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Trends in Food Photography: A Prop Stylist's View

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# Trends in Food Photography

## A Prop Stylist's View

I HAVE BEEN STUDYING TRENDS in food photography since I became a freelance prop stylist some twenty years ago, work that comes with having to answer to multiple creative teams who wish to convey their own particular message. I have always felt that making prop choices, imparting a sense of style, and defining a new look are guided by more than the assigned art direction. There is something in the air that is also a guiding force—I call it the political zeitgeist. From the socially conservative leadership of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush to President Obama's promises of hope and change, the spirit of each administration leaves its mark on trends in food photography.

The prop stylist is the unsung hero of the food photography team. Feast your eyes upon a food photograph, and the elements—the “props,” in food photography jargon—are usually the last things to be noticed. After all, when you open a food magazine or cookbook, you want to engage with the food. The photographer and food stylist are lauded, or criticized, for their ability to render appetite appeal upon first glance, but as the unsung hero knows, the food photograph in question would not be as successful without the careful, creative efforts of the prop stylist.

Prop stylists interpret the collective dreams of account managers, food editors, creative directors, marketing directors, and photo directors. We know what colors and textures work well together to enhance the food. We know that when in doubt, choose white. We know that cake stands with flat tops work better than those with rims, especially if the cake in question is to be shown with a “slice out.” We know that said slice will swim on a conventionally sized dessert plate and will read better on a saucer. These are easily learned tricks of the trade, but what distinguishes one prop stylist from another is how each of us assigns meaning to objects when interpreting our clients' dreams.

Multiple bins of flatware, drawers of linens, and stacks of china will be painstakingly inspected before the stylist chooses a silver spoon sporting a curved, trefoil-shaped handle and worn patina; a fringed, coarsely woven cloth;

and an ironstone, tea-stained, crackle-glazed bowl to telegraph the feeling of comfort for a winter soup shot. Dozens of embroidered napkins will be scrutinized before one with just the right shade and pattern of blue stitching (not too busy, not too spare; more fluid than geometric) will make it to the stylist's prop cart along with other “finds” to serve as the visual anchors for a Croatian food feature to be photographed in a Manhattan garment-district studio. And if the stylist is really good, she will fold that napkin in a way that renders it “different” and “exciting.” Or perhaps, after many

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tries, the napkin will be deemed uncooperative. In a minor fit of frustration, the stylist will toss it onto the set, and lo and behold, the napkin will take on an aesthetically pleasing shape of its own. Her groundbreaking napkin-wrangling will be imitated by other stylists and be seen in other photographs. The look will live on, for a length of time, in the food photography hall of fame. It will become a trend.

The food stylist is also an interpreter, but here the tools are more primal than cerebral. A balance must be struck between an overwhelming desire to make the food









mouthwatering and the client's aesthetic demands. If the task at hand is to create a salad, the food stylist will wake up very early in the morning to scour the market and inspect multitudes of lettuces, tomatoes, and whatever else the recipe calls for. The freshest, most beautiful, and sometimes quirkiest of Mother Nature's bounty will be chosen. Perhaps a particularly vibrant pot of herbs that catches the stylist's eye will be brought to the photo studio as well. That's the easy part. The food stylist's real prowess will be tested by his or her ability to render appetite appeal by artfully composing the ingredients. This process is truly akin to sculpting a masterpiece, with food as the medium and a tweezer the most trusted tool.

The creative paradox for the food stylist is to meticulously compose food that looks unconstructed and casual.

Just before the finished salad is brought to the set, the stylist might want to add a garnish. The way that garnish is deliberately or nonchalantly placed among its fellow greens will make or break the salad's visual appeal. That garnish and a serendipitously fallen crouton or two may catch the eye of fellow food stylists, who will then try to embrace that final touch as their own. A future client will point to the published photograph of the salad and ask for it to be replicated. A food styling trend will be born.

### The Age of Opulence

My prop styling career got underway at the end of the Reagan administration and the beginning of George H.W. Bush's—the eras of actor and oilman. We had just gotten

over the hidden agenda of the Iran-Contra scandal. Limited spending on government programs went hand in hand with the encouragement of entrepreneurship, marginal tax-rate cuts for the wealthy, and payroll tax hikes for the working class. The Cold War had ended, and the United States was an unchallenged superpower. The times were ripe for the perpetuation of fantasy and greed.

