of this lesson.
- Really dive into the photos and look for spirals. Notice how it makes you feel.
- Now, using what you have learned with light and setting, compose a simple food related scene. It could even just be silverware and plates and linens.
- Create a spiral, shoot the spiral. You may have to move things, you may have to shoot from a variety of different angles!
- Post your photos to the Food Photo 101 Flickr Group.
- Blog about it and drop me a comment on the lesson page about where to find your blog post.

A Small list of interesting food photographers:

- Jim Scherer (Boston based)
- Lou Manna (NYC based)
- Matt Armendariz (LA based and a very modest sweetheart of a guy)

Make sure the focal point is particularly delicious

