

# ONE FINE TABLE: A FOOD PHOTOGRAPHER'S JOURNAL

## 那一刻，我的餐桌日常： 食物攝影師的筆記

*Do you take pictures of your food? I'll bet you do. That sizzling homemade steak, a brilliant kale salad at your favorite bistro – you just have to capture it all on your phone. But could your pictures do more? Professional food photographer Lisa Shen teaches you to look at a feast with a true artist's eye.*

Do you take pictures of your food? I'll bet you do. That sizzling homemade steak, a brilliant kale salad at your favorite bistro, those mouth-watering scoops of raspberry gelato – just like everyone else, you pull out your phone and snap pictures for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Line. But when we look back at those pictures, something is missing. How can we capture the sensation and its excitement with the mechanical eye of our camera? Professional food photographer Lisa Shen is here to talk about just that.

This luxurious book, full of luxurious full-color photographs, describes the process of food photography as work of narrative and discovery. Its chapters cover light, composition, sequence, advanced techniques, and photo editing in detail as Lisa lays every secret of her art out in plain but enticingly personal prose.

Pictures of food – this thing that connects us to life – should tell a story. One bowl of oatmeal may contain a cornucopia of textures and colors, and the table on which the bowl sits, the wall behind it, the light in the room can amplify that effect or mute it. As Lisa tells the stories of the many portraits that appear in this book, she describes everything in terms of her own life and what the scene means to her. Color, texture, and composition are drawn together by the photographer's own personality to form a story all their own. How to tell stories with the food you love in the spaces you love is exactly what Lisa Shen aims to teach.



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## Lisa Shen 沈倩如

Lisa Shen is a US-based professional photographer. Her images have been published in lifestyle pages on the internet and in print media; look for her work on the BBC, in *Elle, Food & Wine*, on Uber's website, and many other places. She co-authored with Yang Hui-Yu the book *For the Love of Food*.

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By Lisa Shen

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

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### Texture and the Start of a Story

The ceramics artist came over to tell me that the plate was made from local North Carolina red clay. With its lack of glaze and muted color, it had the beauty of imperfection. He explained to me about *wabi sabi*, a Japanese aesthetic of transience and imperfection, as his eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. I felt the plate's rough texture, and thought about how I would use it to photograph a story about food.

The artist had no way of knowing that I had always felt a vague fear of shiny objects. He also had no way of knowing that touching rough surfaces often makes me fall into a daydream. I photograph food, so texture is important to me. It is the beginning of any food story I create.

Texture is everywhere – the grain of a wooden chopping block or table, ridges on a grill, scores on a baguette, soft loops of soft serve ice cream, the crimped edges of a pie, melted cheese on a pizza, speckles on a quail egg, or the seeds on the surface of a strawberry. Even a monochromatic bowl of squash soup can be ornamented with herbs and crushed nuts that give it layers of texture in appearance and mouth feel.

Texture describes a quality of an object's surface, such as coarse or smooth, soft or firm. One can experience the texture of an object directly through touch, but that experience can also be simulated using a camera lens. This sense of texture can be brought out even more strongly by photographing with different angles of light.

Light has its own abstract texture, be it bright or dark, soft or harsh. It's important to note that an exterior with a coarse or pronounced texture will respond more to light and shadow, and it will draw the eye to it. If the primary food in your photograph has a bold texture, there's little need for extra care. When dealing with a background or props, however, one must be more careful.

Baked beans is an early American dish. Before trying to photograph it, I had the wood table in mind as a background to create a homey atmosphere. Since the table is made of recycled wood with a rough grain, lighting causes the texture to deepen further. In figure 1-2, I used low key photography to concentrate the light in the foreground and reduce the range and intensity of the shine from the table. This is one of the reasons that wood tables appear frequently in low key in food photography, rather than in brighter high key photography.

### **Figure 2-1**

The external texture of the table and utensils appear in the image, but the texture of food is not limited to the outward appearance. There is also an internal texture, which either corresponds or contrasts with the exterior. The peel of a cantaloupe has tiny raised veins, while its inner flesh is smooth and slippery. The red peel of a pomegranate is rough but uniform, while inside the red seeds glisten against the white pith. The crust of a croissant is golden, while the folded layers of crumb are pale. A contrast of textures is a gift. When photographing food, I cut the objects open to reveal their inner layers, allowing viewers to see the different inner and outer textures. The contrast will reinforce their impression of the objects. Let me give you another example. You've probably seen photographs of a dumpling bitten in half. Why is it bitten in half? Because the photographer wants to give you a glimpse of the filling inside, hoping that the contrast between the wrapper and the filling will help you imagine the taste of the dumpling.

