

# CREATING SMARTPHONE FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY THAT LOOKS DELICIOUS

By Kent DuFault

Food photography is popular with all photographers, but smartphone photographers seem to have a particular affinity toward this genre.

Who amongst us hasn't snapped some shots of a meal we are about to devour?

Food preparation often entails creativity on the part of the chef. It's their job to make the food look and taste appealing.

Transferring that appeal from personal experience into a photo that appeals to an audience can be difficult.

In this creativity prompt, we will discuss the most common issues with smartphone food photography and how to overcome them.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/lPysOZXRwus>

Image 001 - Photography by Nika Benedictova



Image 002 – Photograph on the (l) by Jennifer Pallian and photograph on the (r) by Kent DuFault

<https://unsplash.com/photos/X2gM-SIufpU>

*The photograph on the left has several problems as compared to the photograph on the right. Let's look at them more closely. Right photo: iPhone 6 Plus and processed in Snapseed, InstaFlash Pro, and TouchRetouch.*





Image 003 – Photograph by Jennifer Pallian  
<https://unsplash.com/photos/X2gM-SIufpU>

- 1 Highlights are blown out, leaving no detail in the white areas of the marshmallows and foam.
- 2 The spoon is out of focus.
- 3 There is a bright area in the background that pulls attention away from the subject. It offers no value to the overall shot.
- 4 There is a lack of attention to detail with a speck of something lying on the table.
- 5 There is a lack of attention to detail with a speck of something left in the frame's upper-right corner.
- 6 The dense blacks in the chocolate are unappealing.
- 7 A background object pulls attention away from the food.
- 8 A low camera angle emphasizes the cup more than the food.

Now compare that evaluation to the photograph on the right side of Image 002.



Image 004 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

- 1 There is detail in all of the white highlight areas.
- 2 There is detail in all of the shadow areas.
- 3 It has a simple, unobtrusive background.
- 4 There is the purposeful placement of powdered sugar on the background while eliminating any dust, dirt, hairs, or other non-purposeful objects.
- 5 A slightly elevated angle of view accentuates the food over the bowl.
- 6 All areas of the food, wand, and bowl are in focus. The background is slightly out of focus.

**Important:** Image 004 was created with an iPhone 6 Plus and edited in Snapseed. You can create a pro-level food photograph with a smartphone camera when you plan your shot and execute it with a keen eye for detail.



#### Assignment:

Create a photograph that mimics the subjects of Image 002. Choose the food that you wish to photograph. Select a bowl or cup as a supporting prop. Pick some background materials. Create your set near a window that has indirect lighting – no direct sunlight. Create several small light reflector cards. You can easily do this with cardboard painted white or tape white sheets of paper to it.

