



Maximum Workflow | BY SEAN MCCORMACK

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY WITH EXPOSURE X4

Food. Our fuel. Something we find both necessary and appealing. Catching the mouth-watering sensation when you look at food and savor it before taking that first bite is what good food photography is all about. You want to have the visual appeal, but you also want to create hunger for the subject.

Good food photography is very much about styling and lighting. That light can be natural or artificial, though the latter definitely expands your options for shooting when the sun is down. And, as we head into winter in the northern hemisphere, artificial lighting is a necessity. Styling isn't just the thing we do to make the food look more appealing; it's also about the setting the food is in. A plate on a table by itself looks lost and not particularly appetizing, but add some cutlery, napkins, and elements used in the creation of the dish, and your scene is elevated.

Now, I'm not a chef. I can bake bread and make buttercream icing and, of course, I can knock out basic food to survive, but I'd never call myself a cook, though, that's on my agenda. I do, however, really enjoy shooting food. In some ways, I put off food photography because I have a friend who's a world-class food photographer. I felt like I couldn't compete; but then I realized that I didn't have to feel that way because, even if we had the same plate of food in front of us, we'd shoot it completely differently.

THE EQUIPMENT

Generally speaking, any recent DSLR or mirrorless body will be adequate gear. Either a 50mm or 100mm macro (full-frame equivalent) should be enough to get you started. Primes are a better option because you're often looking for shallow depth of field. A constant aperture zoom of f/2.8 in a lens will work too, but it's often more expensive.

Personally, I'm using a **FUJIFILM X-T2** with the 35mm and the 60mm Macro. For the following shots, I used the 60mm. In order to capture the scene, I used a tripod to lock off my camera position. With shallow depth of field, even the slightest movement can make you lose your focal point, so it's better to have the camera position fixed.

To ensure that I have the shot I want, I shoot tethered. Alien Skin recently updated Exposure to version **X4**, which now includes a Monitor Folder option that will watch a folder for updates. Combined with the camera maker's tethering software (X Acquire from Fujifilm in my case), this is a good option for nailing the shot. A laptop is great for keeping the set tight, but on larger shoots, a whole production station can be used.

SETTING THE SCENE

If you're just shooting for yourself at home for Instagram, food blogging, or even shooting for Adobe Stock, you'll need a way to create a variety of backdrops and surfaces. This can mean having loads of space taken up with various different tabletops and walls. There's another option, though. I found wonderful double-sided backgrounds on eBay for round \$8 each. I bought a few to give me a variety of options for my shoots. They've also come in handy for camera and product shots for website reviews and for clients.

Props: Just as with other genres, such as newborn photography, it's all about the props. If you get into food photography, you'll find yourself buying all manner of plates, interesting cutlery, napkins, and ingredients to scatter about your set. I'll often include ingredients as part of the scene. It's all about creating interest. It becomes a habit, and you end up buying stuff all the time to supplement your food styling kit!



The setup



Double-sided backdrops

LIGHTING

Diffused window light is really all you need. Optimally, the light needs to be positioned somewhere between the back and the side of the food—anywhere in that line will generally look good. Lighting from the front looks really flat and never particularly appealing. You need to use the light to create shape and shadow and give texture to the food, a key element in arousing taste buds.

For artificial light, you have two options: continuous or strobe (flash). Continuous could be something like the **Westcott Spiderlights** or **Flex LEDs** with diffusion. The beauty of these is that there's no guessing what the light might look like. What you see is what you get, especially with live view on camera.

For this shoot, I'm using a PIXAPRO PIKA200, which is a rebadged Godox AD200. Shot with the bare bulb, it works

like a studio monobloc, but without the modeling bulb or the wire! To get that big soft light akin to window light, I'm using a 6' shoot-through umbrella. The final addition is a white card to bounce light back from the other side. To set the power, I often use a light meter, but not always. By checking the screen and histogram, I can change the power to suit. If it's too bright, turn down the power; if it's too dark, turn it up. Easy.

