

From The Ground Up

Diary of a Trainee Food Stylist

Wednesday, March 14, 2012

On the Fourth Day they Ate...

So my next foray into food styling came in the shape of an editorial spread for **Country Living** magazine with photographer **Carol Dunne**. The editorial shoots are very different from the advertising and packaging shoots as the styling is slightly more relaxed and 'realistic' and it is usually focused on recipes rather than one product.

The good news here is that editorial shoots are interesting from both a styling point of view and a cooking point of view. We made six amazing dishes, one of which was a roast chicken with a thyme and garlic butter smoothed under its skin. I had never tried this before and so approached it eagerly but very tentatively. On seeing my wimpy attempt at getting under the birds skin, Sharon took the butter, grasped the chicken and demonstrated a technique similar to that used in Chinese warfare. It was shocking to see and so satisfying to do! If you thought Maggie Thatcher had thick skin you should go and shove some butter under a chickens skin.



Me and Carol taking a pic of the Chicken



Beef Noodles

So while the chicken roasted beautifully with its buttery lining going golden brown, we moved on to fresh mussels with an Asian broth. A few of the dishes had Asian flavours and even though I am confident with those ingredients, I learnt that while they can pack a punch they can also be very subtle and delicate. I had worried that chilies, garlic, ginger and lemongrass would overpower the flavour of the mussels but using coconut milk to form the broth really mellowed the intensity and worked a treat. The mussels were absolutely delicious. As were the beef with noodles and pak choi, the chicken and ham pies, the basil tagliatelle and of course, the Guinness and chocolate cake.

In fact it is here that 'good news' introduces us to its evil twin - 'bad news'. The bad news is that I ate it all. It started innocently enough, having the mussels as our lunch. With seconds and then thirds and bread. The flag went up when it was thought best to 'sample' the beef. The last thing I can remember is Sharon handing me my third slice of Guinness Cake. It had been such a fun day, lots of laughs, I had learnt a tonne and we had got all of the food cooked and styled. I should have been happy with my lot and left it at that, but no. I wanted more. I wanted to eat my work. It was indecent and unnecessary, and I will absolutely 100 % do it again.



The food before the massacre



My Nemesis



Setting the beef noodles up for the photo

WHAT I LEARNED:

A little bit about me...

Hi! My name is **Emer** and I live and work in **Dublin**, Ireland.

I am a **food lover** and have nabbed an **internship** with Class A **food stylist Sharon Hearne-Smith**.

I thought it was too greedy to keep all the tips and tricks to myself so join me for a taste (sorry!) of life behind the scenes in **Foodie Land!**

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- It may be common sense, but when making a sauce or mixture with something like butter or creme fraiche, loosen it up by beating it on its own before adding the other ingredients. This helps to keep the flavours from being 'overworked' but helps to make the mix easy to work.
- Don't pigeon hole ingredients. Stout in a chocolate cake, chilies and ginger acting subtly. Beef and noodles out about with little more than a smile and a dash of soy sauce! I had forgotten that great produce speaks for itself and even the usual punchy flavours can be modest when needs be.
- If putting flavored butter under chicken skin, son't be timid - it can take it!

Posted by **Emer Taylor** at 2:20 PM 2 comments: 

Labels: **DOMESTIC DOLLY, EDITORIAL, Food, Food Styling, SHARON HEARNE-SMITH, Styling, Tips**

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Saturday, March 10, 2012

Vegetables...The Good the Bad and the Ugly

So after a weekend in Paris where I ate my way through every Boulangerie that stood in my way, I returned to a week filled with vegetables. Similar to the steak and sausage shoot last week, this was for packaging/advertising (as opposed to editorial). Meaning that the product has to be perfect because the camera gets really close and very personal. We call the food that gets the main focus of attention 'The Hero', it's the pick of the bunch, the Angelina Jolie or George Clooney if you will (and I know you would).



Me sorting the peas



Yes, Maybe, Definitely Not

If you thought you had problems with wrinkles, bumps and lumps, spare a thought for peas and sweetcorn. If they aren't up to a stylists cut-throat standards they are literally pushed cruelly to one side. Myself and Sharon searched through mountains of peas, corn, sprouts, carrots and baby potatoes searching for Britain and Ireland's Next Top Veg. We were ruthless in the cull. Making 'Yes', 'Maybe' and 'Face only a Mother could Love' piles, we sorted through the miniature vegetables looking for our 'heroes'. Once our little caped crusaders were selected we arranged them, being meticulous in making it look like they just landed in that position - as a pea is wont to do. A splash of oil and a dash of va va voom later and we had a wrap!

