

Fancy being a food stylist?

Behind every gorgeous image of food, there's a talented food stylist. **Sally-Jayne Wright** finds out how they do it

If you've flicked through this month's recipes, you'll already appreciate the work of the food stylist. It's their job to make dishes and ingredients look great for the camera – for magazines, cookbooks, TV commercials, food packaging and in-store posters. Freelancers earn £225-400 a day, with advertising work paying the most. TV food stylists (also called home economists) are the unsung heroes of cookery shows – their job is as much about making chefs look confident as it is about making food look good.



Cooking for the TV cameras

Nicole Herft is Head home economist on the Good Food channel's daily show, *Market Kitchen*. Nicole (above with Rachel Allen) has styled books and magazines and, having worked in different media, knows that TV is much faster and more pressured.

On Monday, she goes through the recipes and food props for all five shows and orders the necessary food. On Tuesday, she prepares food for the first three shows. Five shows are then recorded on Wednesday and Thursday, her busiest days, which may include up to 20 recipes. Nicole watches chefs through a TV monitor, prompting them through a microphone link should they forget an ingredient.

Before joining *Market Kitchen*, Nicole gained plenty of experience working in commercial kitchens. She was head chef for nine years in several different restaurants, and this broad apprenticeship has paid off.

Janice Gabriel, *Market Kitchen*'s executive producer, says: 'We value Nicole's enthusiasm and knowledge. She's able to handle nervous first-time TV chefs and big personalities alike.'

Working for magazines

Bridget Sargeson, who regularly works for *Good Food*, styled the Cauliflower (page 66) and Chocolate (page 71) features in this issue. She studied interior design and was working at an architectural practice when a friend asked her to help with a recipe shoot. Her new career promptly took off.

For a photo shoot on a Thursday, Bridget receives the recipes on Tuesday, then spends Wednesday shopping and cooking. The props stylist delivers crockery, cutlery and cookware to the studio. On the day, the photographer, Bridget, their assistants and *Good Food*'s Art director work as a team.

'We frequently have to shoot beach barbecues in February, and cherries or pumpkins months in advance, as magazines work so far ahead,' she says.

There are also long hours and artistic temperaments to deal with, but one of the biggest challenges is keeping food looking fresh and appetising in a studio as the hours go by. Food stylists often have to remake a recipe or cook more than they need to ensure that the dishes look as attractive as possible.

'You need patience. If a photographer hasn't worked with food before, they may not understand that roasted meat turns grey if kept waiting. But I love the variety and meeting new people.'

Barney Desmazery, *Good Food*'s Food editor, says: 'Bridget's food looks natural but also very tempting. She is thorough and, if there are problems with a recipe, she tells us what changes she'd make, thus providing an extra test process.'



Bridget adds the all-important finishing touches to a Cauliflower & potato curry – turn to page 68 for the recipe

DISPELLING THE MYTHS

Food photography has a reputation for trickery and, in the past, there were lots of cheats – such as painting meat with Marmite to keep it looking juicy.

In recent years, the trend has been to show real, genuinely prepared food, something which always happens on *Good Food* shoots. In fact, when the photography is over, the food is often eaten or taken home.

How to break into food styling

- Become an apprentice to an established food stylist. Run errands, do the washing up and prepare vegetables. Assistants can earn £80-£100 a day, but may have to work unpaid at first
- Team up with a would-be food photographer and put together a portfolio of your work. Nicole did this to land her first position at *Sainsbury's Magazine*

Qualities you need

- Top-notch cookery skills
- The ability to think on your feet, multi-task and read and understand a recipe
- A highly developed visual sense
- Resourceful shopping skills. You need to pick the most visually attractive items and hunt down hard-to-find ingredients, often out of season
- Patience and confidence
- Team-playing skills