

WHAT A DISH!

To some camera-happy diners, food is so gorgeous, so sensual, that it just has to be photographed -- and posted on a blog.

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This is how widespread "food porn" has become.

In March, Chicagoan Dominic Armato went to The French Laundry, an eat-here-before-you-die restaurant in Yountville, Calif., with his wife and his Fujifilm FinePix F-11. You see, Armato, like many foodies, dabbles in food porn, taking luscious closeups of food and then posting them on a Web site.

As the amuse-bouche (a tiny cone filled with salmon tartare) arrived, he felt sheepish about whipping out his camera. Then he noticed a woman at another table ostentatiously snapping pictures. Emboldened, he pulled out his camera in time for the first course--sea urchin with water chestnuts, pea shoots and black truffle coulis.

Fast-forward a few days. Armato was posting The French Laundry photos on his food blog, Skillet Doux (www.skilletdoux.com). He has pictures of everything but the salmon cone, so he looked for a photo of it on the Web in the off-chance another foodie had snapped one. Amazingly, one had.

That Armato was able to find and borrow something almost unimaginably obscure shows how common food porn has become.

"I am a little ashamed I do it," said Armato, who works for a Chicago manufacturing company. "But I can't help it, I love to document. You need photos. If people can't taste it, you have to be able to show them something so they can imagine it."

From white-hot restaurants such as Moto to tiny taquerias, hordes of foodies are pulling out their cameras before they eat. Their pictures rarely include other people. They are close-ups of food. And they are sensual.

Alinea, a cutting-edge restaurant where a lavender-scented pillow is as likely to accompany a dish as a sprig of parsley, is so frequently photographed by foodie diners that when chef Grant Achatz changes something on the menu, someone almost immediately posts photos of it on the Web.

"It's nice people are so excited that they feel the need to take photos of their meals," Achatz said, adding that on any given night, multiple tables are photographing--and even occasionally videotaping--what he sends out to them. "That's a great level of passion and excitement. Those are the people you want at your restaurant."

The photos are meant, like good old-fashioned porn, to spark a very specific reaction in the viewer. Your mouth is supposed to water. The best make you lean toward the computer screen, wishing you could lick it.

"If you look at the photography, the very loving manner in which these photographs are shot, they are meant to tantalize and titillate the viewer," said Jarrett Byrnes, a graduate student who lives in Sebastopol, Calif., and runs Food Porn Watch, a Web site with links to almost 1,000 food blogs around the world, most with extensive food photography.

For chefs, this can be immensely flattering. But it can also be a problem. Photographed well, gnocchi can look like pillows of pasta perfection. Photographed poorly, they can look like segments of a fattened albino caterpillar, as Terragusto's gnocchi recently did on foodie message board LTHForum.com.

And that makes for some nervous moments from chefs like Achatz, who makes it even harder on amateur photographers by prohibiting use of a flash.

"You have diners coming in that just aren't very good photographers," he said. Their resulting photos "might be a misrepresentation of what the food looks like."

Nobody knows exactly when lots of people started photographing their food and posting the pictures on the Web. Some point to the growth in popularity of food TV, especially the Food Network, with its picture-perfect dishes.

Others point to the proliferation of food blogs, which practically cry out for photos to break up the text and, as Byrnes put it, to "tantalize and titillate" readers.

In and around Chicago, there's plenty to tantalize and titillate. Restaurants, both upscale and hole-in-the-wall, abound. Most every kind of cuisine is served somewhere here, and because of that, Chicago is something of a food porn fantasy city.

On a recent Thursday evening, Armato walked into River North's Zealous with his camera, ready to photograph chef Michael Taus' five-course tasting menu. The first course arrived: a tiny pink cube of watermelon gelee with black sesame seeds pressed into one side and sitting on a scribble of minty sauce.

"Pretty food is less challenging," he said, quickly snapping pictures of the little cube with his slim FinePix F-11, a \$300 point-and-shoot he bought especially to photograph restaurant meals discreetly in low lighting. "When you have food this pretty, it doesn't take much to make it look good."