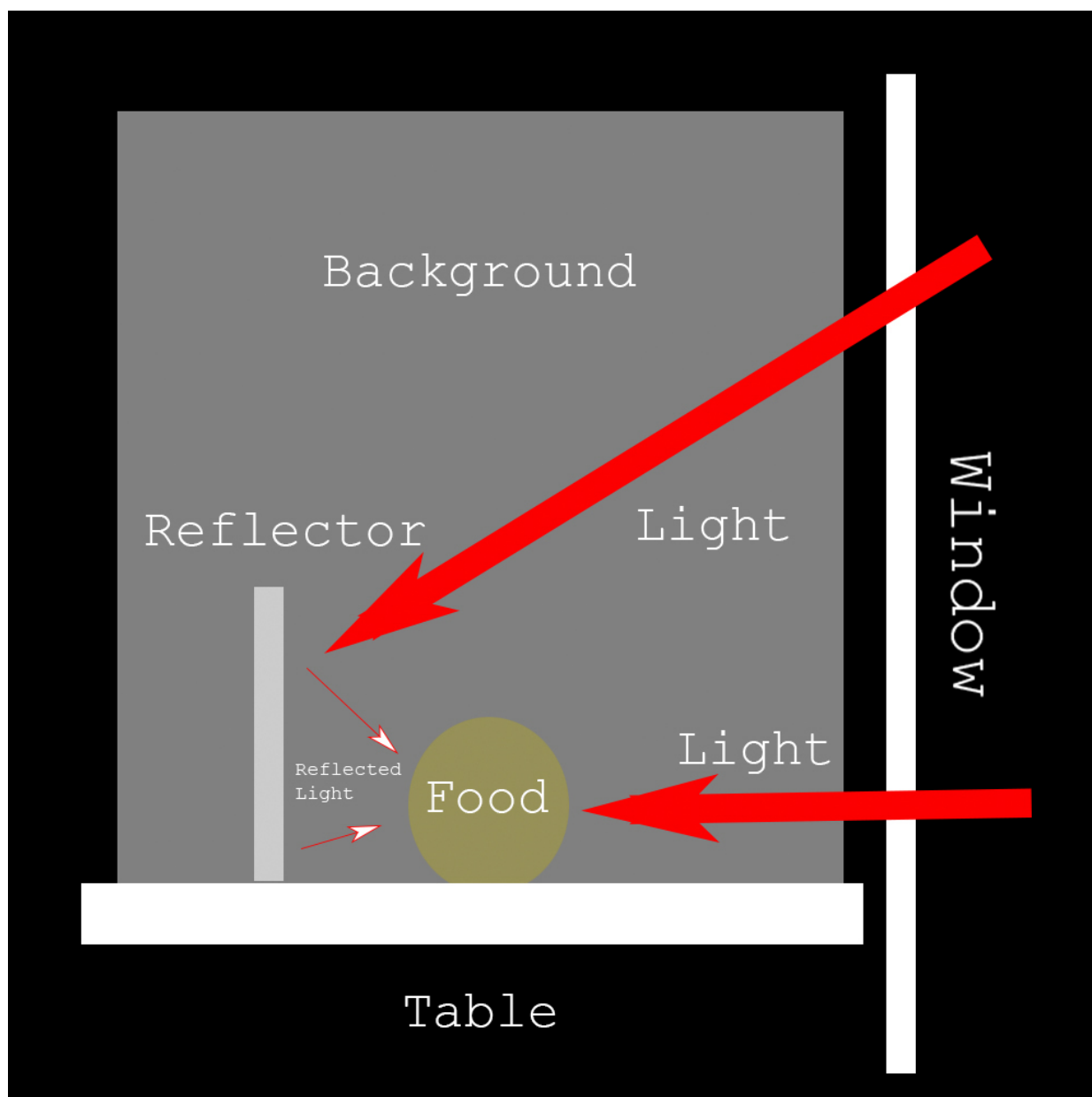


Image 005 - Illustration by Kent DuFault

Keep these points in mind:

- 1 Use soft, even lighting from a window (no direct sunlight).
- 2 The food is in focus, and the background is slightly out of focus. You can do this with your smartphone by using a shooting app. I use the Focos app for the iPhone. Do an Internet search for the best phone app to create minimal depth of field and you'll see numerous options to select.
- 3 Keep the areas surrounding your food clear of anything you don't intend to be in the picture. Notice the details.
- 4 Use a slightly elevated camera position. Remember, food is the subject.





Image 006 – Photograph and editing by Kent DuFault

*Anywhere that you take food photography with your smartphone camera, you should consider the lighting. The provided light in restaurants, grocery stores, and food markets can often create an odd color tint. Food doesn't look desirable if it has a green, yellow, blue, or red hue. This image was taken on an iPhone 6 Plus and processed in Snapseed and Adobe Photoshop.*

The left side of Image 006 has a corrected color palette. The right side is the original camera file taken in a grocery store while using the auto white balance setting.

**Note:** My color correction steps shown here are only shown as an example. You will need to research and sort out how to color correct using your particular software and equipment. The goal of these next steps is to illustrate how to judge white balance. Most photo editing software has an auto white balance adjustment. I find that the auto setting rarely works well for food.



### Assignment – Part 1:

Visit your local food market or grocery store. Take a variety of photos with your smartphone. Try different locations that are under different types of lighting. Remember to frame your images tight, showing only the food.

When you get home, sort out your best frames, and now, we'll color correct.