TIPS & TRICKS

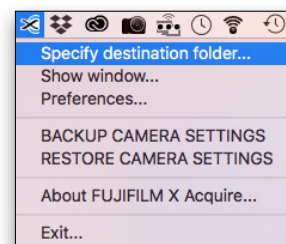
What you see isn't quite what you have. There's a whole wealth of tips and tricks to make the food look better, such as using makeup sponges to raise or angle the food, or using pins/toothpicks to hold salads in place under a bun or bread. To fill out a bowl, put another smaller bowl in the center upside down, and build the dish around it. Use heat guns

to melt cheese, or even brown food. Keep spritzers on hand to add water droplets to salads. Using a mix of water and glycerin helps to keep the drops from evaporating. This works for bottles too.

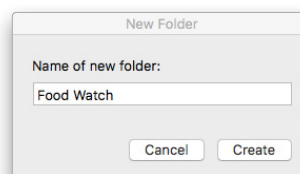
SHOOTING

Once you've plated and set your scene, it's time to get shooting.

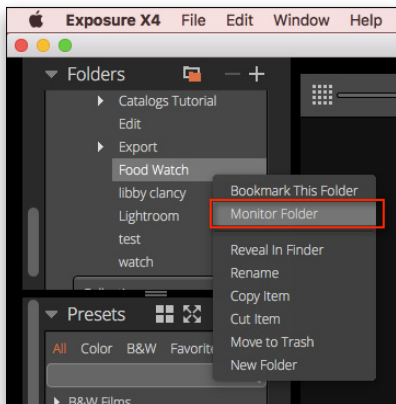
Step One: Using your camera tethering software, select your destination folder. For FUJIFILM, choose Specify Destination Folder in the X Acquire menu.



Step Two: Enter a folder name and remember it for the next step.



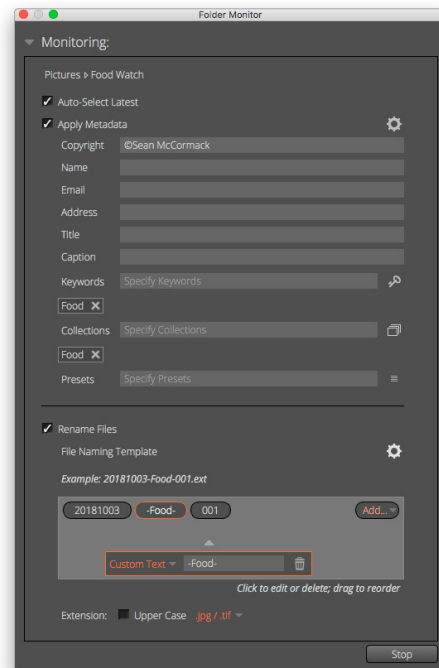
Step Three: In Exposure X4, Right-click on that folder in the Folders panel, and choose Monitor Folder.



Step Four: This will bring up the Folder Monitor dialog. In this dialog you can set up a series of things that happen on ingest:

- Auto Select Latest: This shows the most recent photo after it comes in.
- Apply Metadata: Adds information of your choice to the file. This is great for copyright, and you can save it as a preset to add the same metadata to other shoots. You can add keywords and add images to a collection. There's also a Presets option where you can create a series of virtual copies with presets applied.

- Rename Files: Change the file from the camera file-name to one of your choosing.

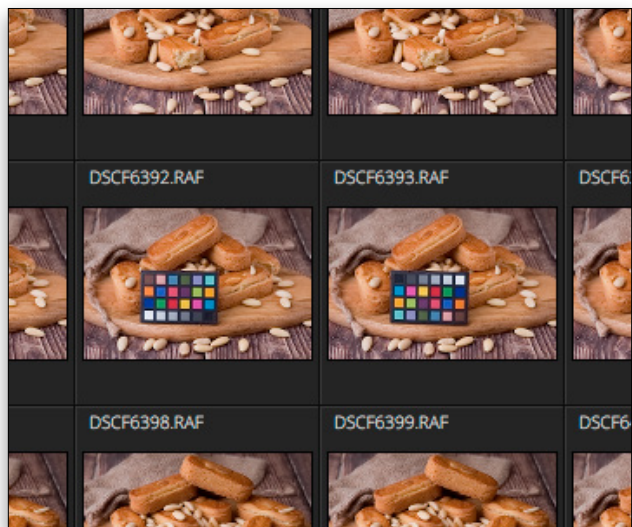


Step Five: I recommend using Auto Select Latest, so that as you shoot, the file shows up on your computer and you get to make changes based on a large preview vs. the small on-camera preview. It's absolutely the single most photo-improvement method I know. It's based on years of getting