Nobody batted an eye as Armato finished photographing the amuse-bouche from his seat, a process that took less than a minute. He put the camera away, cut the cube into two and popped a piece in his mouth. Twelve hours later, the photo, along with pictures of the other four courses, were already posted on his blog with a lengthy, detailed review (he deemed the little watermelon gelee "far too subtle").

What effect such photograph-heavy reviews have on restaurants is uncertain. While emphasizing that it is an honor to have his food photographed by his diners, Taus also said that negative photos can hurt business. "This is not a hobby," he said. "This is a business."

And, it can spoil the surprise, a major element in restaurants such as Zealous, Alinea or Tru, where presentation and creativity are as important ingredients as butter, herbs and fish.

"People read the menu and they see a dish like tomato, mozzarella and olive oil," Alinea's Achatz said. "It is anonymous and we do that on purpose so there is an element of surprise and a sense of wonder. If that is blown, it takes a layer off of the experience."

And if diners can go to a Web site like eGullet and see that the mozzarella dish comes as, say, a cheese balloon filled with tomato foam, or some such delight, it's a little like learning the ending of a thriller before heading to the movie.

Then again, Achatz admits to checking out food blogs before heading to a restaurant, and allows that in some cases, photos of the food can generate excitement in an establishment for reluctant diners.

And for ones who can't make it to restaurants, photos can be the next best thing.

"I have lived vicariously through a lot of Chicago diners who have more access to those kinds of things," said Gemma Petrie, author and photographer of Part-Time Pro Bono Baker, www.probonobaker.typepad.com, a food blog focused on bread.

The photos can also act as insurance for creative chefs who can't copyright their creations. When photos of bizarre concoctions from a restaurant in Australia showed up on the Web, foodies recognized them as having originated at Alinea and WD-50 in New York. Food fans pounced and the Australian chef was shamed, his career shredded like so much cabbage.

"It's a self-protection system," Achatz said.

But protecting Alinea and WD-50 is not what propels people to pick up their Coolpix before their forks. For Debbie Carlos, it's a desire to share photos of a simple and serene world she can create in her kitchen.

"Whenever I make anything, I don't eat it until 30 minutes after it's done, I am so busy photographing it," said Carlos, a Chicago photography student whose food blog, Bunny Pie (tart.hellogirlfriend.com), is filled with pictures of banana muffins and zabaglione tarts. "Sometimes I make food just to photograph it."

Petrie, who photographs bread at Chicago area bakeries, said she feels a little self-conscious pulling out her Canon PowerShot S70 in a restaurant. "People think it's pretty strange," she said. "They think, it is just a hunk of bread. But for me, I'm thrilled."

The urge to document food predates digital cameras, food blogs and the Internet. Before cameras, people were painting still lifes of food, attempting to capture the ripeness of a peach, the dew on a piece of melon, the heat of blood dripping from a recently killed rabbit.

Tru chef-owner Gale Gand said she used to draw her meals after returning from an especially memorable night out. Using colored pencils, Gand said she sketched a dozen or more meals. "And these were elaborate, 12-course meals," she said. "So I understand why someone might want to snap a photo."

As art, food is unique in that it is meant to be consumed soon after being prepared. It doesn't stick around. You can't really take a gorgeously made salad and keep it around for inspiration.

Although you can try. About 15 years ago, Gand said, she and her then-husband, Tru executive chef Rick Tramonto, kept a perfectly square crouton from Jamin, renowned chef Joel Robuchon's restaurant in Paris at the time.

"We put it in a little film can," she said. "We carried it around with us on our trip. We joked about having a food museum."

One day, they showed a chef friend the crouton, and he popped it into his mouth and ate it. "We could have killed him!" she said. "There's this desire to hold onto a meal and you can't. There is just no way."

But with photos, you can try. And thousands of foodies are busy trying. Trying to capture that incredible quail salad. That textbook plate of handmade pasta. That light-as-air zabaglione tart.

Armato said he regrets not starting to take photos earlier in life, when he went to Alain Ducasse's Louis XV in Monaco (another before-you-die restaurant) and Jean Georges in New York (ditto).

Asked what he ate at each restaurant, Armato said he doesn't really remember, and that bothers him. "I wish I did have pictures," he said sadly

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How to take food photos

A good photograph of food can make your mouth water. A bad photograph? Stomach-turning. At Play asked renowned, New York-based food photographer Judd Pilosof,

whose clients include Starbucks, Godiva and Campbell's, for a few tips for getting that appetizing shot.