Image 007 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

*This photo of bread was taken in the deli section of my local grocery store using an iPhone 6 Plus and an auto white balance setting.*

The color of Image 007 is not very appealing. There is an excess of green, blue, and cyan.

**Note:** You will hear the terms color balance and white balance. If you're a bit confused by it, you're not alone. Both terms discuss

the 'color' of your image. Both tools can correct color problems. I generally refer to white balance when talking about the camera settings and color balance when discussing post-processing adjustments.

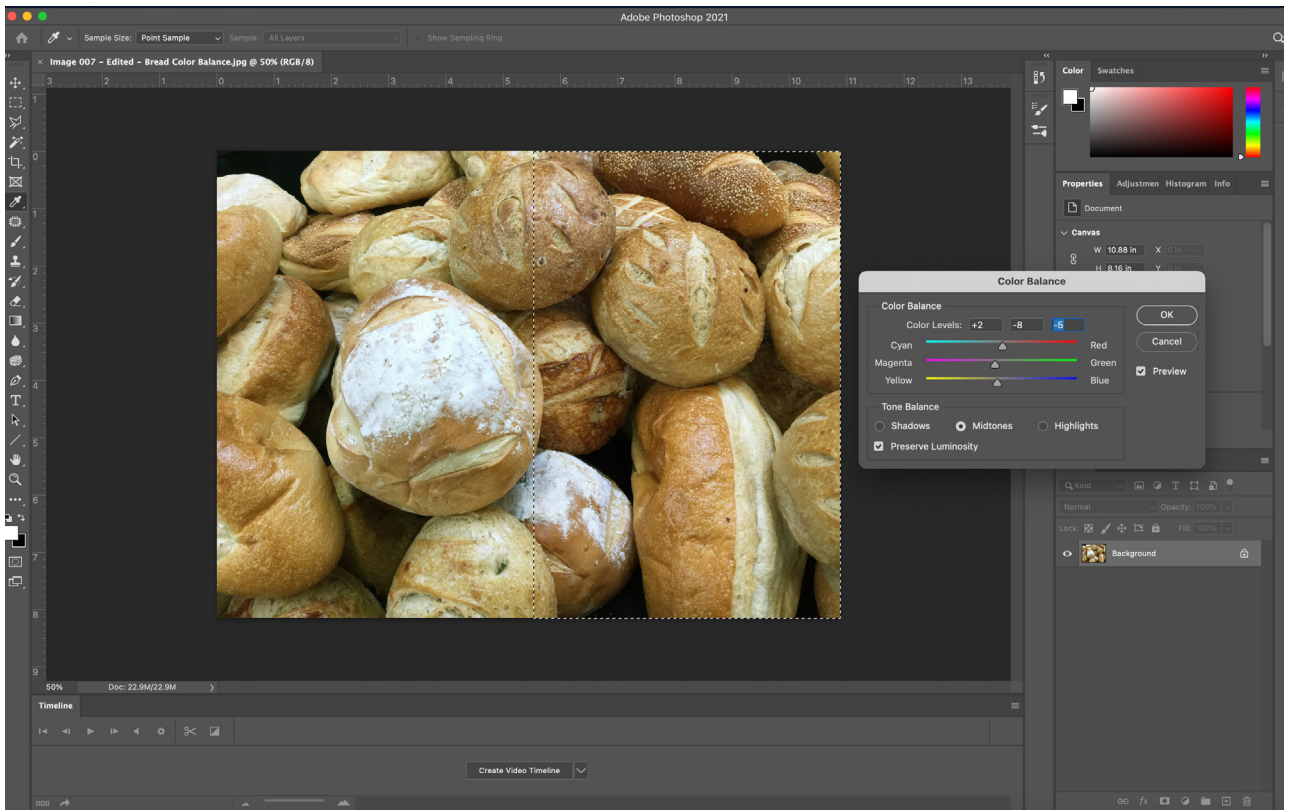


Image 008 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

*I'm going to color correct using the Photoshop Color Balance tool.*

I always start my color balance adjustments with the Midtones.