files back to the computer and going, “Why didn’t I...?”. Now you can make the necessary changes as you go, and know you’ve nailed the shot.

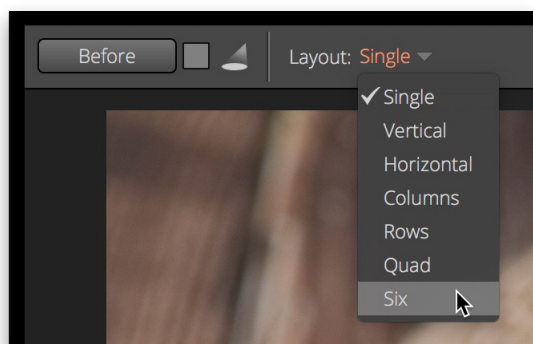
Step Six: For white balance, I shot with a color checker card. This is an older one from before X-Rite took over Gretag-macbeth. I do have a ColorChecker Passport in the studio as well.



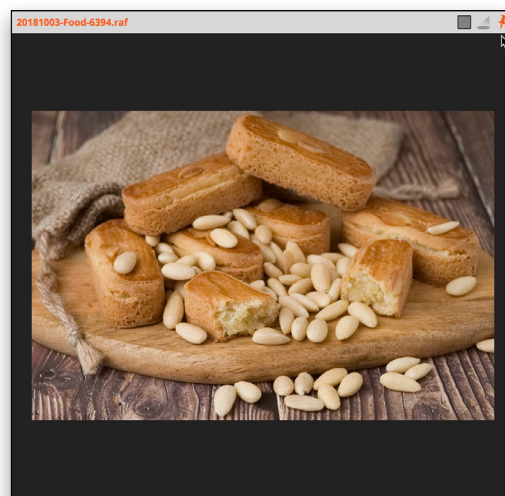
Step Seven: Because I’m working on this article on my iMac rather than the MacBook Air, I transferred the files across from my laptop. Note that if you copy over the folder, it contains a subfolder called Alien Skin. This folder contains all the data that’s applied in Exposure and acts like a catalog. Keeping this folder intact makes your work transportable, so don’t delete it.

MAKING SELECTS

Step One: Exposure has a number of great tools for making selections (picking your best images). I like to view the images six up when I can. In this new version of Exposure, Alien Skin bumped up the maximum from a quad view to a six-up view—a great addition for me.



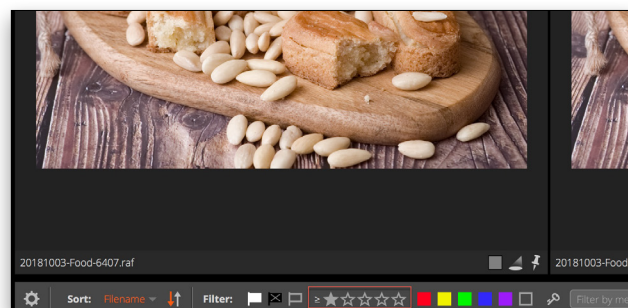
Step Two: Once you’re in the six-up view, you can pin your current favorite using the pin icon to the right of the filename.



Step Three: From there, you can arrow through the photos and pin more images if you require. When you get to the last photo, pressing the arrow will jump the photos by the number of unpinned photos.

As well as pinning images, you can set star ratings as you go by pressing 1–5, or Reject images using the – (minus) key and Pick images using the = key. Color labels can be set with 6–9. Also use these to help you make selections.

Finally, use the filters on the bottom to view the selects you’ve made. Repeat the process as much as you need to get the final edits.



