

Anatomy of a Food Photograph

by Harriet Harcourt

for Activity & Nutrition Aotearoa



Life is uncertain, shoot dessert first!

This is a screen grab of a social media post by a local business selling gourmet foods; according to their caption this is one of their signature dishes.

- The light is flat and unfriendly, with hard shadows
- The pie is out of focus
- The board is sucking the colour out of the pie
- The chocolate drops are irrelevant
- It's a hot mess (in my opinion)

Let's see what we can do - I'm going to recreate their image my way..



- Neutral props bring out the colour of the pie
- Side light from window
- Light bounced in from right using a piece of white foamboard, so shadows are softer
- Ice cream has texture – it doesn't need the chocolate drops
- Mint stays for pop of colour, but less of it
- Some crumbly, flaky bits retained but the filling is still exposed
- Tells the story (delicious dessert ready to be devoured)



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Photography

Which one would you buy?



one of these things is not like the other one..

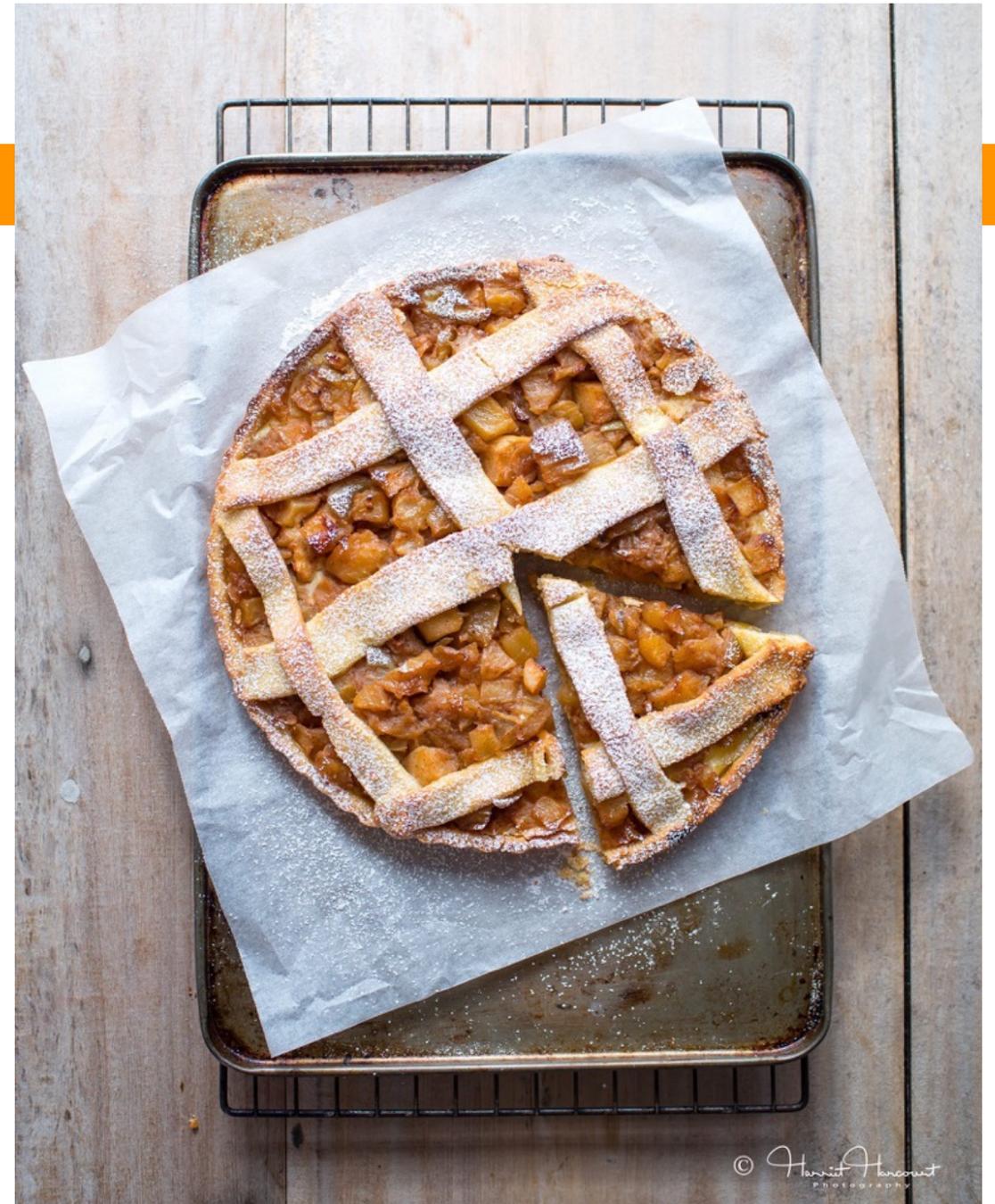
- Their “signature product” again – but I found them all in the freezer.
- They should be walking out the door fresh - they actually taste great (and I’m fussy about pastry!).
- The background is distracting; one suggestion if they had really wanted to post the picture immediately would be to hold it out in front of them so the chef’s jacket or an apron was the background. This would add to the story of inhouse fresh-baked pie. (Watch out for grubby hands and nails!).
- A good example of why is is worth taking a bit of time to get a better shot.