**Critical Point:** If your eyes tell you that the photo has too much blue, you should add yellow. If you see too much green, you should add magenta. If you see too much cyan, you should add red. And the opposite would be true as well. If there is too much yellow, you should add blue. Too much green, you should add magenta. Too much red, you should add cyan.

**Key Thought:** In Photoshop, I select half the picture. I then make my adjustments to see

how my corrections look sitting next to the original. When I'm satisfied, I write down the settings, cancel out of the Color Balance tool, deselect, and apply them to the entire picture.

**Note:** Looking at Image 008, you will notice that I began my corrections with the Midtones. I always correct the Midtones first, followed by the Shadows, and finally the Highlights.

In Image 008, you will see that I added +2 Red, -8 Magenta, and -5 Blue.



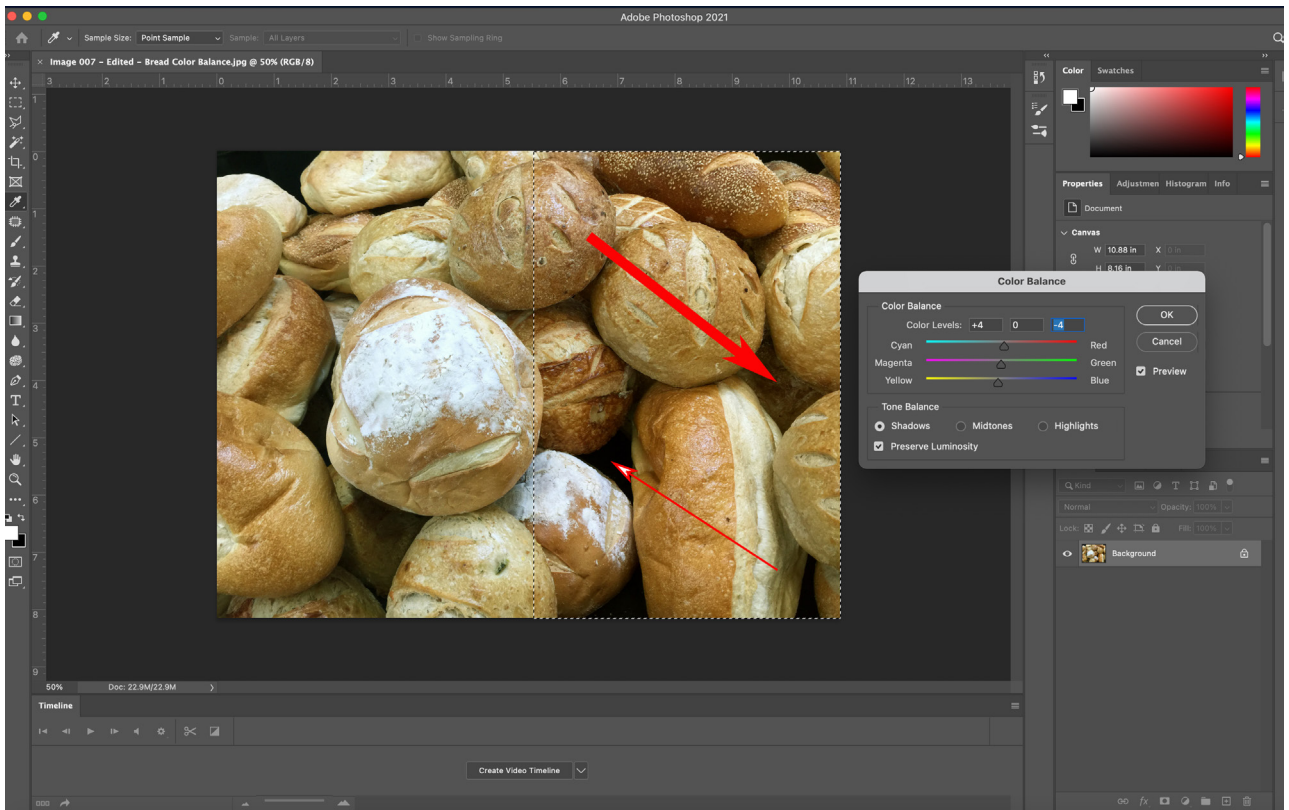


Image 009 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

*Next, I will adjust the color balance of the shadows.*

When correcting the color balance of the shadows, pick a spot to observe your correction where there is still a fair amount of visible detail.

