



Q & A with Prop and Food Stylist CHRISTINE WOLHEIM

One of the great things about writing this blog is that I get to meet and spend time with the inspired creatives in the Bay Area, especially people who seem to really love their jobs. Christine Wolheim, an effervescent and multi-talented prop and food stylist, exemplified this as she bounded around her filled-to-the-brim prop shop in a vintage aqua dress showing me her hand-made surfaces (she has a degree in painting from SFAI), her collection of just about everything kitchen related (if there were a degree for collecting she would have one) and the beautiful photos she has styled for Williams Sonoma, David Lebovitz and many others.

A huge thanks to Christine for a great visit and very fun and interesting interview and behind-the-scenes look into the worlds of prop and food styling!

POP: How did you find what seems to be the perfect job for you?

I was doing a lot of soul-searching and informational interviews and applying to schools, and in the end, I needed work and started assisting food stylists, not really thinking (or knowing) about the props aspect of it all. Then I assisted prop stylists (this is an old fashioned apprenticeship type of business), I fell in love with it and gradually went out on my own.

POP: As a prop and food stylist, what kinds of jobs do you typically work on?

I am fortunate to work on advertising, editorial and cookbooks. They all provide different opportunities and challenges. I am never bored!



POP: What is the collaborative process like between the stylist and the photographer?

It depends on the assignment. It usually starts with the client or Art Director (AD) who gives direction regarding the final look and feel of the shots or how the product needs to be shot. For instance, a magazine client recently wanted a shot of Indian Dosas with an Indian flair yet a contemporary modern feeling. Often times the client or AD will ask the photographer and stylists for ideas as well.

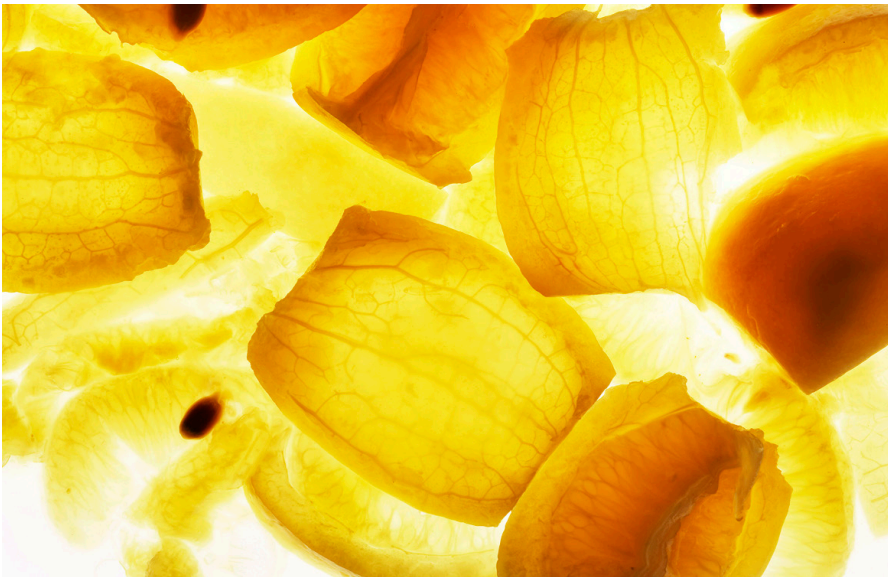
And this is why I became more interested in prop rather than food styling because the whole look and feel of the shoot is really driven by the props. It's the table (surface). It's the background. The photographer can do a lot with lighting and angle and focus and that's when the collaborative aspect really comes into play. When you're on set and you're trying to solve a particular problem right then and there, with everyone tweaking their part of it.

Denny's Ad. Photo by Sue Tallon
Final sculpture was made with quail eggs for purpose of scale

POP: What is your role in the look of the final shot?

A lot of times the art directors leave it up to us to come up with the creative ideas or solutions. But some clients have very particular needs and the AD and I work intimately on every shot.