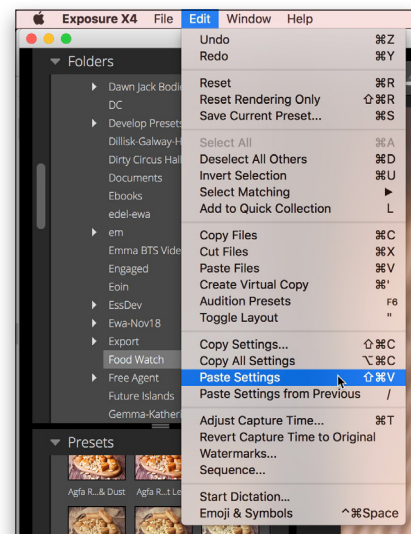
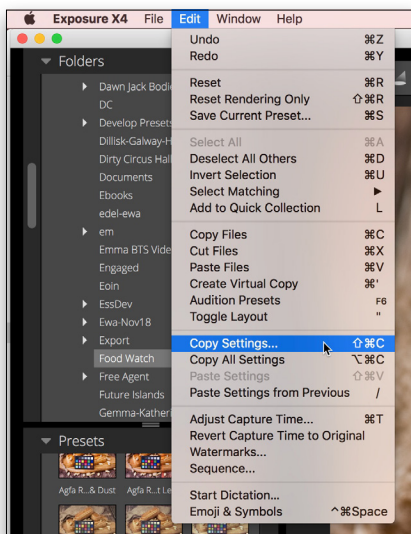
EDITING

Step One: The first step is to use the color checker to set the white balance. In the Basic panel, click on the Eyedropper. As you hover over each of the gray swatches, the Temp and Tint sliders update and the image preview changes to reflect the settings under the Eyedropper. Select the one that you think looks best. While accurate white balance is essential for those things that rely on an exact color, for food, pleasing trumps accurate.



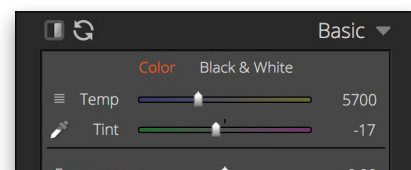
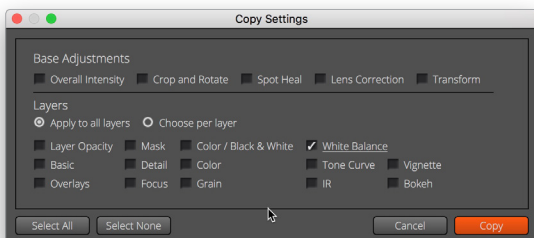
Step Two: To copy the white balance settings to other photos from the shoot, select Copy Settings from the Edit menu.