In Image 009, the spot you would want to observe is the larger red arrow. The smaller

arrow points to a shadow area that is too dark to watch for color correction.

The corrections for the Shadows were +4 Red and -4 Yellow.

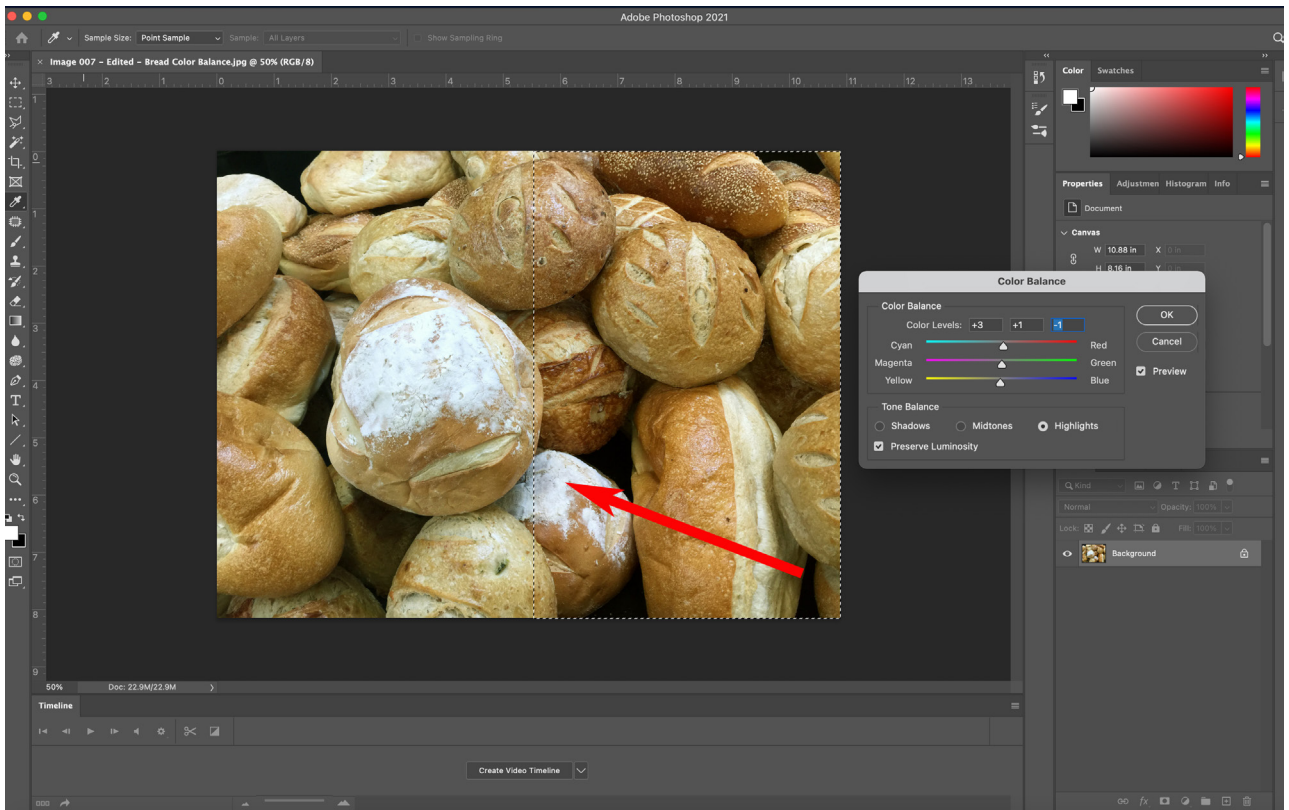


Image 010 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

*The final stage of color correction is the Highlights.*

The red arrow in Image 010 indicates where I'm observing as the correction is made.