Nancy Reagan had the second- and third-floor living quarters of the White House redecorated for one million dollars. Congress had approved the 8.6-million-dollar renovation of Blair House, and what better men to decorate its 115 rooms than the conservative traditionalist Mark Hampton and the extravagant “Prince of Chintz” himself, Mario Buatta? This conservative opulence would eventually play itself out in a different medium—on the pages of *Gourmet* magazine. This style is the guiding force in the opening shot depicting a New Orleans dinner, photographed at the *Gourmet* studios for the April 1991 issue. The prop-driven set is lush, filled with the trappings of an affluent, southern white aesthetic steeped in tradition.

What a feast for the eyes! Ironstone china, sterling silver flatware and salts, cut and engraved stemware, all positioned properly—indeed, ritualistically—at the dining table. Emily Post would have approved. The lavish, antique Romanian embroidered lace tablecloth suggests a family heirloom handed down from generation to generation. As we study the shot, our eyes move to the centerpiece—a floral arrangement that tries very hard to emulate the already ornate floral pattern decorating the Coalport porcelain jug in which the flowers stand. From the jug our eyes turn to the walls. There we encounter, among the child portraits and eighteenth-century Bavarian mirrored sconces, not one but two wall treatments—the handmade, hyper-patterned wallpaper above the chair rail and the painted Lincrusta relief wall-covering below—both available through one’s decorator. Then our eyes travel back down to the lace pattern inserts in the tablecloth, resting for a moment on the china, adorned with yet another floral pattern to be visually ingested. As extravagantly appointed as this set is, its verisimilitude leaves us cold. Despite the attention to detail in dressing this formal set, it remains, in the end, just a set. Its orderliness is stiff and staged, rather than warm and inviting.

We turn the page and there we find what we’re after. “Hero” shots of the food—up close and personal. An appetizer of artichokes, leaves fanned out like the spokes of a wheel with a garlic-pimento vinaigrette at the hub. The plate beneath catches a few pinches of scattered parsley but is otherwise clean. There is no pool of oil to be seen. The main course, crown roast of pork with dirty rice stuffing, is amazingly

under-garnished—just three whole cherry tomatoes, symmetrically placed like mirror images to the right and left of the roast. A swath of Italian parsley, more arranged than strewn at the base of the roast, gussies it up, but just a bit. Remember, the year is 1991, and we are right on the cusp of Martha Stewart via Donna Hay. Food styling is at a transitional stage, and this feature has its legs firmly planted on both sides of the fence. We are on the verge of leaving the 1980s behind, when time-consuming garnishes were the signature of every entertaining housewife, and when food presentation was very controlled (those cherry tomatoes would most certainly have been carved into rosettes). Although the two side dishes, sweet potato puree and okra and onion pickle, are garnish free—a foreshadowing of what was to come in the 1990s—they perfectly mimic, and are neatly contained within, the outline of their serving bowls. No broken edges here. Dirty rice stuffing takes on the shape of a perfectly smooth dome. I feel like a mischievous child when I look at it, wanting to poke it with my index finger to break its perfect circle and tease out a crumb or two. However, I don’t know if I would have felt that way in 1991.

We turn the page to the grand dessert finale—butter rum ice cream and a pecan chocolate tart. The shot is a super-close-up, but instead of getting in-your-face food, we get in-your-face props. The floral centerpiece appears again, this time large and looming. The tart is presented on a silver salver with applied tongue-and-dart border and interior beaded edge, perfectly at home in this set. But the choice for the ice cream is daring. We see six individual scoops, with nary a drip or smudge, sitting in a Victorian silver-footed basket with beaded trim. Not very practical, but a perfect icon of the opulent feeling the creative team was after. The food’s perfection trumps any possible appetite appeal. It is as if the food is just an excuse to show off even more ornate table accoutrements to further exploit the feel of this high-end dinner fantasy.

How different that dessert page would look if photographed today! Most likely a single slice of the tart would be featured, so that you could see into the gooey texture of the chocolate filling surrounding the pecans, which would be topped with a scoop of ice cream in all its natural, dripping glory—less perfect and controlled, but a thousand times more successful at piquing our appetite.

