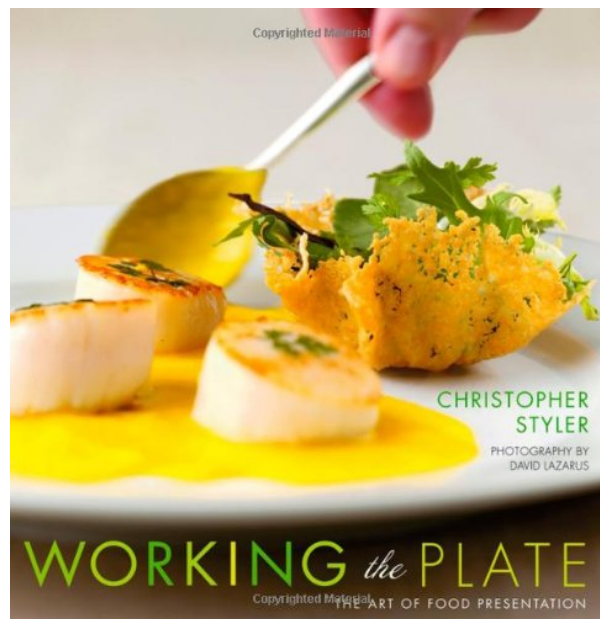
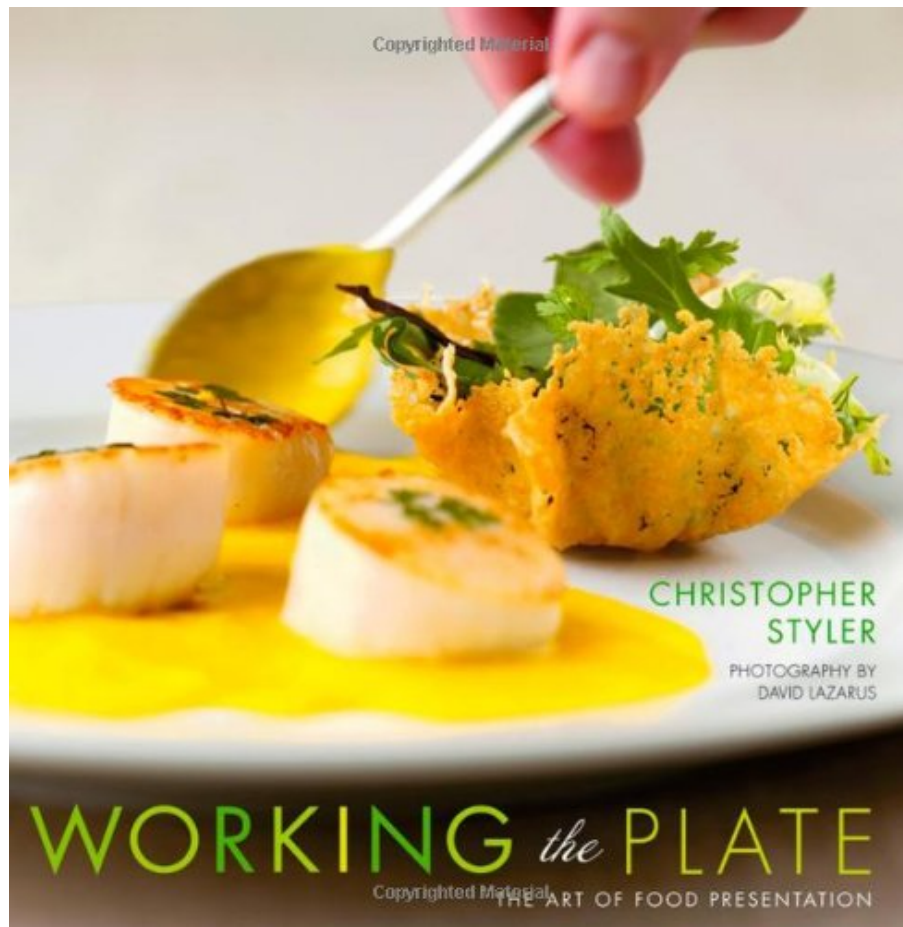


WORKING THE PLATE: THE ART OF FOOD PRESENTATION BY CHRISTOPHER STYLER



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shelf.