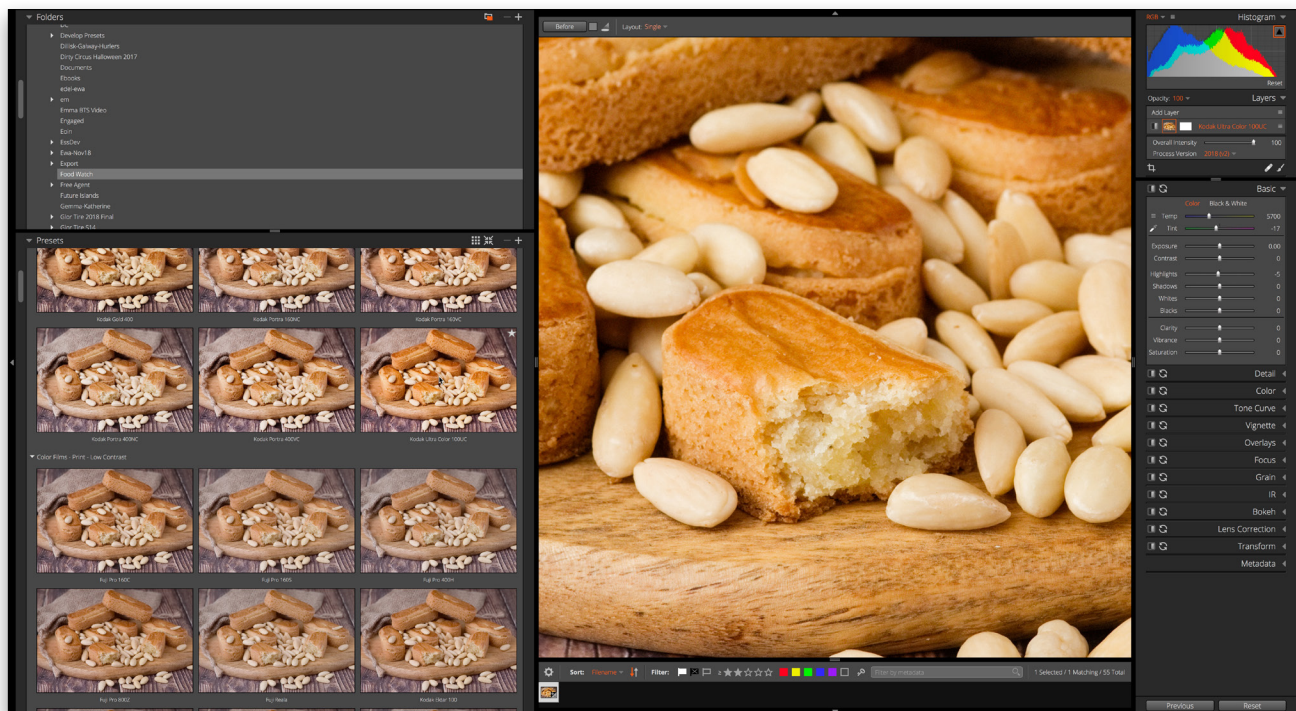
Step Four: Move to the photo to which you want to paste the settings, and from the Edit menu, select Paste Settings.



Step Three: From the dialog that appears, click Select None, check White Balance, and click the Copy button.

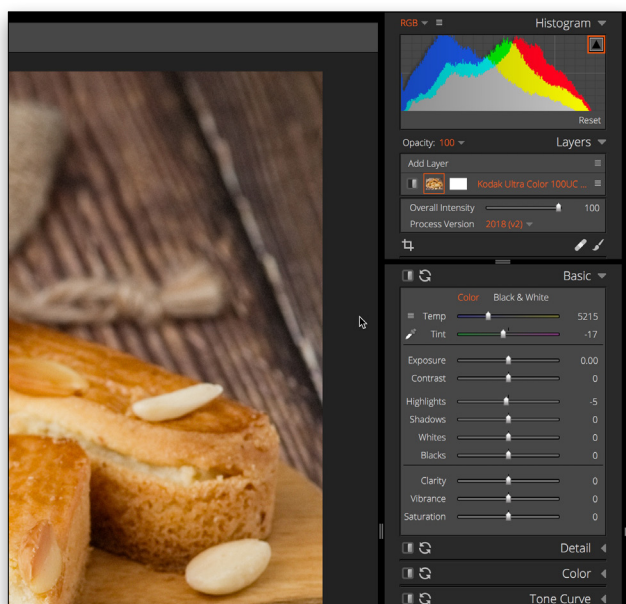
Step Five: When I looked at the image, I felt that the white balance was actually too warm. It's partly because of the tones in the photo being naturally warm, so I changed the Temp to 5700.





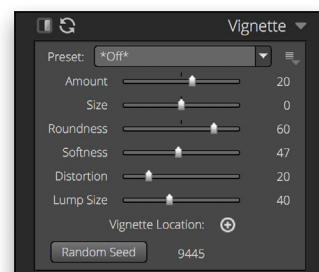
Step Six: For the next part, drag the handle on the right side of the left panels toward the center to expand the Presets panel so you can see larger thumbnails. Clicking on the little grid icon will toggle between list and one, two, or three thumbnails per row.

Step Seven: I quite like the color and contrast in the Kodak Ultra Color 100UC preset found in the Color Films - Print set. As you hover over a preset, the main window updates to show how it looks. The preset added more warmth, so it's time to cool it down again to 5215.