## The Age of Illusion

Fantasy, excess, opulence—the qualities that set the tone for food photography during the Reagan and Bush years—were not limited to *Gourmet* magazine. John Saladino, another

influential interior designer of this era, was the man responsible for bringing exterior, architectural elements indoors. The crumbling, peely-painted columns we associate with stylized antiquity were the mainstay of every Saladino home. He reminded us that civilizations were built and crumbled, and he had a big influence on the way I propped. I was responding to the texture and beauty found in the imperfections of used, aged objects. Indeed, I was also rebelling against the pristine, controlled perfection that was the norm for food photography then. Saladino's influence brought forth an organic rather than decorative feeling, what I call an "edgy opulence," which made its way onto the pages of *Food & Wine* magazine.

A beautifully crafted golden charger lying amid the textures of architectural detritus—what better way to prop one's first assignment for *Food & Wine* magazine? Golden fish—imperial fish—are centered like a royal mascot on an emperor's shield. But the fish, like their setting, are not perfect. The empire is crumbling. At first glance, the charger's gold-leaf surface looks flawless, but on closer inspection we see that it is crackled and pitted. The charger is set into a broken terra-cotta pot, which I found in the outgoing trash of a favorite Spanish antique shop, a remnant of an unfortunate shipping accident. The gold, rippled-plaster relief bow in the lower left-hand corner was rescued from an old dresser, also destined for the dump. The Maxfield Parrish reproduction, set into an aging, chipped cerulean and gold-washed frame, was ignored by many a passerby at an upstate New York yard sale until catching the eye of a twenty-two-year-old girl, later chastised by her art-historian boyfriend for bringing home the worthless piece of sentimental such-and-such. Kitsch? Perhaps. But I was drawn to it for the same reason that would make it illustrative—a golden-hued image of a happier, naive America, protected but still vulnerable in its chinked, damaged frame.

The props for this shot, done in 1989, were chosen for purely aesthetic reasons. I was certainly unaware at the time of any political symbolism they might hold, but now I see that in fact they serve as a visual metaphor for Ronald Reagan's presidential legacy. His folksy, populist image was a fake front for the power grab taking place, successfully accomplished by his trickle-down economics and tax laws. Underneath his presidential veneer the policies and advisors were chipped and marred, just like the supporting props in this photograph.

What pulls this shot together, and what keeps it from going totally over the edge of the beautiful and the broken, is its exquisite lighting by photographer David Bishop and food styling by Rick Ellis. Ellis pioneered the more natural,

less fussed over and arranged look that cutting-edge creative teams requested from their food stylists in the early 1990s. His intention, as well as *Food & Wine's*, was to make the food look just as it would after being cooked. In other words, to make the food look real. As far as Ellis was concerned, it was time to dispel the myth of perfect, unapproachable food. In his lexicon burn marks were permissible. After all, they were apt to occur during the cooking process.

In this shot of Stuffed Trout Turkish Style notice how Ellis nudged the stuffing out of its cavity, allowing it to spill onto the fish and charger. Such a move, most likely deemed "messy" by other food magazines, added a textural note to the dish, making it more approachable. Note, too, how the trout are laid on the charger. One piece intersects the inner rim, while the other actually overlaps and reaches out over the charger's edge. Those may seem like subtle choices now, but they were revolutionary in the early 1990s. Allowing the Japanese eggplant, merely a suggested side dish, to overlap the main attraction—the trout—was a daring choice, and much to Ellis's credit, he chose correctly. This placement adds to the composition's harmonious flow, achieving a perfect rhythm that improves the food's visual appeal. It makes viewers want to slide a spatula under the trout and carefully lift up as many vegetables and morsels of stuffing as possible while placing the fish on their plates.

The most radical move of all was to allow the fish's clouded-over eyes to remain in the shot, uncovered. This decision made *Food & Wine's* food editor squeamish and afraid that her readers might feel squeamish too; the photograph was almost removed from the feature. (Ellis tells a funny story about a food stylist who kept fish eyes, purchased from a taxidermist, in her styling kit for just such moments. She would pop out the clouded-over oculus and replace it with her purchase.)