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Spiced Apple Pie

- Neutral colours & minimal props
- Baking tray gives a sense of scale
- Window light from the top of the frame
- One cut piece makes the shape more interesting
- Looks fresh, warm and inviting
- Shot from above makes texture visible
- Rectangular props give nice counter-balance to round pie





Before & after



Behind the scenes

- Natural light from side
- Diffuser to spread light evenly
- Note use of special diffuser stand
- White foamboard reflector – more about that later



Next.. noodling around

Hokkien Noodles



- an example of a take home ready-meal in need of some TLC for product shot
- first, I took all the bits out to see what I had to work with – we'll get to that in a second..
- I reassembled the noodles in the container so that more pieces of vegetable were visible, and the noodles had a nice shape (not too many ends showing)
- next, I added freshly cut garnishes – spring onion, chilli and lime
- finally, a dab of oil on some of the vegetables and noodles for shine and a sprinkle of fried shallots
- let's see how that worked out..



"deconstructed"

et voilà!

- reassembled
- freshly cut garnishes
- touches of oil for highlights
- still edible!



Let's see that again



No shaving cream was used in the following scenes..

Thai Beef Salad

- ready meal in takeaway container with lid removed
- brief is a simple serving suggestion type of shot for social media
- not very inspiring?
- separate components
- give the herbs & salad a water bath and spin
- cut some new red onion
- this time we'll use some simple props..



Making the process part of the story..

- tease out the noodles so they're visible
- rinse the meat under the tap to make it look moist and pink again (and get rid of the dried shallot crumbs).
- use the sauce to garnish and add shine
- fluff up the herbs & salad
- added bonus, nice action shot
- Shot from $\frac{3}{4}$ angle, overhead would work too



Thai Beef Salad

- everything used from the container as purchased, apart from fresh red onion and dried shallots
- could add cutlery and/or napkin (if you want to be authentic, don't use chopsticks – Thai food is eaten with a spoon & fork)
- Normally, if I had been shooting this for a client, I would have topped up the chilli sauce in the bowl.

