

Who's Hungry?™

A day in the life of food photographer
Stephen Hamilton



Posts Tagged 'Sun-Times'

Food Photo Contest Critique

Thursday, May 20th, 2010

For an amateur photo contest, Steve was really blown away by all of the entries for the Sun-Times Food Foto Contest. The shots were much better than he was expecting! These images are his top picks from the entries, and he's taken the time to discuss the pros and cons of each. Here are his thoughts:

(To refresh your memory on his advice for food photographers that accompanied [Janet Fuller's April 28th article](#), click here: [Ten tips to photographing food](#))



GRAND PRIZE WINNER Sharlene King's grilled chicken sandwich with roasted peppers, sugar snap peas, and mayo made of olive oil and freeze-dried shallots.

This sandwich really could have won on taste appeal alone. I love that it's close up and you can see all the different textures of each ingredient. The mayo is so nice squishing out over the peppers and sugar snap peas. The chicken looks moist and hearty weighing down the bottom slice of bread, while the top piece remains light and fluffy. I thought almost all my tips were taken into consideration here and applied very well. There's indirect light, tight cropping, a great angle, salt and pepper "props" in the background, tons of taste appeal, and best of all, it's simple and it's a real life moment. This image makes me feel like I'm right there in the kitchen, about to enjoy this really great sandwich.



FINALIST Heather Wetzel's Roasted Tomato, Basil, and Whole Wheat Tart

This was initially one of my favorites. Oven roasting the tomatoes has given them a really nice soft color that contrasts beautifully with the green curls of basil. I really love how the whole wheat tart has a break in it at the bottom edge. I also like the choice of a simple rustic oven rack for the surface. On closer inspection though, I realized this was all photographed off her balcony. The car in the background was really what took this one out of the running for me. Even though it's a small detail, sometimes it's the little things that can make or break a good photo. Even so, this image has a ton of taste appeal and I really liked it over all!



FINALIST Kwokmun-Lee's Fresh Strawberry Scones

I loved the softness of the light here, diffused from a window behind our view. And the choice of surface is great. The light on the wood echos the warmth of the scones in a really nice way. The composition could have used a little more foreground and a little less room at the top though. This would provide space for the addition of a prop (a napkin perhaps?) to help tell the story.



FINALIST Gemma Petrie's Zucchini Pasta with Parsley Pesto

This is one of my top picks! I love the idea of zucchini pasta. The composition and curls are beautiful, especially with the parsley pesto sticking to it in various places. I love the ribbony light feel. One of my favorite things about shooting thin strips like this is that you get the light coming through, which is always a fun thing to capture. My only issue with this image is that the cropping doesn't allow you to read what it is right away. It needs a little more environment and maybe a bit more sauce to give it more lushness and taste appeal. In fact, I think it works much better on [Gemma's blog](#), which I think everyone should check out if they have a chance. She's done a really great job with it!



FINALIST Steven Matthews' Hot Wings

This image looks professional. It has great taste appeal, and technically, it's a very impressive shot. It's pretty challenging to get the highlights on sauce just right, and they are truly beautiful here. The photographer either knows a lot about lighting, or it's a very happy accident. Ultimately, this doesn't have quite the amount of taste appeal as the winning shot because it looks a little too staged – it lacks that feel of a real life moment. This was an extremely strong contender though, and I would love to see more work!



Meredith Kelly's Irish Soda Bread for St. Patty's Day in the morning light.

This one has really nice natural lighting coming from the right. And I like the whole narration that's happening with the props – being in the kitchen with a recipe, leaving the bread on a cooling rack just out of the oven. I do think that the recipe itself is just a bit too distracting. Conceptually though, this is a nice element to have. Maybe it would work a little better if it were a bit smaller. For example, it could be a thin piece of paper, slightly out of focus in the background, curling toward the foreground just enough to imply what it was. My only other comment would be to warm the image up a bit.



A brunch crafted from things found in the Logan Sq Farmer's Market: apples, sprouts, herbed vinegar, eggs, and cheese on a fresh baguette.