It is important to remember that until the early nineties food styling was a closed industry that grew out of corporate culture.<sup>1</sup> Food stylists were home economists, hired by companies to work in their test kitchens to develop and test recipes to promote their products. Their styling technique screamed technical proficiency, and the companies they worked for—Kraft Foods, Campbell's, Cuisinart—demanded visual perfection. These corporations elevated their products by asking home economists to create eye-catching, time-consuming garnishes. Veteran stylist Delores Custer remembers having to create dozens of carved carrot roses to dress up a slice of frozen lasagna for a client back in the day when each layer of lasagna was prepared separately and then constructed to keep tomato sauce from bleeding into cheese, and cheese from bleeding into pasta.





These women were styling for a generation of stay-at-home housewives whose cooking skills were put to the test as they prepared nutritious breakfasts for their kids, luncheons for their women's club get-togethers, cocktail parties and elaborate dinners for their husband's colleagues. These housewives didn't merely cook, they "entertained," and they strove to emulate the women economists' detailed flourishes. The fantasy of the perfect housewife perpetuated by corporate culture fed into these housewives' fantasies of domestic mastery and bliss.

By giving prop stylists creative license to reinterpret the trappings of the moneyed classes, *Food & Wine* enabled us not only to emulate but to mock right-wing materialism and traditional values. We created another visual trend that caught on. Props drove the fantasyland in which food photography existed. If you look at a sampling of food photography from the late eighties and early nineties,

you will glimpse a world of heavily textured plates and ornately trimmed napery. Maps, playing cards, strands of silk ribbons, books on butterflies, game pieces, and advertising memorabilia took the place of utilitarian forks, knives, and spoons. Tables were supplanted by wrought-iron gates, heating grates, broken slabs of marble, stone pediments, and peely-painted, weathered wooden doors. Prop stylists were not setting the table; we were setting the *mood*. We were trying to elicit an emotional response, not unlike one viewer would feel when seeing an Old Master painting in a museum. Why, for instance, put Christmas cookies on a plate, when they could be displayed in a small vintage suitcase lined with holly-berry wallpaper? Plates, glasses, and flatware hardly mattered. Yet even among the unexpected visual cues of these heavily propped sets there was never any doubt that the food, placed front and center, was the star of the show.





WOMAN'S DAY, JULY 11, 2000, P.154, FOOD STYLED BY WOMAN'S DAY TEST KITCHENS; PROPS STYLED BY FRANCINE MATAJON-DEGN; PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES SCHILLER.



And then a new clarity began to emerge. Although we still see traces of fantasy props, food was suddenly being presented in real places. Why? The answer lies in the confluence of Bill Clinton and Martha Stewart. The Clinton administration's domestic agenda set a social groundwork that enabled the domestic goddess to flourish. Clinton's working wife and his proactive, pro-family legislative agenda established a social environment in which the notion of "having it all" no longer seemed unrealistic. Increased funding for Head Start and after-school programs, the Violence Against Women and Family and Medical Leave acts, the working-family tax cut—all of these initiatives demonstrated the Clinton administration's respect for the needs of working mothers and commitment to keeping families safe. The family structure was empowered.

### Domesticating the Table

Not for decades had a woman been in the foreground on the domestic front, taking a leadership role through mentoring and instruction. Women had moved increasingly away from the drudgery of domestic work as new technology fueled the notion of better living through science. The overriding emphasis on progress had created a myth of a homemaker who had only to press a few buttons and mix a few cans of cleverly and chemically altered foodstuffs to create a blissful and work-free domestic environment. This myth was both paternalistic and patronizing. The modern woman of popular culture was a happy hostess and a bit of a sorcerer. In magazines and television multicourse meals seemed magically to appear, with a smart dress and a string of pearls the only prerequisites.

In the 1960s feminists battled the myth of the happy hostess and her gilded suburban cage. The ensuing cultural battles took an unseen turn when Martha Stewart appeared. Stewart—a self-employed, suburban divorcee—merged both the self-reliance of the feminist and the comforting tradition of the feminine hostess. Empowerment was no longer one-dimensional. Yes, women worked. Yes, women cooked. So? Martha Stewart allowed women to believe they could accomplish just about anything on the home front, as long as they were well organized. Whether you were willing to take a stab at the Martha Stewart lifestyle or were totally frustrated by the sheer scope of her domestic agenda, you have to admit that when it came to food, it was Martha who sat us back down at the table. Her magazine's clean, naturally lit photographs ushered in a new visual vocabulary.