So the moral of the story is - vegetables are like women, it takes a long time and a lot of work to look that natural.



Sharon blotting the peas.



Close up of the rejects. Harsh but true.



Test shots of the corn



Getting the peas ready for their close up



Lily and Zara with the 'Hero Peas'



Lily Markovic and the Leaning Tower of Carrots



Sharon, the Magic Stick and the Hero Corn. Would make a great movie.

WHAT I LEARNED THIS WEEK:

- When you're styling green vegetables always blanch never boil.
- Brush veg with water or oil to keep them looking vibrant and glossy.
- Even peas have a good side.

Posted by [Emer Taylor](#) at 10:39 AM 2 comments: [M](#) [e](#) [t](#) [f](#) [p](#)

Labels: [Advertising](#), [Packaging](#), [Styling](#), [Tips](#), [Vegetables](#)

Sunday, February 26, 2012

Styling it up - Peasant chic

Another week, another fabulous country estate... it's a hard life. We loaded up The Van with our Avoca swag and hit the road for **The Village at Lyons** where the **Irish Country Magazine** shoot was taking place. The focus of the shoot was four Irish food bloggers, **Imen McDonnell, Lorna Sixsmith, Ella McSweeney** and **Pat Whelan**. The Fantastic Four were asked to bring along some of their favourite foods, edible nostalgia to capture what home cooking means to them.



Jack and Carol taking test shots

The style brief was a picnic-y sort of vibe, or as Sharon christened it 'peasant chic'. We had the props, we had the location, we had the food. We did not have the weather. Standing shivering in the courtyard, we said goodbye to the perfect (and colossal) wooden picnic table and retreated inside to warmer climes. Luckily there just so happened to be a gorgeous conservatory that was filled with warm light (this was Carol and Jack talking, I was just glad to be indoors). We shimmied the tables into place, brought in a few garden chairs and Sharon did her magic with nothing but a table cloth and smile on her face.



Quiche and clotted cream by Lorna

This shoot was different from the first one because there was no cooking involved, which meant that I could really learn a lot about the styling process. String and brow paper were never put to such good use! You can see some of Sharon's handy work in the pictures - pears sat on pillows of hidden paper giving the appearance of abundance, flowers were hog tied in such a way that they hung lazily over the edge of the wicker basket and if in doubt, use a kilner jar.

The food that the bloggers brought was stunning (and delicious - we devoured it later on), Lorna's spotted dick looked gorgeous nestled in red gingham beside clouds of clotted cream. Pat's



Pat Whelan's brawn and pink horseradish styled up with string paper and Pat's labels.

sausage rolls were introduced to the now infamous string and brown paper. Dulse butter from Imen sat proudly beside her bread and cardamon marmalade, purple petals of dulse scattered close by. Ella had brought a leg of lamb....and a piece of the ground. Yes, an actual slice of the ground, a little mini lawn bordered by purple heather. So with health and safety in mind, the lamb was placed on baking paper and then perched on the tiny wild garden. As Ella and Pat said, this is what the lamb eats, so it's what flavours the meat. This was not all of the food, they had outdone themselves, brawn and pink horseradish, quiches, cordials, flapjacks...all scumdidlyumptious!



Imen brought Cider cordial, dulse butter and cardamon marmalade



Imen, Lorna, Pat and Ella during the shoot

The style side of the shoot was great to see but it was hilarious to see the twitterati at work, the Fantastic Four, Sharon, Yvonne the editor, even little ol' me went into social networking overdrive while Jack and Carol snapped it all up. The buzz was great, the bloggers were able to dig in to their food and share and chat which made the whole thing really dynamic.



Ella's lamb on a bed of heather

You can see the finished article in Irish Country Magazine out 29th March.

Packaging Shoot

With another successful day done, the next lesson came in the form of a packaging shoot.

The aim here is to make sure the product gets pride of place, looks extremely appetising and fits on to the available space on the package itself.