Most helpful customer reviews

104 of 107 people found the following review helpful.

Disappointing solution for a needed niche.

By George R. Wilmot

Since becoming a truly dedicated foodie 5-10 years ago, I've been looking for a good book on plating, but have never found one. With the publication of this new book I thought my search would be over. I was way wrong.

I'm not a design-oriented person, but this book is a classic example of art direction (photography, layout, design) that is so misguided that it totally destroys whatever educational content may be present (pretty little, in this case) . At times, it made me want to scream, like on p. 153, where the color and typeface choices make the type almost illegible. While the book's look might work with another cookbook, it just DOESN'T FIT with the purported purpose of the book, which was to teach cooks how to "work the plate" to create artful presentations. As mentioned in the excellent previous review by B. Marold, the only photographs of the finished plates are low-angle, shallow depth-of-field pics that look nice but are actually instructional hindrances. The series of 3-4 small demonstration photos (taking up an entire double page, with way too much "white space") in each chapter usually show things that are basic and don't really need photos (like dusting a plate with cinnamon and chile powder) and have minimal educational value. There are just a handful of neat techniques (like the chocolate bowls made by dipping a balloon in melted chocolate), but again informational content seems oddly and poorly coupled with the layout/design.

In defining different styles of food presentation (minimalist, architectural, contemporary European, etc), the author makes a welcomed attempt at providing a conceptual framework to help guide the reader. Unfortunately, the dishes of food chosen to illustrate each category do not do a good job of defining that style as distinct from the other styles, i.e. they are poor archetypes. I'd much rather have seen one clear, archetypal dish from each category, WELL-PHOTOGRAPHED!

I enjoyed the inserted chef profiles, and some of the author's introductory remarks to each chapter. These sections pointed out the connection between style of food and style of plating...an important point that perhaps I've not yet considered enough. In other words, if you cook wonderful natural ingredients simply (e.g. Alice Waters style), the plating style should reflect that style of food preparation (i.e. no toothpicked geometrical designs in drizzled sauces...just a toss with a light vinaigrette, etc.). A simple, common-sense point that is nicely reinforced throughout the book.

I hope that within the cookbook field the plating niche will continue to be addressed. Wait for the next attempt; it's got to be better than this.

37 of 40 people found the following review helpful.

not inspiring and not informative

By glouise

Some nice pictures...many cookbooks have better. No discussion on style or technique and certainly no recipes worth buying the book for. Check it out at a bookstore or library before you purchase it...watching a food network show will give you more information on plating than this book will in my opinion. There is also the fact this book is TINY, not worth the money or a second look it is so lacking in information. So disappointing. I was at least expecting pictures of several presentations of different courses even if there was not a lot of explanation, a picture is truly worth a thousand words when developing this skill. Did I mention this book is a big disappointment.

75 of 87 people found the following review helpful.

Some Excellent Techniques for foodie and pro. Overpriced.

By B. Marold

'Working the Plate' by cookbook writer and TV cooking show producer, Christopher Styler offered great promise as a text on an arcane corner of culinary artistry which chefs such as Bobby Flay and Mario Batali can do so effortlessly on 'Iron Chef America', and yet when mere mortals try to do the same, we come up all thumbs.

The hefty pricetag from the classy textbook publishing Wiley gave further promise that the book had weighty promise. Before I cracked the covers, I itemized a list of things I would expect to find in such a book, such as knife and mandoline techniques; sauce making; squeeze bottle techniques and general techniques for decorating with multi-colored sauces, ring mold carpentry (well, PVC pipe cutting, really). In short, I expected something like a 'Martha Stewart Plating Handbook' where every technique is explained in exquisite detail. That is not what this book is about.