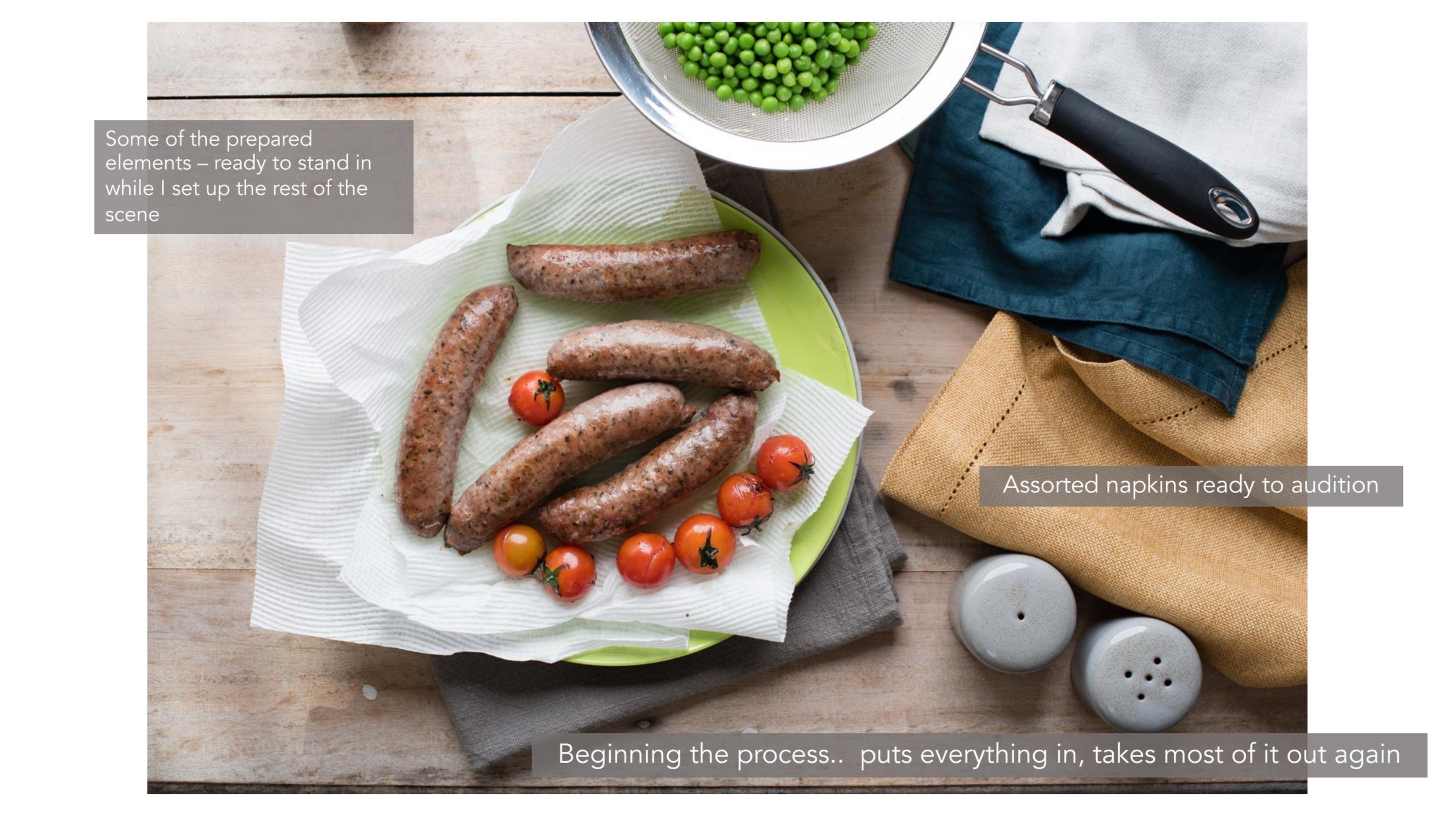


Before & after..



Let's walk through a whole shoot now..





Some of the prepared elements – ready to stand in while I set up the rest of the scene

Assorted napkins ready to audition

Beginning the process.. puts everything in, takes most of it out again



Too dark..



Nope, not today
(admires lovely folds
before discarding)



NO!!

Is this going to add anything?



But this has to go – it's too dark

Definite improvement – leaning towards all neutral props and make food colours pop

Maybe?



Yeah, nah – not today





Oh, I like you better!

Also, no.. thanks anyway



Relocated



Even more neutral!