Prop stylists were no longer setting the mood; we were now being asked to set the table. My, how our prop choices

changed! We were back in the real world. Slick-surfaced plates, unadorned napkins, and thin-walled glasses were the new favorites. Cutlery, salt and peppershakers, butter dishes, and serving pieces filled in the spaces previously occupied by superfluous ribbons and nostalgic memorabilia. My favorite art direction during this time was, "You know, give me that Martha Stewart non-look look." I knew exactly what that meant. Gritty wood succumbed to cleaner cloth surfaces, ironstone replaced fine china, and glass replaced cut crystal. The mood "at home" was casual. Even cardboard food containers made their way onto the table!

Our visual cues telescoped less fuss for the busy working mother. Strong, saturated color was no longer in vogue. Our food sets became whiter and brighter as prop stylists jettisoned intricately detailed props for those with cleaner, simpler lines, and photographers traded in their clunky lighting equipment for natural daylight. It was at this time that more caterers and cooks, disillusioned with their physically demanding schedules, became food stylists, bringing a more natural, relaxed, realistic look to the food. Ice cream dripped, crumbles crumbled, and pie crusts cracked. It was all caught on camera.

The launch of *Saveur* brought new respect for the home cook. The magazine's editorial quest to focus on cooks "without pretense" brought the human element to food photography in a way that we had not seen before.<sup>2</sup> Hardworking hands—unmanicured, pudgy, spotted with age—appeared again and again on *Saveur's* pages. Hands engaged in chopping, slicing, picking, and peeling ingredients, once relegated to back-of-the-book "how-to" photos, were the star beauty shots in *Saveur*. And then there was the "ta-da" shot of hands holding a platter of finished food, positioned at the waist in a gesture of grand offering—here was food cradled in loving hands at home. The women's service magazines repeatedly imitated that shot, magnifying the power and importance of those who prepared our food. Could it be that the political tone set by Clinton's populist agenda was responsible for the cultural tone that allowed *Saveur's* and Martha Stewart's visual messages to endure? I think so.

### The Age of Anxiety

The notion that changes in the visual dynamics of food photography reflect the social agendas of administrations became increasingly apparent to me as I looked at *Gourmet* during the George W. Bush years. Food photography was not immune to the changes Americans felt as we moved ever further away from the Clinton years, when the country



had experienced not only a federal surplus but the longest domestic period of peacetime. I hoped to find comfort in food images, but the feeling eluded me. The visuals in *Gourmet* reflected the discontent of a polarized political atmosphere, when we lived through impeachment, a contested election, the horror of 9/11, and the turmoil that followed. Looking through *Gourmet* was as unsettling as reading the *New York Times*.

As our world grew more askew, so did many of *Gourmet's* photographs. Was it just coincidental that while the Bush administration fed us red herrings (weapons of mass destruction, anyone?), *Gourmet* employed similar strategies in its food photography? The magazine increasingly

strayed from the classic photo setup in which food is front and center, and props play supporting roles. Instead, food vessels began to float on the periphery of the photograph's frame, leaving us with either dead space in the composition's center or intricately detailed, superfluous props. We began to see food sitting atop patterned plates that sat atop patterned fabrics. Shots became inarticulate, making it hard for the viewer to focus on what should be most important: the food. As we seek a focal point in the shot for "Get It Ripe," in *Gourmet's* July 2007 issue, we are bombarded with trivial details. We lose our focus just as our country lost its way. The muddled disinformation that was fed to us in the political sphere is reflected in the confusing composition





of this photograph. Once again we find ourselves engaging with prop-driven shots filled with an excess of “toys,” from a rubber stamp to a newspaper to the innards of a junk drawer. The abundance of props that we saw at the beginning of our journey is back, but this time the props are composed in a disorderly fashion that overshadows the food. The food plays a secondary role. We almost miss it.

Some food stylists grew uncomfortable with this new look, this decomposition of their carefully styled food. They were asked to compose a plate of food, then to remove some of the food, then to remove even more of the food, add a smear or a smudge until it appeared as though someone had just eaten or messed with the plate. The half-eaten

plate of food suggests a human element, but in a cynical way: it is only through absence that the human presence is felt. Instead of anticipating our engagement with food, as the 1990s *Saveur* shots did, photographs like this one in *Gourmet* tell us, “The party’s over.” We have missed out on all the fun. Our presence is no longer required, unless we feel like scooping up the leftovers.