With the sausages we shaped them gently in our hands before lightly colouring them all over in a frying pan. The problem is that the skin can wrinkle easily so the heat can't get too high. Once they have been lightly fried they were transferred to the mini work station where Sharon was armed with lots of brushes and various sauces.

Browning is to sausages as fake tan is to a pasty Irish girl. Careful application and a bit of trial and error left us with a batch of delicious looking but highly inedible sausages. I hate it when my food plays hard to get.



Sharon and her sausage beauty salon



**Giving a steak a little 'nip and tuck'
- using a pin to hold a rogue section of meat in place**



Me using oil and browning to make the steak look extra tasty



**Introducing 'The Magic Stick' -
when everything is in place and your dealing with the ideal position of a crushed peppercorn, the
Magic Stick is your best friend.**

What I learned

Styling...

- Kilner jars, glass bottles, parchment paper, whatever it is, just remember that when your styling your food, packaging is everything. It's a shallow world we live in.
- Don;t be scared to add a little lift or volume using paper or card. It can give the impression of abundance and in the steak pictured above, a little card was used to keep it sitting properly.
- Always add to a plate or glass gradually. While a plate can be changed if a mistake is made, it's always easier to add to rather than take from.
- On a similar vein, NEVER through anything away with out asking everyone involved if it definitely done. You never now when someone may realise you've missed a shot or thin of a new idea.
- If you have a glass in the shot, place the glass in position and then add the liquid. This avoids tide mars on the glass that happen when you walk with it filled.
- Vary heights of objects in your photo as it adds more interest.
- If the griddle lines on your steak or bacon aren't prominent, carefully hold a metal skewer over a flame and then sear it on to the flesh. This creates a similar effect.

Recipe Testing...

- When thinking of new recipes use imagination and don't be put off if it doesn't work first time round. Make a few adjustments and try again.
- If you aren't able to think outside the box, look inside it for inspiration and put a new spin on a classic recipe. Play with flavours you like in a recipe you trust.
- And as before, when testing recipes weigh the food as often as possible and take note of it at each step. Like the old saying goes....you can never be too rich, too skinny or too eager to weigh ingredients...

Posted by [Emer Taylor](#) at 5:09 AM 2 comments: [M](#) [e](#) [t](#) [f](#) [p](#)

Labels: [Ella McSweeney](#), [Food](#), [Garrendenny Lane](#), [Imen Mc Donnell](#), [LornaSixsmith](#), [Packaging](#), [Pat Whelan](#), [Peasant Chic](#), [Picnic](#), [Styling](#), [The Village at Lyons](#), [Tips](#)

Thursday, February 23, 2012

Hello hello hello

Hello and welcome to my blog! As I wrote on the little blurb about myself I have bagged an amazing internship with a food stylist, home economist and interior whiz kid. As a food lover this is a dream come true. Days filled with shoots, prop shopping and recipe testing are up there with a candle lit dinner with George Clooney in my twisted opinion.

I am still brand new to this and already I have learned so much about what's needed if you want to deliver as a food stylist, from the tricks of the trade to the hard work and prep that every shoot requires. I am going to

document what goes on behind the scenes for a food stylist and hopefully you'll stick with me as I work my way From the Ground Up.

And so it begins...

Now please don't think I'm an unworthy sod, but when my new boss phoned me up and told me that my first day would be working on a shoot for **Catherine Fulvio**, my initial reaction was a little fearful (read terror). I watch Catherine's shows, I have her cook book, the first day on a new job is always a bit hairy but adding a celebrity chef into the mix was a touch overwhelming. My lovely boss told me to be excited, not nervous, displaying a faith in me I thought wise not to question.

Catherine met us and showed us around **Ballyknocken House**. Can I just say at this point that I am not working for or getting paid by the Fulvio team, but if you haven't been to **Ballyknocken House** you should pay it a visit. It is country chic heaven! Swings dangle from thick old trees, herb gardens make little paths through the grounds and the buildings themselves are gorgeous! But anyway, reeling back from that tangent...Sharon and the photographers, Jack Caffrey and Carol Dunne, set to work creating flower 'theatres' to house the gorgeous little raspberry mousses' (meeces?!), topped with whirly swirly meringue crowns while I got started on making the dishes we were to photograph.

I didn't click straight away onto just how much cooking is involved when you are a food stylist. That changed pretty quickly! While the recipes are provided the stylist often cooks the food you see looking all dressed up in the ads and mags. Maybe this is common knowledge but it was news to me!

