Use these 5 steps to transform any meal or day in the kitchen into a written experience that will leave readers hungry for more.

BY DIANNE JACOB
The best part of traveling to Italy was the hand-cut pasta in a tiny restaurant. You’ll never forget the farmer’s market where you tasted fresh mulberries for the first time. Feeding your bacon-wrapped caramels to friends makes your time in the kitchen a thrill. Why not marry your love of food with your love of writing?

As America’s obsession with food continues, plenty of publications, websites and blogs either focus on or feature food writing, whether in the form of news, recipes, travel pieces or roundups of where to find the best burgers. The cookbook sections in bookstores continue to expand, as well, accommodating new shelves of literary food writing, reference guides, and trends like vegan and gluten-free cooking.

At its heart, most food writing is about, well, eating—so if you aspire to succeed in the genre, your challenge is to express yourself without resorting to cliché or an endless string of adjectives. Luckily, there are concrete steps you can take to employ successful food-writing techniques and practices that yield compelling ways to describe a dish or the experience of eating. And once you discover a few simple rules of the craft, you’ll feel more confident immediately. So whether you’re looking to get started, improve your skills or expand the market for the writing you’re already doing, put down your spatula, pull up a chair, and let’s get cooking.

**STEP 1. SERVE UP A SENSUOUS FEAST.**

What makes food writing unique is its focus on the senses and the pleasure and enjoyment that ensue. You want readers to see the colors of a ripe peach, feel its fuzzy down, smell its ripeness, hear the tearing crunch with every bite, and taste its tangy flesh.

While it’s easy to focus on taste, when combined with smell, the two senses can produce emotions, feelings of nostalgia, and involuntary memories. This response has a name. It’s called the Proustian effect, for Marcel Proust’s wistful passage about eating a madeleine in his novel *Swann’s Way*:

> But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure or recollection.

**Translation:** If you think of the punch in the gut you experience when tasting or smelling a food that takes you back to childhood, that’s what Proust means. Put in simple terms, he’s saying that using your senses to access food is evocative. Your goal is to transport readers to a place and time where they can experience a scent or taste for themselves. Readers find this much more satisfying than just reading about how you experienced it, which can actually have the contradictory effect of creating distance between you and them.

Here’s an example from M.F.K. Fisher, one of food writing’s most revered icons:

> The first thing I remember tasting and then wanting to taste again is the grayish-pink fuzz my grandmother skimmed from a spitting kettle of strawberry jam. I suppose I was about four.

At first you may feel repelled by the notion of tasting “fuzz.” But you’re also intrigued, and transported to a kitchen from long ago, perhaps your own memory taking over to stand in for hers.

Some writers think the least important sense is sound. But consider how it enlivens the experience in Alan Richman’s essay “The Great Texas Barbecue Secret”:

> Because the meat is seldom pricked during cooking, the fat accumulates, sizzling and bubbling. Slice, and the drama unfolds. Think of a bursting water pipe. Better yet, imagine a Brahman bull exploding from the gate at a rodeo.

It might sound overdone, but you’ve got to give Richman credit for imaginative writing about what could
otherwise be a dull topic. He is, after all, describing what happens when he cuts into a sausage. Yet Richman excels at translating his excitement onto the page, and has won more than a dozen national awards for his essays in magazines such as GQ, where he is a contributing writer.

**STEP 2 SEASON SPARINGLY.**

Look back at Richman’s description of the sausage. See any adjectives? I don’t. Adjectives are the dangerously addictive drug of food writing. You might be tempted to use several to describe, say, the pork tenderloin with pears and shallots you proudly concocted at your stovetop last night. But in truth, adjectives weaken writing and cause reader fatigue.

Take note of what else happened during the meal. Try Richman’s technique of using metaphor, the art of referring to something (a sausage) as something it is not (a Brahman bull). Or perhaps you can convey your enjoyment of a meal in a restaurant by telling a fitting story about the people at the next table, rather than by unloading sentence after sentence of flavor descriptions. Look for innovative, unexpected ways to depict your experience with the dish.