*Bon Appétit* took this cynical view one step further with its 2008 redesign by stripping away all human allusions—aka “the props”—and giving us full-page bleeds of creamy sauces, landscapes of scalloped potatoes, and enormous blocks of beef. Enticing, but not always pretty. The creative team at *Bon Appétit* was hoping to entice younger readers

by broadening the types of images shown. So they introduced these megagraphic, architectural food photos.<sup>3</sup>

Delores Custer explains the attraction of this style as an innocent outgrowth of “spotting.” With the advent of digital photography, photographers could zoom in on a shot for retouching purposes, which allowed them to “spot” imperfections in the image, since they are magnified by as much as 200 percent. This process might have been the impetus for such graphic photographs, but the reason for their staying power speaks to a larger issue. The younger creative teams, as well as their readers, come from a generation that knows and wants quality yet understands scarcity; they are more self-aware of their position in a frenetic world of diminished resources. Their generation keenly felt the personal powerlessness brought on during the Bush years as the world spun out of control. These up-close photographs, absent of peripheral clutter, maintain a sense of order that is quickly telegraphed, understood, and appreciated by an anxious audience.

While many of those in and out of the industry scoffed at these intrusive food images, food stylist Victoria Granof was only too glad to respond to *Bon Appétit*'s redesign. She styled the magazine's August 2008 ice cream feature and its infamous ice cream cone cover: the upper two-thirds of a larger-than-life, gloriously melting, brightly lit cherry ice cream cone covered in a hardened, but dripping, dark and white chocolate sauce, popping out of a white background. Granof had had enough of “painstakingly styled” food that looked “exact and structured,” as well as the “exact and structured” sets surrounding them. She wanted the “visual interest, provocation, and seduction” of the shot to come from the food itself: “It used to be that you didn't get to look into the soul of the food and see its beautiful imperfections. It had always been on its best behavior, just waiting to bust out and let you see what it was really made of—literally!”<sup>4</sup> But for all of her enthusiasm and technical proficiency, Granof admits that the ice cream cover proved to be *Bon Appétit*'s least popular: “People just didn't want to eat it.” Perhaps it was just too much of a good thing. Once its purely naked, graphic appearance was ratcheted up, the food lost its appetite appeal.

Laurie Buckle, the editor of *Fine Cooking* magazine, contends that in the last few years creative teams have gotten so caught up in their quest to forge a unique visual identity for their magazines that they have forgotten about the most important element of all—the food. She sees a lot of art directing for art's sake, with photographers and creative directors trying to see just how far they can push the envelope. Rather than making pictures for those who

want to engage with food, they are making pictures for themselves. Buckle admits that there are many windows into the visual food experience, whether through travel or avant-garde, heavily propped studio settings, or the spanking-clean magnification of the next hot ingredient. She feels that within this creative free-for-all no one has been making photographs of food that people want to cook, which is what she hoped to accomplish with her magazine's redesign in 2009.

When you look at the pages of *Fine Cooking* you will see beautifully photographed, realistic food. The food in the June/July 2009 feature on “Spill the Beans” is shot at an angle that actually flatters it. The photography shows off the undulating lengths of long beans, the natural order of randomly scattered *haricots verts*, the light and shadow inherent in the twist of fusilli, the nooks and crannies of roasted romano beans with tomatoes. You see food that behaves like food, and accessible props and lighting that complement, rather than overpower, it. “Coaxing, nudging, checking for jagged edges, poking for pockets to rest your eye” were the methods food stylist Allison Ehri Kreitler employed for her educated, “plonk-it-down” approach to styling this feature. She believes that food styling is “all about the flow” and keeping the food from looking static. Instead of painstakingly constructing elements from the ground up, which Kreitler believes makes the food look unnatural and takes up too much precious set time, she lets the food “talk back” to her and “speak for itself.”<sup>5</sup> Although this intuitive approach to styling may seem casual, it takes a stylist with impeccable skills and a complete understanding of food to pull it off.