With some jobs, there's not a client on set and it's all up to us. Those jobs sometimes pay less, (cookbooks and magazines vs. advertising) but they're more fun because you have that creative freedom. There are several books I did with Maren Caruso where we took a lot of chances and made a lot of extra, not required shots. We worked very quickly and spontaneously and I would set up a shot, and while she was taking it I was setting up the next and finding interesting, unique ways of setting up shots. Once the author/chef and the AD saw our "grab" shots, they changed the whole direction of the book.



Lemon Preserve
Example of styled grab shot.
Photo by Maren Caruso



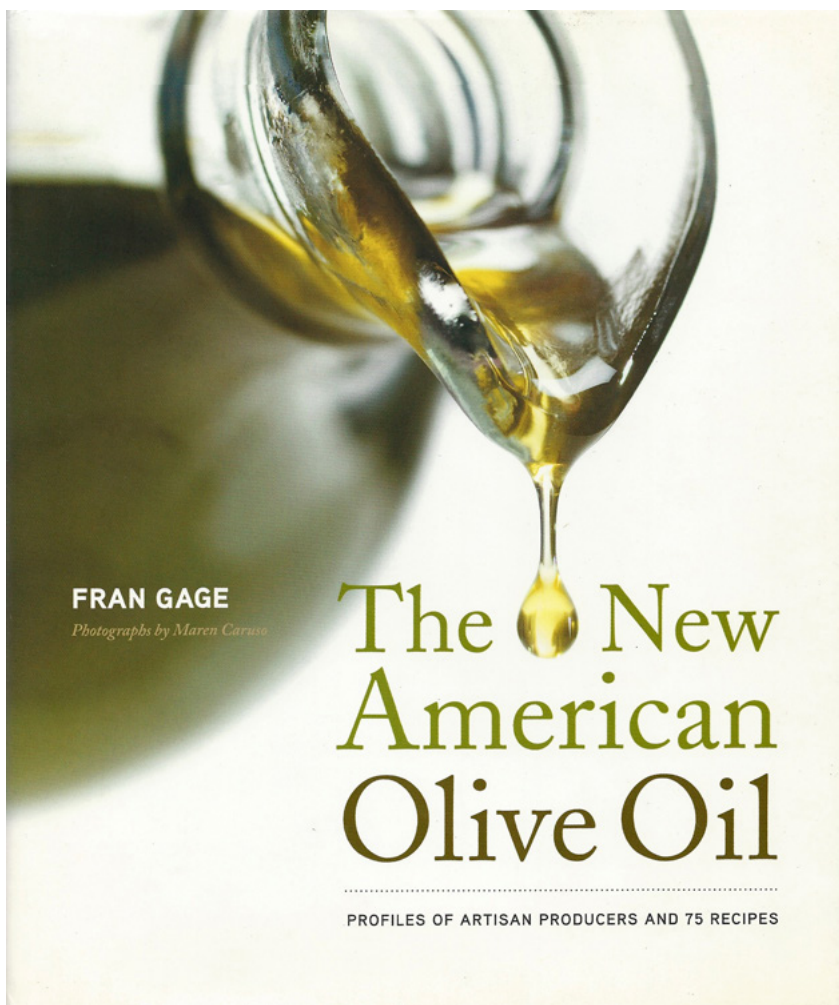
Saffron in water
Example of styled grab shot.
Photo by Maren Caruso

POP: But you've already gone out, gotten all the props, brought them to the set. The photographer trusts you, that's your job.

Yes. And that's why photographers like to work with the same people over and over again because they know their aesthetic. They know that you're going to deliver. They know that you're going to come prepared. They know your eye. And within that trusted relationship, we can push each other. But, let's say I have an idea for a particular shot that I think is going to look good. And you get it out there and you shoot it and it doesn't (look good). Or you get it out there and you show the photographer and they might not like it or just had a different feeling they wanted to convey, but hadn't communicated that in words yet. So I have to bring at least three or four scenarios for each shot. I've got to have backups. And I've got to be flexible. I might be really attached to an idea and maybe just have to let it go if every body else isn't feeling it.

POP: Are stylists getting more recognition than they used to?

I've learned to negotiate this and there does seem to be more awareness of the role of the stylist. The first book I ever did got an award. And unfortunately, there's no notation of who the stylist was in the book. So I've learned to ask for that up front and negotiate it as part of my contract. I was very green and didn't understand. It's only for people who know or care that even look at it, but being as it won an award it would be great publicity!