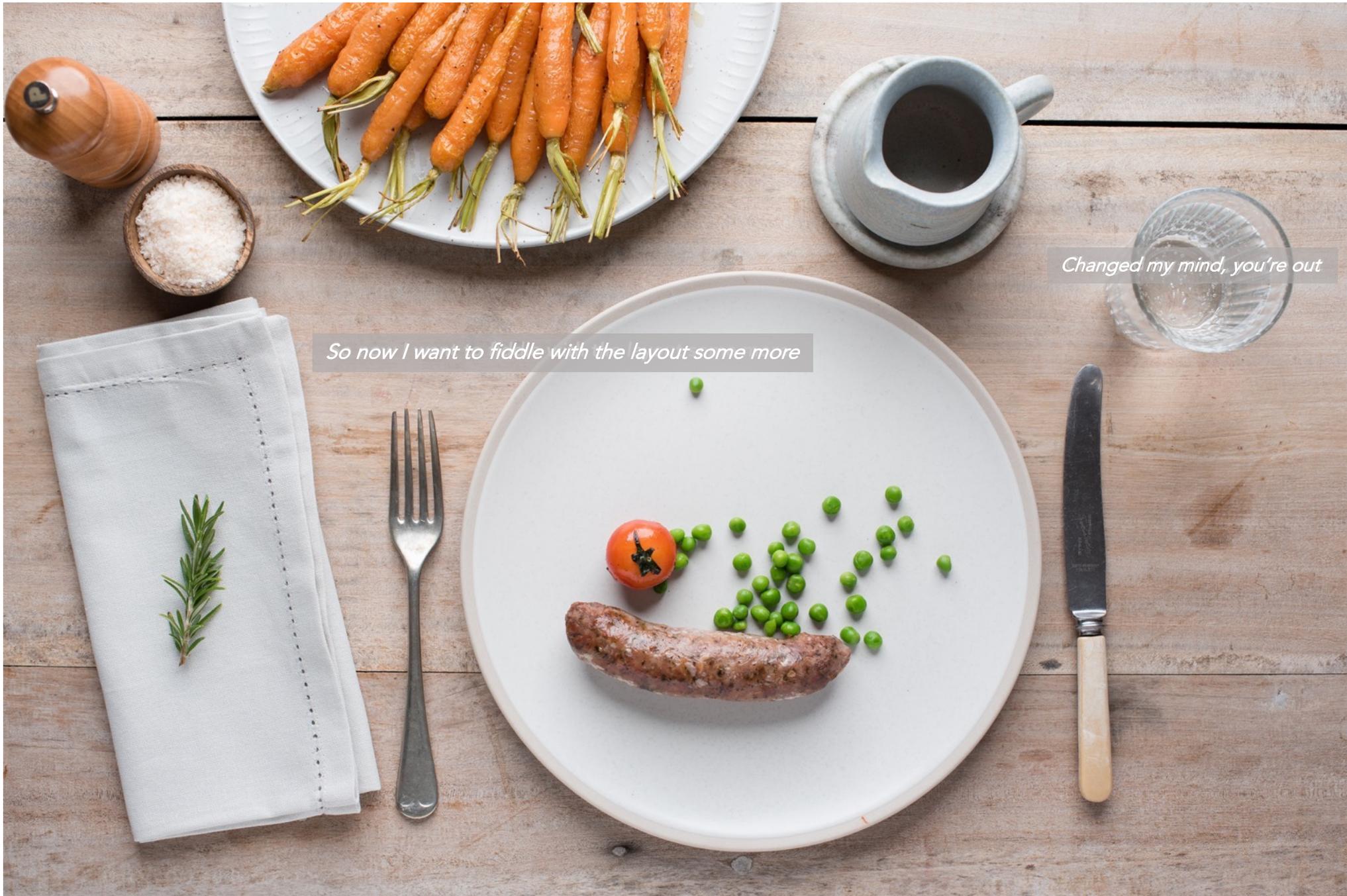
Why are you still here?

Oh, hello pop of colour!

YES!!

Maybe, but you'll need some ice and lemon if you're staying





So now I want to fiddle with the layout some more

Changed my mind, you're out



Nearly there..

Oh wait – change of plate!





Actual food!



Tweaking..

You need to go

Not liking this weird sausage angle..



Much better! :D

Further over on the plate

*I remembered
to fill it!*





OK, all good to go.. or are we?

*Sausies look dull and fatty
(because they are cold)*

(Plate is now higher in the frame too)



All fixed.. NOW we are good to go



Well, there's no going back now, but we're not there yet..



Getting there.. But I feel like I could go a bit further



Nice, but what the heck – let's go for broke!



Now I'm happy – it's all connected



Be careful when adding pepper – it can look like dirt..



Has this water drop been bugging anyone else the whole way through?

