



THE **STYLISTA**

Renowned food stylist Denise Vivaldo has been making food photogenic for years now. You've probably spotted her work on TV shows, infomercials, movies, magazines, and cookbooks. So what does she do exactly? ANGELO COMSTI signed up for her recent food styling class in Singapore to find out.

Photography by Lester Ledesma (Singapore) and Patrick Martires (Manila)
To know more about Denise, visit www.denisevivaldo.com



MEET DENISE

What does it take to be a professional food stylist? Denise Vivaldo tells us all about how she got her styling career off the ground—and how you can do it too.

How exactly did you get into food styling? What sparked your interest?

Aaron Spelling came to one of my parties. I was a chef in Hollywood then. He put me to work on several of his TV shows. I had also seen food stylists working at a local magazine and thought, “I could do that.” I would copy their cover shots by practicing.

Where did you train for this kind of work? Who would you count as your mentors?

I had several mentors. Maggie Waldron, who ran Ketchum in San Francisco, told me to stick with it because I had a little talent for it. She gave me the confidence to go on. Kit Snedaker, a local newspaper editor, also inspired me. “Kid, just put one foot in front of the other and keep moving,” she said. My training was in the trenches.

Are there a lot of food stylists in the US? How hard was it to get noticed and land a project?

I don't know how many stylists there are in the US. In LA, there are about 20, but only five of us get most of the work. I have styled and contributed to about 30 cookbooks; many of them have been on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list. Each great project generates another one.

How do you define food styling? Does one need to be a chef to be an effective food stylist?

Food styling is preparing media food or food that looks good for the camera, be it still or video work. Being a chef made me understand how food reacts under the lights and camera direction. Food stylists are food salesmen. We create appeal visually.

Tell us about some of the toughest projects you've worked on so far.

The hardest projects come from the clients since the food doesn't talk and the clients do. I've worked for a lot of celebrities. They are

often demanding and spoiled and that makes for a long day.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a food stylist?

The advantage is that I love it—and after 25 years, I can still say that. The disadvantage? Most of my clothes have food stains!

What does it take to be a food stylist?

Experience, guts, and confidence—like most jobs you want to do well in life. I've always believed in following the adventure and trying to make the most out of every day. Food styling is going global and thus there will be more opportunities for food stylists. The interest in food will continue to grow. Food and eating together is the glue our planet needs to fill in the cracks.

What's next for Denise Vivaldo?

I have three more books coming out. I've written four books of my own. I love the creative process of starting with an idea and building a cookbook. I've been asked to consider several TV concepts for a show for me. None have appealed enough for me to make that kind of commitment. It would have to be fun. I'm grateful for each day in my career as I learned early in life to enjoy the ride.

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HER WORK

These two dishes, Angry Shrimp Pasta and Spinach Salad were styled by Denise with Cindie Flannigan for *The Date Night Cookbook*. Want to see more of her work? Pick up Denise's new books, *Do it for le\$\$! Weddings* and *Do it for le\$\$! Parties*.



PROFESSIONAL FOOD STYLING 101

The secret's out! Denise shows us how she does her work using some of the most popular items photographed for books, magazines, and advertisements. See how pros shape the perfect picture.

POULTRY

- 1 Choose a bird with a nice, full shape; preferably organic.
- 2 Pull flap of skin down and under bird. Secure with pins or sew shut. Using kitchen twine, secure the legs close to the body. Tuck wings under if that style is called for.
- 3 Spray bird with cooking oil and place on a greased baking sheet. Bake in the oven at 350°F for about 30 minutes, depending on size. Skin should start to get a tightened look. Remove bird from oven and let cool.
- 4 Paint chicken with Kitchen Bouquet, a bottled cooking condiment that functions as a browning agent (*available at The Landmark*). Continue until desired color is achieved.
- 5 Layer light coats of color on the bird rather than paint it with a single dark coat. Coating it lightly with paprika or torching it also helps.



BURGER

- 1 Use the fattest ground meat available. Place hamburger patties on a tray lined with wax paper and place in freezer until well-chilled but not frozen solid, about 40 minutes. Cook semi-frozen patties on a well-seasoned grill or a nonstick cooking surface. Cook until a nice brown color is reached. Use a torch to add extra color. Place on tray and adjust color with Kitchen Bouquet and water. Cover lightly with plastic wrap until ready to use. Burgers will hold for 30 to 45 minutes.
- 2 For the buns, spray the inside surface of buns with a fabric protector like Scotch Guard to keep them from soaking up the condiments.
- 3 Build a burger by placing curly leaf lettuce on a bun. Add the patty. Follow with a slice each of cheese, onion, and tomato. Cover with the "crown" or the top bun. This order may vary.
- 4 Condiments are added with a syringe, eye dropper, or squeeze bottle. This is usually done when the burger is in front of the camera.

ICE CREAM

- 1 In an electric mixer with the paddle attachment, beat together 1 pound powdered sugar and 1 cup shortening until smooth, about 10 minutes. Add cornstarch as needed to adjust consistency.
- 2 Food color should be added at the start. Always add a small amount of color then let it completely incorporate into the fake ice cream before adding more.
- 3 For realistic looking drips, use white toothpaste colored with food coloring.
- 4 For the chocolate topping, mix chocolate fudge sauce with chocolate sauce. Or keep the topping of choice chilled and spoon on at the last minute.



NOW IT'S YOUR TURN...

What can a home cook learn from a professional food stylist? Try these handy tips from Denise.

Explore fresh herbs as garnish on any food

An example: Mint leaves on ice cream will add freshness to the dessert. You can also place sprigs of fresh rosemary beside a whole roasted chicken or leaves of fresh basil atop puttanesca pasta.



Use simple plates for food presentation

Think of white as a canvas. A busy patterned plate will look messy, not pretty. That's why many of the top restaurants you visit stick to white, as it lets you appreciate the food more. The fancier the plate, the more the attention is taken away from the dish itself.



Think about contrasting colors when cooking

That beef stew needs bright orange carrots or roasted red tomatoes as a side dish. Bland-colored fried calamares can be made more visually interesting with splashes of yellow from lemon wedges on the side. Or try a drizzle of sour cream on tomato soup.



Develop different textures

Think about offering your guests a layered experience. If you're serving creamy soup, for example, garnish it with crispy croutons. Other ideas: Top a dish of ice cream with crunchy, roasted nuts; sprinkle herbs on a pool of sauce; or dust confectioners' sugar on lemon bars.



Light candles at dinner

Everything looks better in candlelight! No need to spend much on this easy upgrade. Simple candlesticks or votives will do. In fact, avoid scented candles so they don't interfere with the smell—and taste—of the food.



It's all in the kit!

At any shoot, professional food stylists are always spotted lugging around a large toolbox. It may look like it holds screwdrivers, nuts, and bolts, but it's really a treasure chest of nifty, dual-purpose gadgets, including these 10 essentials.



- **1 SCISSORS** In all sizes for different jobs • **2 BRUSH** Paintbrushes in all sizes for oil, color, etc. •
- **3 TWEEZERS** To handle small pieces of food • **4 SMALL SQUEEZE BOTTLE** For controlling sauces, condiments, etc. • **5 TORCH** For controlled browning • **6 COTTON BUDS** For cleaning up mess • **7 PETROLEUM JELLY** To use as food glue • **8 MAKEUP SPONGE** To create height, use the sponges to elevate food • **9 PAPRIKA** For added color • **10 SPRITZER WITH WATER** To create freshness