That is not to say that there are no good plating ideas in this book. Especially ideas you are not likely to find in cookbooks other than those from the very high-end culinary artists such as Keller, Rippert, Boulud, Portale, and Tramonto, or on 'Iron Chef America'! There are several knockout ideas here which are actually relatively easy to do, as long as you have the time and some basic knowledge on how to work with the raw materials.

My favorite example of this situation is the excellent little technique used to plate the 'All-American Sundae Chocolate Bowl'. In a nutshell, the technique involves coating half of a simple small rubber balloon with melted chocolate, cool the chocolate, burst the balloon, and extract your thin chocolate bowl in which your ice cream or anything else you want is served. The problem here is that melted chocolate is one of the world's fussiest ingredients, as it can't get too hot and it can't touch water. But this book assumes you know all that. Of course, if you are a culinary school graduate or a foodie of long standing, this is no problem. In fact, I admire the simplicity of the technique. One can for an afternoon imagine you are emulating Jacques Torres or Pierre Herme in creating cleverly molded chocolate serving ware.

Weighing heavily on the plus side of the ledger is the fact that although there are few techniques (eight plating styles with one to four recipes and techniques per style), each technique is very nicely illustrated in a series of three or four pictures after the photograph of the completed dish and a narrative describing the dish. What is very odd is that we get no standard recipe for any of these dishes. There is no list of ingredients with amounts or details about preparations. And, aside from the captions to the pics illustrating the techniques, there is no real procedural write-up. This odd state of affairs is tempered somewhat by the fact that there are standard recipes in the back of the book for all the sauces, dressings, and other decorative preparations such as mushroom jus and bell pepper puree.

These basic techniques are far more important than their being divided up into the eight styles, which are Minimalist, Architect, Artist, Contemporary European, Asian, Naturalist, Dramatic Flair, and Desserts. To me it seems these distinctions are totally arbitrary and of no value in a 'how-to' manual. And, the author goes so far as to say that it is the rare chef who would work entirely within one or another of these styles. All this leads me to believe the styles were cooked up by the author simply to make the book seem more authoritative.

The problem is that this book is not dedicated to 'how-to' narrative. It is dedicated to culinary titillation, with a bit of technique added to give you some basis for hands-on participation. My best illustration of this claim is the fact that in the narrative description of 'The Minimalist' style, the author paints a word picture of 'a

cube of perfectly cubed tuna set atop fresh corn relish and a pool of silky-smooth coulis.' Now why couldn't the author spring for an accompanying picture of just such a dish? And, no dish of that description is to be found among the three archetypes for minimalist plating.

Interspersed among the recipes and the various styles are profiles of ten (10) major chefs known for their skill in presentation. These are Wayne Harley Brachman, Terrance Brennan, Andrew Carmellini, Susan Goin, Sharon Hage, James Laird, Emily Luchetti, Tadashi Ono, Kent Rathbun, and Marcus Samuelsson. All the thumbnail narratives about and by these chefs are interesting and informative, but they are not essentially connected with the techniques or 'styles' described on the accompanying pages.

The subtitle, 'The Art of Food Presentation' tells the story in that this is more like a picture book of frescos and less like a manual on how to go about painting frescos. The unfortunate aspect of that emphasis is that the culinary photography is relatively weak. I would expect most or all pics to be taken from directly above the plate and at a decent distance so that nothing is out of focus. Instead, most pics are taken from about 10 to 20 degrees above the level of the table and a few inches away from the plate, so that the foreground third of the plate is in focus, but the remaining two thirds of the plate are out of focus.

I confess my comparison with a fresco picture book is an exaggeration. As I have already said above, the book does give a great little tutorial on about 25 different plating techniques, some of which one can easily do oneself, but the heavy pricetag is paying more for the mediocre photography and the celebrity sketches.

Since there are so few general books on plating, the dedicated foodie and the professional will get much from this book, although they could have gotten more with more attention to technique and less attention to flash.

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