When I had finished cooking I went out to help (stand and watch from a safe distance) Sharon and the photographers style the shoot. It was great seeing them play around with the flower 'theater' and various collections of crockery to show off the mousse, not to mention the savoury tarts and freshly picked salad leaves that Carol 'casually' placed on a railway sleeper draped in gingham. In fact while we're on the subject of gingham and sleepers, let me just state that while food is obviously numero uno when it comes to styling foods, props come in a close second. More on that later.



Raspberry and Lime Mousse on the Flower Theatre

So day one ended on a high, food was cooked, food was styled, food was even eaten - something that worried me. It's one thing cooking a tart and making it look appetising, it's another thing having your new boss and her colleagues eat said tart when all you can do is pray the pastry is cooked through.

We piled the props back into The Van, said goodbye to the photographers and on the way back into the city I found out that I had officially started my internship. Boom baby!



Photographers Jack and Carol in the salad garden for the Irish Country Magazine shoot.

Props...not just for Christmas.

So, day one had been a blast, I met lovely people and got to cook and help style *on location*. I wasn't entirely sure what it was like to not be on location but everyone assured me that on was better than off and I had no reason to doubt them.

The next step was to go prop hunting for an upcoming piece on Irish Food Bloggers for the March issue of Irish Country Magazine. I mentioned The Van and the props on my last post but I didn't pay them the attention they deserve. Let me make amends. The Van is Sharon's Batmobile. She is a glam chick who wouldn't look out of place in a cute and slick little runaround. Imagine my surprise when I was introduced to The Van. The name says it all really. It is a van and it is 100% necessary. If Ballyknocken hadn't demonstrated why with the railway sleepers, table and chairs and countless plates and cups, then our trip to **Avoca** did!

We arrived with a good idea of what we needed thanks to Sharon's 'Peasant Chic' vision and Carol's fab mood

boards. Sharon and I had spent the day before going through her props and picked out items that fell under the brief. That helped to strengthen the concept in our minds and show up any gaps in the props that we needed to fill.

Armed with a trolley and a desire to style, we boldly Avoca'd where no one had Avoca'd before. Blankets and baskets and cups...oh my! We debated the merits of various flasks and jugs, different heights translate well in photos. Sticking to the theme without being too 'matchy matchy' was the task at hand and you can see the result of our labour in the photo Carol took below.

The staff in Avoca were great, letting us dash upstairs for a delicious lunch of spiced chicken wraps and a cup of coffee. One conversation about horoscopes and The Secret later and we were downstairs again where our trollies full of props had been wrapped up ready for us to whisk away (on a prop loan).



Carol's snap of our trollies in Avoca

So that was my baptism into prop hunting. To say I enjoyed it would be an understatement. A legitimate reason to bulk up on colourful kitchenware and cool meets kitch home wares is all I have been waiting for.

The following day we worked from Sharon's base testing recipes. Well testing a recipe. Pancakes. Took me four hours. In my defense the pancakes were lace edged, fabulous and I may have been low on caffeine. There will be much more on my experience of recipe testing in the post to follow as we will be testing more, but let me say one thing - measure everything!

Back to props... so lace edged pancakes deserve a fitting stage and hat is exactly what they got - a lace edged cake stand. While the amount of props on this particular shoot was less than the others I had seen, Sharon has ALOT of cake stands, not to mention platter, plates, serving boards...you get the idea. This showed me just how important it is to have a good variety of props to choose from and more importantly, to pay attention to the smallest detail. It doesn't matter how gorgeous your food looks, if you want it to look snazzy in a photo then you need a keen eye and a problem with hoarding.

What I've learned so far:

- Stylists cook....ALOT!
- Food is a way of life - you have to love it to do it justice.
- Ditto for props.
- Hoarding is no longer a bad habit in my house.
- When testing recipes, weigh, measure, weigh, measure and weigh. And measure.
- As the pancake marathon taught me (and my mother actually) - If it at first you don't succeed....

Posted by [Emer Taylor](#) at 1:28 PM 4 comments: 

Labels: [Ballyknocken House](#), [Food](#), [Food Styling](#), [Internship](#), [Irish Country Magazine](#), [Styling](#), [Tips](#)

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