As someone who was never much for holidays, I used to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival simply, by enjoying mung bean mooncakes with my family. I liked mooncakes' soft texture and the way they yield easily against my teeth. In figure 2-2, I've cut a mooncake in half and positioned it face up, inviting you to look at its filling. Then I've positioned a few other mooncakes around it, making their soft exteriors the main focal point. The newspaper and coffee are there for atmosphere, and their shapes contrast with and play off of the mooncakes. I want the image to present a leisurely moment of light refreshment.

### **Figure 2-2**

In addition to cutting a food open to show the contrast between its interior and exterior layers, you can also emphasize a food's texture by positioning it next to something else that is differently textured, creating visual layers. I once met a food stylist who firmly believed that "coarsely textured foods can only be paired with a smooth or subtly grained container. Otherwise, the backdrop will steal the limelight from the food." Take quail eggs as an example. Their shells are stippled and spotted, and so are best placed inside a simple white porcelain bowl in order to emphasize their rough exterior. However, if I put them into a speckled container (as in figure 2-3), it creates a juxtaposition of spots against spots, and enough contrast is created simply with the difference in color.

### **Figure 2-3**

After I purchased the red clay plate, I kept thinking about dried fish. I have a few friends who bring back a big bag of spicy dried fish with peanuts to share each time they travel to Taiwan. I have another friend who taught me how to fry those dried fish until they're crisp and fragrant. It's a perfect cure for homesickness.

When I returned home that day, I just had to fry up some dried fish to put my new red plate into action.

In figure 2-4, the rough texture of the plate contrasts with the smoothness of the soybeans, conveying the simplicity of the food. The background splits into two levels: at the bottom is a bit of charcoal-colored wallpaper showing the brush lines, and above is a grill showing grill lines, and the two overlap. This kind of combined background can be risky. Their

grainy texture and the colorful food both compete with the red plate. However, I stuck to the idea of texture when considering the visuals. In the end I decided to use light and shadow to give the secondary players a sense of waxing and waning. The texture and color of the grill responds to the dried fish, and it all becomes more than the sum of its parts.

#### **Figure 2-4**

Texture can also be explained in terms of light adjustment. In figure 2-5, I simply used a plate and some marble to emphasize the light filigree on the three scoops of ice cream. . Unlike a boring white background, the marble's subtle pattern adds another layer to the image, yet won't steal the show from the ice cream. I specifically looked for a plate with a noticeable rim, and added toasted quinoa and ground almonds for their similar color, while the plate serves as a border between the marble and the ice cream. The coarseness of the plate's rim and the lines on the ice cream set each other off, something the white porcelain plate I originally intended to use could not have done. Although the image involves only subdued hues, you can still see the different textures and the different shades of color.

#### **Figure 2-5**

Thinking about texture is a great start to telling a story about that food, and it will effect what you choose for props and the direction of the light. If your house is like mine, you only bake pie on a cold day. When you see its crisp, flaky crust straight out of the oven, do you think about how you'd use light and shadow to bring out the special qualities of its texture? Do the grain of the wooden table, the flour sprinkled across its surface, and the bits of pie dough inspire you to tell a story? For me, I imagine a house in the country with a warm fireplace and the fragrance of the baking pie filling the cozy rooms, and I just want to stay there all day.

The beauty of the texture enriches the story behind the image. If texture is misused, however, the image will become messy or confusing. If you are able to carefully observe the texture of the food and background props, just as you observe a food's flavor and mouth feel as you eat it, and notice the tactile impression a food gives you as you buy it, you will be able to appreciate its individual beauty. If you want to photograph food, you must understand it first.

A few days after I bought the plate, I saw an interview with the ceramicist in the local newspaper, and learned that his great-grandfather was Henri Matisse. He very rarely mentions this connection or brings it up in public. Their creations are not the same, but I can enjoy the style of both, as well as learn from their deeper meanings. And that's what it comes down to: simplicity and complexity are in the eye of the beholder.