What struck me about this image was the softness of light and the color palette. One of the tips I mentioned in the article was to use indirect lighting and I thought it was applied here really nicely. The main drawback to me is that I can't really tell what it is so it loses a lot of taste appeal. I think it just needs a little more thought put into the composition so that one ingredient relates to another more clearly. Overall it's a very nice image, and I love the warmth and texture of the bread!



Paul Lettieri's Frosted Chocolate Cookies

My grandmother used to make cookies just like this, so this photograph immediately evoked a strong emotion for me. Ultimately, that's what every image should do! The backlight on this is also a nice touch. The image feels a little cold though, and therefore has a problem with taste appeal. If you look take a look at the top right cookie, the melt on it is beautiful. On the cookies in the foreground though, you can tell that the frosting has dried and looks kind of hard.



Pam Shultz (photographer) and Carol Mackey's (chef) Blueberry Buckle with Lemon Sauce

This blueberry buckle has tons of taste appeal! I love the lemon sauce drip, and the cake looks moist and delicious. The prop choice here is a little heavy though, and when you use such a dark background, it draws your eye to it before you have a chance to look at the cake. This dark palette really needs a stronger light so that the food can pop and be the center of attention. I can tell that a lot of thought went into this piece though!



Tammy Green's Cole Slaw from Better Homes & Gardens' cookbook, with honey subbed in for sugar.

Conceptually, I really like this shot. There's a finished bowl of coleslaw with all of the ingredients surrounding it. The problem is that the ingredients are a bit overpowering and it's hard to tell what you should pay attention to. The light source and colors here are really great, but the eye doesn't know where to go because there's so much going on. I think this could have been a really successful shot with just a hint of the ingredients, further back so that they're out of focus.



Candace Rogers' Hummingbird Cupcakes filled

with bananas, pineapples, and pecans, and topped with cream cheese frosting and a candied pecan.

These cupcakes are perfectly bucolic in their kitchen setting! I love the hutch in the background and the doily details of the cake stand. Also, it takes a lot of talent to pipe on frosting like this. These were decorated by someone who knew how to use a pastry bag and pastry tips impressively! It would be nice to zoom in on the closest one, allowing it to be the hero, and letting the others blur into the background. Likewise, even though I really like the addition of the forks to the image, they could be pushed back a tad so that they don't compete with the cupcakes.



Debbie Carlos' Roasted Beets
Sitting Beside Ranunculus

Generally, I don't like shots with big flowers or anything potentially so distracting, but this seems to work here. Since the flowers are so out of focus, they don't take away from the beets, but personally, I would have preferred to just zoom in on the beets. But this is actually a pretty cool conceptual shot because it reads as a still life even though it's a prepared dish.

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[Photo Contest Top Picks](#)

Tuesday, May 18th, 2010

A few weeks back, [Janet Fuller](#) visited the studio to do an [article for the Sun Times about Steve and food photography](#). With so much interest out there in the general public, it seemed appropriate to put together a contest judged by Steve for everyone who wanted to develop their own food photography skills. Janet's hard work and Steve's expertise really paid off. We had some very impressive entries! Flip through the entire gallery by [clicking here](#), or scroll down to see our top picks!

The winner will be announced tomorrow (this Wednesday) . Unfortunately some of the entries, although beautiful, could not be considered because they were either shot in restaurants or done by professional photographers. This contest was for amateurs only.

Check back soon because our next entry will be an in depth critique of each of our picks – what we liked and didn't like about each.

For now, feast your eyes!



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Debbie Carlos' Roasted Beets Sitting Beside Ranunculus

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- The Who's Hungry? blog is a behind-the-scenes look at the day in the life of leading commercial food photographer, Stephen Hamilton.

Stephen appears as a Quickfire judge on Top Chef Masters and his images have appeared on every season of Top Chef, since Season 3 in Miami.

This is an opportunity to glimpse into the whole culture of a culinary photo studio. Join us often and you'll find tips on photography, food and prop styling, and just about anything the crew may be up to that day.

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