New American Olive Oil Cookbook.
Photos by Maren Caruso

POP: Do you still work as a food stylist?

Yes, for certain projects. For Maxim, I did this giant pastrami sandwich with photographer Sue Tallon, for Denny's I did a stacked egg sculpture. I worked on a bunch of images for Nestle re-fashioning their classic drumstick. In that case they asked us to come up with creative ideas, based on images from our portfolios, and we don't even know which one they will go with yet, so I cannot show you images.

For this book I did the food AND the props. It's challenging to do both so I had to be very ready with the props. This is a chef's chef book and David Lebovitz is very down-to-earth with his recipes so he was happy to have a kind of kitchen aesthetic.

And, that book was not heavily prop dependent. The focus is on the food and there are a lot of close-ups of the food being made and in the pan. We wanted it to look really natural and we kept it simple, kind of messy, in the kitchen. We wanted to show the process and make it more engaging. And David came on set one day and he really liked it.

When we make a book like this, we create a mock-up of the order in which each shot will be in the book. And then you go, oh wait, in this first chapter on cakes we have a green background so let's shoot the second cake on yellow. Or oh wait, we shot three things overhead for the ice cream so let's do this in little cups. It's a lot to keep 80 shots in your head and remember what you've done when you're trying to get 6 shots a day. So it really helps if you have that map on the wall.



Maxim huge pastrami sandwich.
Photo by Sue Tallon

POP: What do you like about working on cookbooks?

One of the reasons I like the cookbook projects is that I get one big budget, and it is not as restrictive as advertising. I can use my creativity to make it happen. Sometimes there is research involved. There will be a lot of variations on a theme, depending on the style direction chosen. Naturally, I have to find specific things for each project, but because I have a prop warehouse, I can pull from there and I don't have to buy everything every time. The old model for a lot of prop stylists was to buy everything, use it (or not), and return it. But these days, budgets are smaller and you have to make sure you're actually paid for your days buying and returning. For me, I just prefer just to buy less, and keep (most) the stuff I've gotten. I'm really selective.

I have a really specific look that comes from who I am as an artist, comes from my past living in Europe, comes from my past as a chef, my past as a collector. I really like things that have a texture and rustic quality to them. I can employ this personal aesthetic in cookbooks (depending on the project) whereas in advertising it is my job to deliver a requested, very specific look and feel.

I'm kind of known for my surfaces. And that's one of the things I wanted to specialize in. There are two other people in the business that rent props as well. And they have huge warehouses. But there are never enough surfaces!

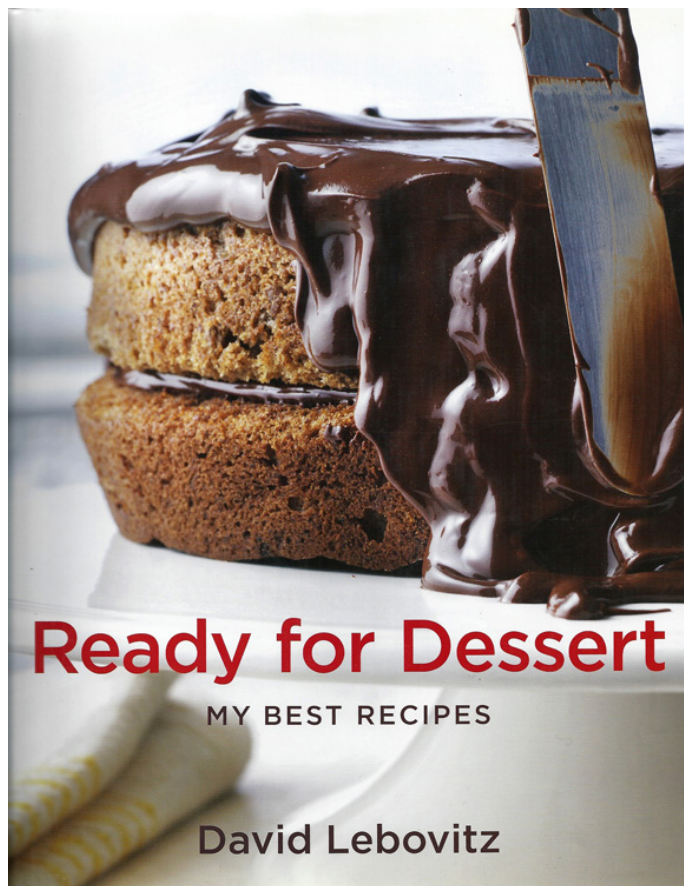
And yes, I rent out my props and surfaces (and custom make them as well).