One final, tiny tweak

Notes:

- All the food was cold except the gravy which was just warm enough to pour.
- Sausages, tomatoes & carrots given a little dab of oil with a soft paintbrush to make them shine.
- The line through the wooden surface is not something I would normally leave – it's good to see the things you shouldn't do as well!
- I feel like I've achieved my aim of making the food really pop, and all the props are taking a back seat.
- The light was positioned at the top of the frame, and I had a reflector at the bottom of the frame. (I started out with the intention of shooting this in natural light, but we were just getting into the tail end of Cyclone Seroja and it got rather dark in my little room).
- From "Go" to "Whoa" this took me about 1½ hours to style and shoot on my own – that's not counting the food prep.
- There are already things about this that I would change – but sometimes you just have to stop!
- Yes, I heated it all up and we had it for dinner. Sometimes I wouldn't recommend eating the food on a shoot if it has been sitting around/handled a lot.



Mediterranean Lamb Sausages with Mash, Scorched Cherry Tomatoes, Roasted Dutch Carrots & Gravy

So, what bits and bobs do I need for all of this?

- Obviously, a camera of some sort – the best camera is the one you have on hand at the time.
- Yes, this includes your 'phone – one of the first pictures I sold was taken on my mobile.
- (Because of the broad nature of this presentation I'm not going to get too deeply into the specifics of camera gear – that's for another time)
- But for those of you who are really interested:
I shoot with a Nikon D750 camera, and I have prime lenses (28mm, 35mm, 50mm, 85mm portrait, 105mm macro)
- There are much cheaper and simpler cameras that you can take great pictures with, and there are considerably more expensive and sophisticated cameras than what I use: it's how you use them that counts.

Also, diffusers, reflectors and a baby food styling kit: here's where you can lift your game a little by having on hand some of the basics...

Here's what using a reflector will do for your image

- A reflector does not have to be a fancy piece of expensive photographic equipment.
- For these photos I used the lid of a polystyrene box and an A clamp from Bunnings to keep it upright (behind the scenes pic to follow)
- Other simple reflectors can be concocted from white foamboard, foil from the kitchen drawer and mirrors, to name a few



Light coming from the window on the left

identical set up

photos taken
moments apart

identical edits



Reflector placed to the right to bounce light into the shot

Let's see how that looks from "behind-the-scenes.."



- Working inside in open shade with the light coming from the window on the left.

- Light being reflected into the right side of the picture with a highly sophisticated piece of equipment: the lid from a polystyrene box and an A clamp from Bunnings as a base.

- Fancy bought diffuser (not in place) - with its cover on it becomes a reflector.

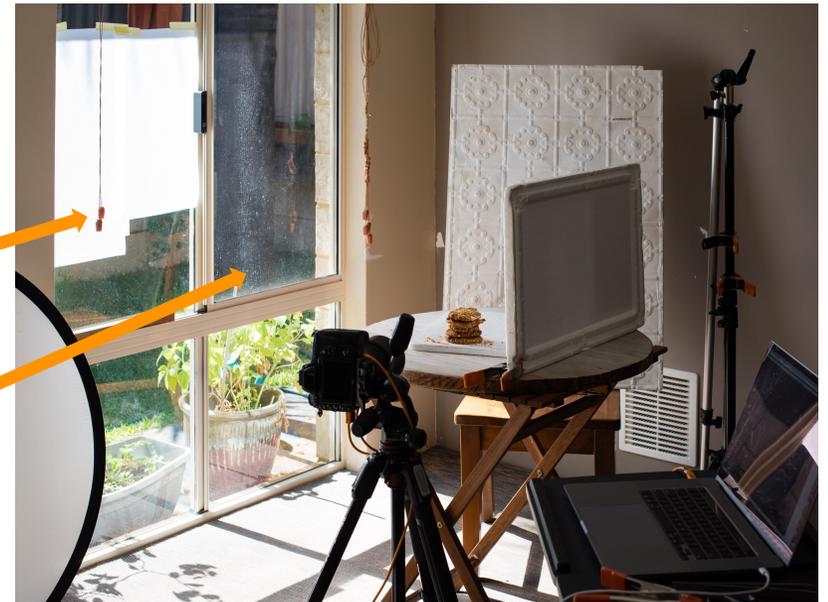


- Camera is tethered to laptop, no diffuser in use at this point

- Baking paper and masking tape are a thing too.