Now, I will exit out of the Color Balance box, unselect the right half of the picture, go back to the Color Balance box, and apply them across the entire image.



Image 011 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

*On the left is the original image file and on the right is the color corrected version.*

**Critical Thought:** Notice that none of the corrections were more than + or – 5 points. Unless your color is way off in color, you should rarely need to correct further than that. Be careful not to over-correct.



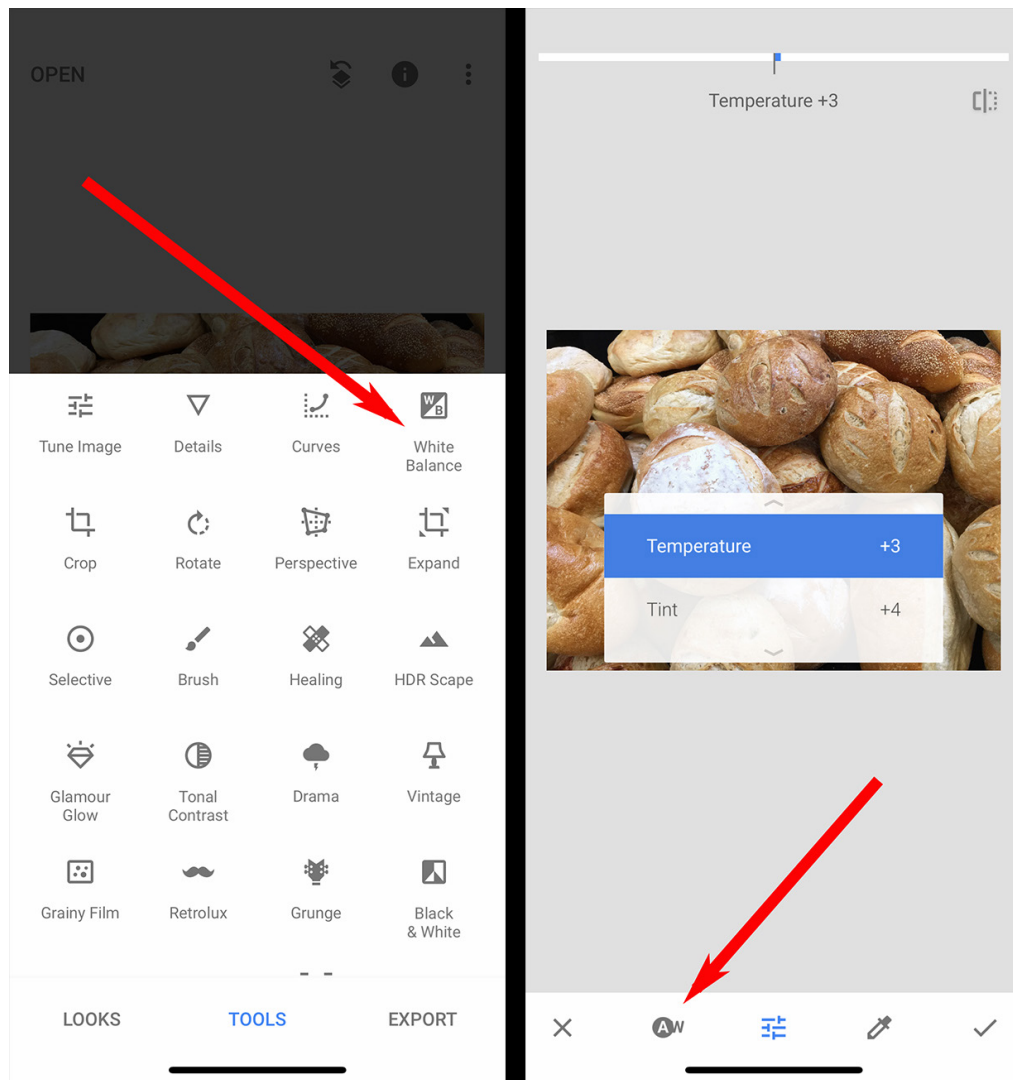


Image 012 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

*Don't fret if you don't have Photoshop or Lightroom on a desktop computer. Many smartphone photographers choose to stick with editing apps on their phones.*

Image 012 shows you one of the methods of color correction on Snapseed. However, editing apps can be more simplistic in their controls. You can still get the job done!