POP: So you have backgrounds, that you've found, made, fabricated...

Yes! I brake for broken down fences. Those blue boards were my dad's porch and that made it on to the cover of a book and in another book. I have a beautiful board from the inside of a wine barrel from a salvage yard in Petaluma. I have a table someone had thrown out and I sawed the legs off.

What looks nice is 'urban organic' (laughing) the combo of the rustic with the very contemporary. Like this Astier salad plate from the South of France. This is the miracle plate. At first I thought, OMG (price tag \$72 for salad plate). But they pay for themselves over and over. Everything always looks good on this. And it's got the perfect little amount of rustic edge and it's really pretty. It has enough detail. It has a rough organic shape, it's not super shiny. It's just perfect.

You can also do a lot, a lot, with linens. I'll take a couple of linen options on set. It softens and finishes a shot. You want the props pretty but not competing with the food. So that's always a fun challenge. You want them to lend a style, ambiance without taking over.



Ready for Dessert. Photos by Maren Caruso

POP: So you're getting to do your art.

Yes! And I use my chef background and my collecting.

One of the things I like is the hunt. I go and I hunt in salvage yards and vintage stores, flea markets, and contemporary boutiques alike. And now I have a reason to buy all these things that I love. I love to go out of the city. I found a beautiful old French cutting board. I couldn't justify it for myself, but for my business... it was so great for a grilling book I just did.

I do things that are not food related but most of my work is. And this is where my chef background comes in. You really have to know what the food is going to look like when it's cooked and I (usually) do. It's really the perfect job for me. Every part of my life has come together. Some of the things I use I've had for years. I get so excited 'I finally get to use my truffle basket from Italy!' It's kind of geeking out in a stylish way, but it's really perfect for me.



Prop Shop Boards and Surfaces



I make cutting boards. I love finding the perfect indigo dyed linen from Japan. I can geek out on so many things. I get to play with textures and fabrics and different kinds of woods and trays. It's endless.

One of the reasons I love doing this and why I've always been a collector is that I'm kind of a nostalgic. I see these old treasures and I feel like I have to save them. If I see something that is so unique and even if I have no need for it—that's a one of a kind thing and I have to buy it! It's a little bit dangerous for me, having to go shopping because I find so many great things. I get to exercise that habit in a way that I've found can be profitable. Which is amazing. I have an excuse to be a collector. They're like my little babies! I get so happy when a given special object finally gets to be used!

You'll notice that all of the plates are this salad size. You know how everything looks bigger in photography? When you shoot this, it looks like a dinner plate. Also, you don't want to have this big expanse of plate around the food. You want it to fill up the plate. So most often we use salad-size plates and small glassware. And same for silverware and the things that go around the food. You want it to be small, smaller than normal.

I've also had things custom made for me by a potter. I use them a lot. It feels a little bit hippy-ish in real life, but it doesn't shoot like that. Urban chic, natural. A little bit soft.

One of the attributes of a good stylist is knowing what three-dimensional object is going to look good in a two-dimensional photograph.

POP: So in a sense you're creating a painting.

Exactly. I think my back ground as a painter is how I actually came to this. I think that I'm actually painting with three-dimensional objects that are then going to end up in a two-dimensional photograph. (painting) And I am not alone in a studio all day long. I'm working on fun and different projects all the time with many people who are now my friends.





POP: So what great projects are coming up?

We're renting a house in Portland for a cocktail shoot for Imbibe magazine (they're based in Portland). We're going to be making the cocktails all day and going out all night. I am shooting it with the talented Sheri Giblin. It's not going to be any fun at all. I just hate my job. (smiles)

That's one of the things about my job. A lot of good food, good drinks. Good people.