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Behind the Scenes with Hollywood Food Stylist Susan Spungen

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Photo: Jake Chessum

After finding success as a magazine food editor and cookbook author, [Susan Spungen](#) has shifted her focus from page to screen, where she's been the food stylist for films like *Julie & Julia*, *It's Complicated*, and this summer's *Eat, Pray, Love*, based on [Elizabeth Gilbert](#)'s best-selling food memoir. Here, she shares the secrets to getting food ready for its close-up.

What exactly is a food stylist?

We make food look good. In magazines, we work in the controlled environment of a studio. Movies are more physically demanding. You face challenges like where to get, store, and cook the food. For *Eat, Pray, Love*, my home base was a refrigerated truck.

How do you keep actors happy while stuffing them with food?

For a take, actors have to eat the same bite over and over again, which isn't the most pleasant thing. Usually they've got some options on their plate. Julia Roberts was happiest when she was eating asparagus.

Any tips to make a dish look good at home?

When choosing plates or platters, think about it as you would if you were getting dressed--if a dish doesn't look right or flatter the food, try something else. You want something that's the right color, shape, and mood for the food.

Were there any unexpected challenges when filming *Eat, Pray, Love*?

Turkeys aren't really something they have in Italy, and I needed 25 of them [for a scene where Elizabeth Gilbert's character cooks Thanksgiving dinner for Italian friends]. We found some, but they weren't the kind of turkeys American filmgoers are used to seeing--the wing tips were chopped off. Prior to cooking, the turkeys were quite ugly. The final product, though, was beautiful and very tasty.

What "real food" doesn't really work on set?

Gelato, especially in Rome in August, when a cup of gelato lasts two seconds. Instead, we would use a meringue that was edible, but wouldn't melt. Melted cheese is my nemesis, too, whether it's in print or on film. It can go from looking delicious to congealed in a very short period of time.

Text by Bekah Wright

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