This current “let's get real” approach to food styling meets the current approach to prop styling at a peculiar crossroads. Prop stylists are being asked to convey this very focused message in a myriad of ways in response to the cultural changes generated by a new presidency. The color forecaster Pantone revealed the close relation between politics and style in its December 2008 press release declaring “Mimosa, a warm, engaging yellow, as the color of the year for 2009. In a time of economic uncertainty and political change, optimism is paramount and no other color expresses hope and reassurance more than yellow.” This announcement was followed by a feature in *Metropolitan Home* that quoted Leslie Harrington, director of the Color Association of the United States: “Yellow signifies optimism, and with a new president in office, we are optimistic as consumers and Americans.”<sup>6</sup> *Martha Stewart Living* followed by running its May 2009 “What's For Dinner” feature in shades of yellow, and later that summer I was asked to prop









FINE COOKING, JUNE / JULY 2009, FOOD STYLED BY ALLISON EHRI KREITLER; PROPS STYLED BY KELLY COUGHLIN GEARTY; PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT PHILLIPS.



food features for *Fresh* and *Specialty Food* magazines in shades of...yellow. That is an easy arc to graph. But what happens when political hopes and promises are thwarted at every turn?

Just as the Obama administration chooses to address policymaking by embracing and borrowing from many different viewpoints, so have magazines embraced a mix of visual viewpoints to convey their editorial message and please their readers. What we are left with, on both fronts, is an all-over-the-place quality that lacks clear definition. As you turn the central pages of *Gourmet* from 2008 and 2009, you find photographs of food placed in excessively propped interiors inhabited by characters from all walks of life—from a fisherman to a weaver to a happy organic farmer and flea-market vendor—their differing experiences democratized by the artfully elite vision of art directors, editors, and stylists. We are engrossed by page after page of disheveled rooms where the mood trumps the food. Just as we begin to feel comfortable in these fanciful digs, we turn the page to experience an abrupt about-face in visual tone: spreads of harshly lit, starkly propped photographs of food on white plates on white backgrounds. The reality of the food itself, stripped of all pretense, becomes the medium of the message.

The November 2009 issue of *Bon Appétit* reveals its continuing identity crisis by kowtowing to both younger and older readers as if they are members of two opposing political parties. Mega-magnified cross-sections of turkey skin, stuffing, and cranberry sauce, used as chapter openers, become maps of the Thanksgiving world in all their blown-up glory on full-bleed, double-page spreads. But these shots are immediately followed by photographs reminiscent of women's service magazines from the 1980s, where too many avowedly "delicious" recipes plated on an unsuccessfully eclectic mix of props are crammed into the frame of a single photograph. In *Bon Appétit's* quest to please both generations of readers, the medium of the magazine's message is, at best, unappetizing.

It will be interesting to see how the next creative push in food photography manifests itself. The "Wall Street vs. Main Street" theme by which we are continually being asked to judge Barak Obama's presidency has already played itself out in the food magazine world with the commercial/visual demise of *Gourmet* (Wall Street) and the commercial/visual ascendancy of *Saveur* (Main Street). But there is more to ponder than pundit-speak when it comes to viewing the evolution of food photography through the lens of its political context.

The president has a young family and a hardworking, accomplished wife. There exists the much-ballyhooed White House vegetable garden, and the government has a renewed interest in protecting consumers from tainted food. While the handling of foreign and domestic agendas cause Obama's approval rating to fluctuate, the approval ratings for the president and his family remain solidly above 70 percent. This new, more inclusive, "all-American" image is being interpreted via shots of healthy comfort foods from different ethnicities, a trend Ruth Reichl trumpeted in *The Gourmet Cookbook*. We will continue to see modern plates and flatware with clean lines, but the occasional nostalgic element—Grandma's transferware water pitcher filled with flowers in the background—will continue to echo the battle between what has been and what can be. America wants to move forward, but we nervously hold onto an image of a past we wish really had existed. ☹

#### NOTES

1. Food stylist A.J. Battifarano reminded me of this in a conversation in August 2009.
2. Dorothy Kalins, *Saveur*, September/October 1994, 9.
3. Kristina Feliciano, "Raw Food Photography," *Photo District News*, February 2009, 24.
4. Victoria Granof, "Ice Cream Meltdown," 28 August 2009, at [www.alonghotsimmer.com](http://www.alonghotsimmer.com).
5. Interview with Allison Ehri Kreidler, September 2009.
6. Jorge S. Arango, "The Year's Hottest Hue: Yellow," *Metropolitan Home*, June 2009, 48.