Step Eight: Because the colors in the photo are all from the same part of the spectrum, we need a way to focus attention.

While I've used a shallow depth of field in-camera, I need to do more. Using the Vignette panel, first set the Amount, click the plus icon to the right of Vignette Location, and then click on the image to set the center of the vignette. In this example I clicked on the front broken finger in the image and set the final Amount to 20.



Step Nine: The next step is to sharpen. In the Focus panel, I set Amount to 20 and Threshold to 15.74.

Step 10: From there it's on to the Tone Curve panel. I lifted the blacks, but retained the contrast.

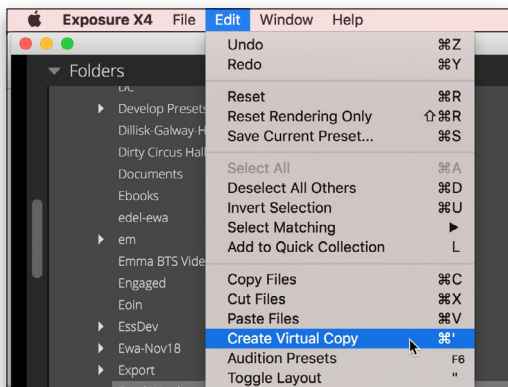




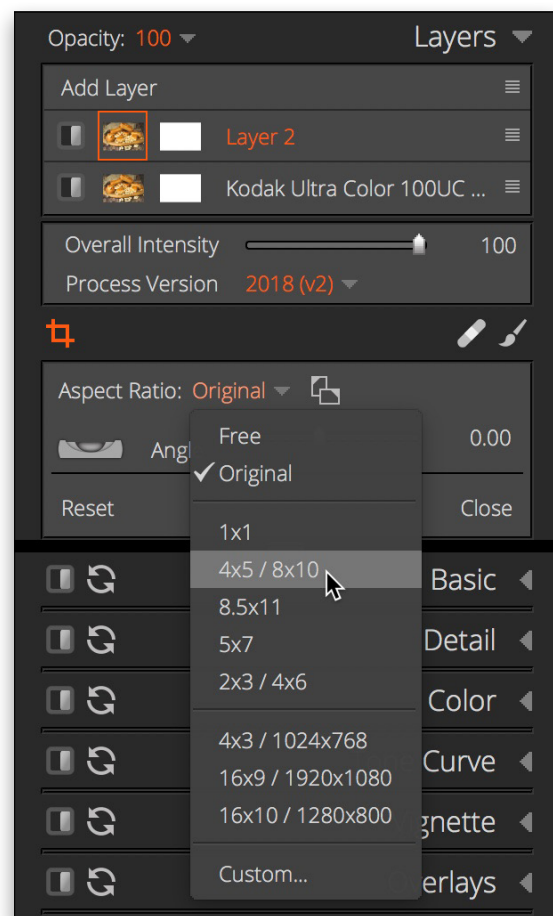
Step 11: I'm happy with this look, but out of curiosity, let's see what other presets might look like on this photo. From the Layers panel, choose Add Layer. This keeps all your current settings intact.

Step 12: Click on the little spotlight icon above the top left of the image to open Audition Presets. (Note: If you don't see the options above the image, click the disclosure triangle above the center of the image.) Use the Layout drop-down to choose alternate view options, and then drag-and-drop presets from the Presets panel. You can compare up to six different presets.

Step 13: Of these four, I like the bottom left the most. I reckon it'd make a great Instagram post, but I'd need to do a 4x5" crop on it. First, choose Create Virtual Copy from the Edit menu.



Step 14: The Crop tool is at the bottom of the Layers panel. Click the icon, and from the Aspect Ratio drop-down menu, choose 4x5.





Step 15: Finally, I applied the Kodachrome 35mm - Faded (cyan) preset that I liked earlier when I was auditioning presets.

To see how far you've come, click the box beside the Before button and choose one of the Before/After split views.

I love the feel in this final image and the ease with which it was achieved in Exposure X4. ■