You might find that you start with strings of adjectives in an early draft. That’s normal. Let the descriptors flow out. Then, examine each grouping and see what happens if you select only one word. You’ll find that your sentences become more powerful when pared back to the essence of the dish.

Let’s say that, in describing the pear, you had referred to it as *the brown buttery silky pear.* What would happen if the only adjective you allowed yourself was *silky*? That one word reads better than the string of descriptors in the earlier draft. If you use too many adjectives, readers get confused. They have to parse all those modifiers and try to imagine what the pear tastes like, deciding which adjective is most important. *Silky,* on the other hand, offers one clear and concise word. When it comes to adjectives, especially in food writing, less is more.

**STEP 3 AVOID GENERIC INGREDIENTS.**

Just as it’s best to be judicious with adjectives, you’ll also see a huge improvement in your writing when you opt for specific language rather than general terms. People who’ve read my blog or book on the art of food writing know that one of my pet peeves is the word *delicious.* It’s a vague way to describe what you’re eating, and tells the reader nothing, other than the fact that you really liked it. Other words in this category are *tasty* and *yummy.* If you spot these words in your drafts, most of the time all you need to do is edit them out to instantly create a more solid piece of writing.

Make a habit of reading your own work looking for vague or general words, and replacing them with specific ones. *Salty* or *velvety* gives the reader a better idea than *delicious*—but adjectives aren’t the only culprits. Examine nouns and verbs, as well. Sometimes something as simple as substituting the word *kitchen* for *room* can make all the difference.

**STEP 4 STIR IN SOME ACTION.**

Another way to keep food writing from becoming a string of description is to go for action, just as Richman did. He didn’t focus on how the sausage tasted, but on what happened when he cut into it. If you slow down and describe what’s happening as you consume food, you create a miniature motion picture in your readers’ minds.

Observe how popular Roadfood authors Jane and Michael Stern describe slicing into a piece of apple pie:

> The crust is as crunchy as a butter cookie, so brittle that it cracks audibly when you press it with your fork; grains of cinnamon sugar bounce off the surface as it shatters.
They’ve slowed down the act so you can picture what happens when the fork cuts into the pie. Action verbs like crack, press, bounce and shatter go a long way toward painting a vivid picture. The authors haven’t described how the apple pie tastes yet, but I’ll bet you’re already salivating.

**STEP 5. ADD DESCRIPTIVE SPICE.**

Because describing food is a big part of food writing, you need as many tools as possible to get the job done. Similes compare unlike things by using like or as. (If you’re rusty on your language terms, similes are different from metaphors, which I mentioned in Step 2. Similes compare two things, as opposed to referring to an object directly as something else.) Similes and other comparisons are fun and imaginative ways to conjure images that might seem incongruous, but work well anyway.

Here’s an example from The New York Times Dining Editor Pete Wells:

First we’ll get the grill going hotter than a blacksmith’s forge … as usual, the tongs won’t be long enough to keep my hands from scorching like bare feet on the beach parking lot.

You might not know how hot a blacksmith’s forge gets, or even what the heck a forge is. It doesn’t matter. You understand that it’s red-hot. Similarly, you might not think of bare feet on a beach parking lot when grilling meat. But suddenly, you’ve got a pleasant if slightly painful memory. A story about grilling becomes an evocative look at a fun part of summer everyone can relate to, a little piece of our collective past.

No matter which techniques you employ, and no matter which medium you choose, remember that food writing is similar to other kinds of narrative writing. It focuses on evocative storytelling and context, rather than on exactly how the spaghetti sauce tasted. While that’s certainly part of the story, it’s more important to evoke an emotional response by making readers imagine a bucking bull or a hot day at the beach. Think of food writing as a type of cooking: You try a little of this, a little of that, and soon you have a unified, flavorful dish. **WD**

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