Ask for a table near a window. "It is a challenge to shoot in a restaurant," Pilosof said. Restaurants are often dim and have many different sources of light that can wreak havoc with colors. Try to get as much natural light as possible, Pilosof said. And if you can, try to shoot either in the early morning or afternoon, when the natural light is softer. "Food has a tendency of being very reflecting of light," he said.

Turn off that flash. Built-in flashes tend to throw harsh light on food. "The flash is really sort of like shooting redeye on your food," he said. Instead, try to hold your camera as steady as possible while photographing the food without the flash, he said. Maybe prop it against the back of a chair, or on the table.

Simplify. The simpler the shot, the better, Pilosof said. Move other plates out of the picture. Ditto with glasses, silverware and any other extraneous items creeping into the frame. Let the focus be on the food.

Be creative. Try different camera angles, he said. Don't stick with that old standby, pointing down at the food at a 45-degree angle. "Try being more overhead or at a lower angle," he said. "Everybody gets into these formulas. I try to kick myself and say I did that yesterday. I want to change."

-- Trine Tsouderos

Sites so good you can taste

So much food porn, so little time. Here is a baker's dozen of food blogs with lip-smacking photography:

CHICAGO-BASED

BUNNY PIE tart.hellogirlfriend.com Simple, delicious, ruffledaproncute, this blog (run by School of the Art Institute photography student Debbie Carlos) showcases serene photos of things like banana muffins and lentil soup, plus recipes.

FANCY TOAST www.fancytoast.blogspot.com Erielle Bakkum's cheerful Chicago blog is peppered with colorful, almost abstract photos of risotto and chicken curry, along with recipes.

PART TIME PRO BONO BAKER www.probonobaker.typepad.com. Lovingly photographed bread is the highlight of this blog by Chicago bread enthusiast Gemma Petrie, who totes her camera to area bakeries and restaurants.

SKILLET DOUX www.skilletdoux.com Filled with restaurant reviews, recipes and thoughts about his favorite chefs, Chicagoan Dominic Armato's food blog is also chock-ablock with sharp photographs of everything from crabcakes at May Street Market to pizza at Spacca Napoli. Some recipes.

AND BEYOND

BRON MARSHALL bronmarshall.com A food blog stuffed with gigantic, lush photos of beef scallopini, tamarillos and ice melting in New Zealand, home to this Web site's creator, Bron Marshall.

CHOCOLATE AND ZUCCHINI chocolateandzucchini.com A classic food blog with stellar photography and witty ditties about eating and cooking in France and beyond. Reading this blog, you want to be Clotilde Dusoulier, its wry Parisian author and photographer.

COOKBOOK 411 cookbook411.com Stunning photography makes this blog by Seattle-based Lara Ferroni a standout. Includes restaurant reviews, recipes and musings about food. Ferroni also keeps a tip-packed site called.

STILL LIFE WITH ... www.stilllifewith.com About food photography and food styling.

DELICIOUS DAYS www.deliciousdays.com German bloggers Oliver Seidel and Nicole Stich are so good they can make a tiny cube of fresh yeast look like a delectable piece of art. Their site also includes recipes for yummy-sounding foodstuffs like orange brioche.

NORDLJUS www.nordljus.co.uk The photos in Keiko Oikawa's food blog are colorful and simply gorgeous, taken in what looks like the dove gray light of a drizzly, lazy day in Oikawa's home in Suffolk, England.

ORANGETTE orangette.blogspot.com With its lively writing and artistic, color-saturated photos of everything from broccoli rabe to deviled eggs, Seattle resident Molly Wizenberg's blog is downright addictive. Includes recipes.

RICE AND NOODLES www.maegabriel.com/riceandnoodles Living on Jersey Island in the English Channel, Mae Gabriel is apparently both a fantastic cook and photographer. The combination makes for a mouth-watering food blog.

SHE WHO EATS shewhoeats.blogspot.com A Japanese food blog maintained by skilled photographer Chika Yoshizaki, who makes foods like oven-roasted figs look like Baroque still lifes. --T.T.

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