- Dirty windows (clutching at straws now!)

(Note to self: ask beloved to clean the windows)





Identical setup in the window – the sun has moved further in now..

I actually quite like the mixed effect on the left, but it isn't always helpful

Having placed a diffuser in between my subject and the window you can see it has evened out the light considerably.

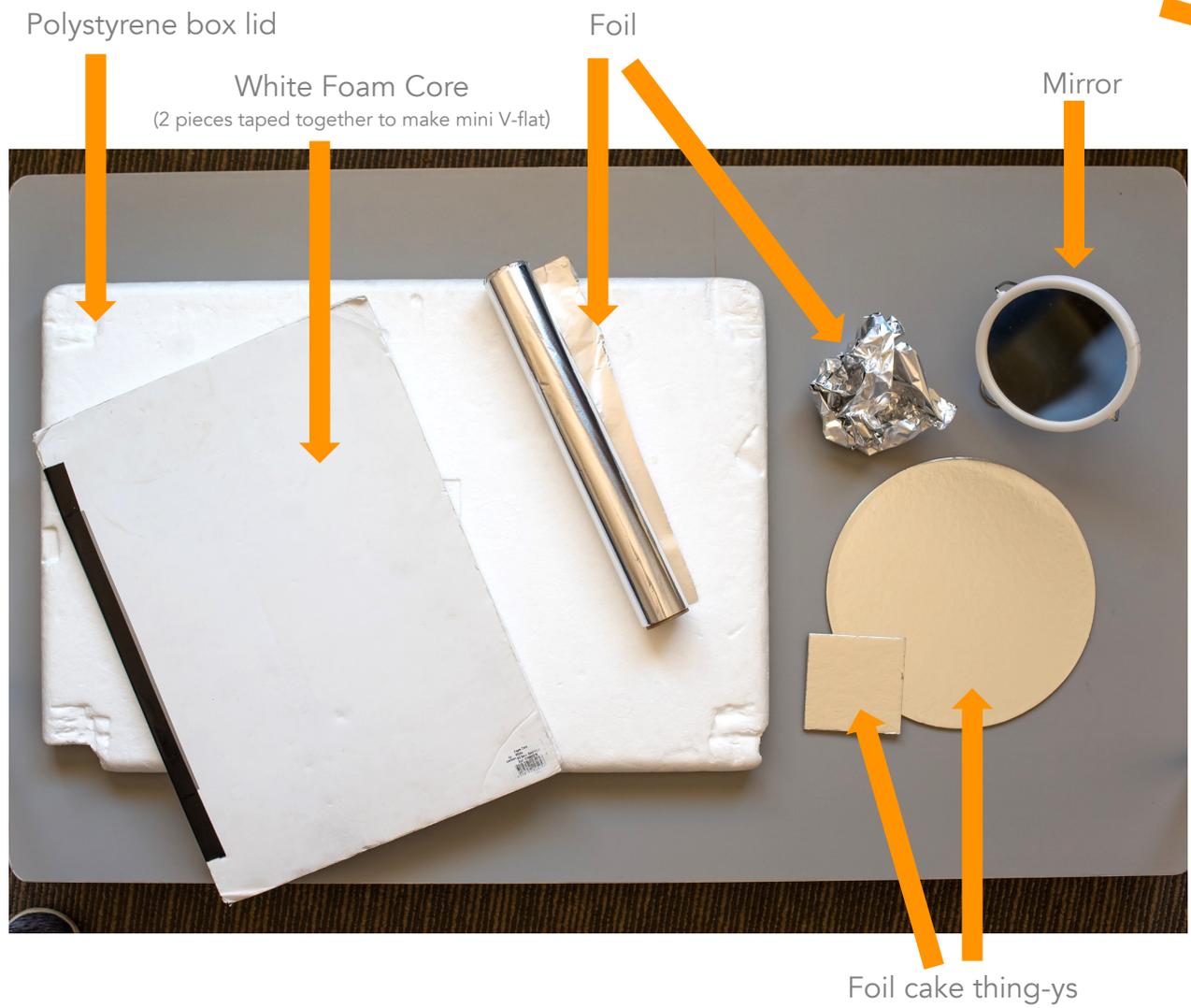


And here's the effect that a diffuser can have on your picture (don't try the scented kind – it won't work)



Reflectors:

5-in-1 collapsible reflector



Diffusers:

Quite literally, Mum's old net curtain from Wellington!