If your app only provides controls for Temperature and Tint, remember this:

- + Temperature adds yellow/red
- - Temperature adds blue/cyan
- + Tint adds magenta
- - Tint adds green



### Assignment – Part 2:

Using the color correction tools available to you, try correcting the color of the images you shot in Part 1. Make copies of the image files before you start working on them so that you can observe each image in a 'before and after' state.



Image 013 – Photograph (l) by Kent DuFault and photograph (r) by Hans Vivek

<https://unsplash.com/photos/Frwx05QZYbU>

*Left photograph: iPhone 8 Plus and processed in Snapseed and TouchRetouch.*



#### Pro Tip:

Put your plate onto a solid surface. If you need to move it closer to some light, move some furniture. You can't hold the plate and create a pro-level food photograph! If your idea calls for someone to be holding the food, then use a model so that you can concentrate on the technical and aesthetic qualities of the picture.





Image 014 – Photograph (l) by Mehrshad Rajabi and photograph (r) by Kent DuFault

*Right photograph: iPhone 3Gs and processed with Snapseed.*



#### Pro Tip:

In many cases, your smartphone food photography will occur in a restaurant, café, or coffee shop. Get close to your subject and eliminate unwanted and distracting details from the background. Remember, food is your subject. The example photo on the left of Image 014 shows how the food can become lost and unappealing when too much background is included. The right-hand photo in Image 014 was taken in a busy coffee shop. By getting close, the food looks delicious, enticing, and there are no distracting elements.



Image 015 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

*This holiday fruit cake is one of my best-selling food stock photographs. Every year during the holidays it sells over and over again. I created it with an iPhone 6 Plus and processed it using Snapseed, Instaflash Pro, and TouchRetouch.*

**Critical Thought:** Almost without fail, food images look best with the lighting coming from behind or from the subject's side. Then you can fill in the shadows with reflectors or in post-production. Deep shadows on the food seldom look good in food photography. Deep shadows in the background can be acceptable at times. Remember, side lighting or backlighting is almost always the best choice for food photography with your smartphone.

Let's recap our tips:

- 1 Light your food subject with even lighting and avoid deep shadows on the food.
- 2 Keep your set simple and uncluttered.
- 3 Use a keen eye for unwanted objects on your set like dust, dirt, or hairs.
- 4 Your food should be in focus and sharp. Minimal depth of field is acceptable at times.



- 5 Keep the camera point of view higher, looking downward on the food.
- 6 Indirect window light is the best (and a free) lighting source for smartphone food photography.
- 7 Be very aware of any color problems. You can correct it with your smartphone app software or transfer the file to your desktop for more critical editing.
- 8 When correcting color, duplicate the original file and work on the duplicate file. Compare the two files for a critical analysis of color.
- 9 Be aware that most food locations will have lighting that can create unpleasant color shifts.
- 10 White balance and color balance are similar in their purpose: creating accurate or desired color.
- 11 When correcting color in a full editing program such as Photoshop, correct the midtones first, followed by the shadows, and finally, the highlights.
- 12 Keep color corrections small. You shouldn't need to make massive corrections unless your color is way off in the original file.
- 13 Create a set where the food is stable. Don't hold the food if possible, or have someone else carry it.
- 14 Keep your shot tight to the food unless the atmosphere of the location is necessary. If that's the case, push the food close to the camera for maximum emphasis.
- 15 Use side lighting or backlighting.

**Assignment:**

Using everything we've discussed, make an outstanding portfolio of smartphone food photographs. Create half your shots at home and the other half at various locations.

*All photographs in this creativity prompt (created by Kent DuFault) were shot with either an iPhone 3Gs, an iPhone 6 Plus, an iPhone 8 Plus, or an iPhone 11 Pro.*

*Kent DuFault's post-processing toolbox includes Snapseed, Instaflash Pro, TouchRetouch, Polarr, Focos, Light Distortions, Instagram, Hipstamatic, and LensLight.*