Baking paper

Diffusion paper
(workout optional)

No. 5 of the 5-in-1 reflector, actually a diffuser



Trusty loved one demonstrating in garden



Baby food styling kit:

The three things I don't leave home without – whether I'm the photographer or stylist, or both.

Brush – useful to brush off crumbs etc, apply oil to give shine



Water spritzer – adds moisture, freshness & shine when oil isn't appropriate

Tweezers: the number one useful tool for removing specks or crumbs, adding specks or crumbs, adding tiny herbs, and generally not mucking up delicate adjustments where your big fingers are likely to!

Props and surfaces:

For this presentation I deliberately used very simple everyday props for my example photos: a cooling rack, baking tray, baking paper, basic crockery & cutlery..

As a professional I have a huge collection of props, and there is always the temptation to use something because you just bought it/it's your new favourite thing/it's your old favourite thing/it's cool..

One word: DON'T!

OK, two words: PLEASE DON'T!

Unless it makes sense and adds something to the story, leave it out!

Which leads me to garnishes; always use edible garnishes that relate to the food you are showcasing - if it's not in the dish/doesn't make sense - please don't do it!!

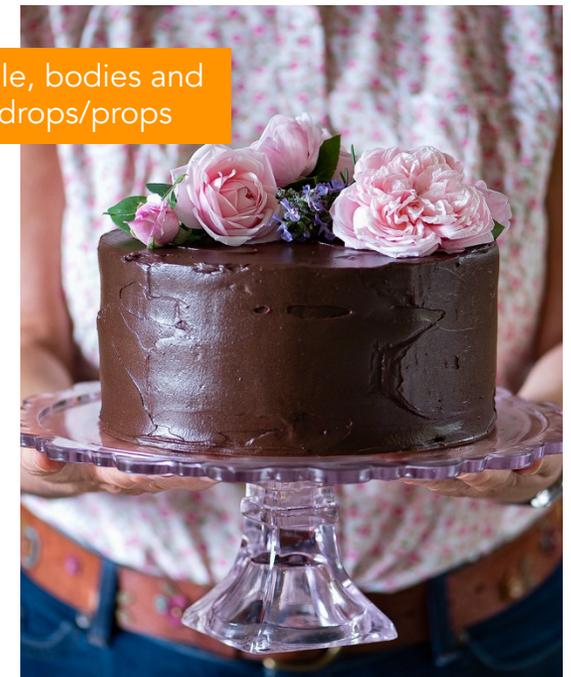
(Reminds me of that time I was catering, and I saw an elderly gent carefully spooning some pot pourri onto his plate - yikes!)

Also, props are probably optional or unnecessary for a lot of you - the best prop or backdrop available may be a willing hand model, an already set table in a restaurant, a graffitied wall,

These can also give context and a sense of scale.



A few examples of how people, bodies and hands can make great backdrops/props



About Harriet Harcourt:

Harriet Harcourt is a seasoned food professional with more than 30 years' experience.

A Cordon Bleu graduate, Harriet's culinary skills and experience span a wide spectrum of activities across the food industry. This includes food styling, catering, film catering, demonstrating, recipe & product development, food columnist, and blogger.

Harriet was the food technician for "The Lord of the Rings" Trilogy, "King Kong" and "Avatar"; designing and creating props food as part of those stories filmed in New Zealand. (This included major scenes involving huge volumes of food, as well as producing 'identical' food items in two different scales when required.)

After moving to Western Australia, Harriet added photography to her skill set and has since been steadily building a client base which includes the *New York Times* along with iconic West Australian brands Mrs Mac's, Fogarty Wine Group, Clancy's Fish Pubs, WA Potatoes, and many others.

In April 2021 she won the Marks & Spencer Food Portraiture category in the Pink Lady® Food Photographer of the Year Awards; an international competition that attracted over 10,000 entries from 80 countries this year.

