

SECRETS OF The Stylists

Four stylists known for their highly specialized techniques explain how they deliver the special effects photographers want—and why they have become so sought after in their fields.

MEGAN CAPONETTO: The Set Goddess

Photographers and photo editors usually call in the services of Megan Caponetto, a set builder/designer/stylist, when they can't figure out how to solve a problem. The examples of the problems she's solved on editorial shoots are endless.

"One day I'm learning about archery and making custom bows, the next day I'm working with bullets, and the next day I'm exploding something or aging something," Caponetto says. "It's hard to say what I love the most but I do relish figuring out how to do something that other people thought couldn't be done."

Despite her lack of any professional training in prop building or styling—she studied opera for a year and then switched jobs every two years until establishing herself in her current profession about ten years ago—she routinely gets hired for her graphic style and versatility.

"Whenever I have pretty hefty set builds or any prop challenges, I enlist Megan to bring them to fruition," says photographer Dan Saelinger. "She knows how to solve the impossible and does it in a really fast turnaround."

Last summer Saelinger worked on a pair of shoots with Caponetto for photo director Allyson Torrisi at *Popular Mechanics*. For the first image, illustrating a story on 3D televisions coming into the home, Caponetto handcrafted the entire set, including reupholstering a couch and repainting a rug and walls in the colors of a classic television test pattern.

The second image was for a cover story on surviving dis-



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asters. The idea was to have an image of a man standing knee-deep in water after a flood. Caponetto built a water tank 15 inches deep by 8 feet wide by 8 feet long with two 4 x 8 white matte Plexiglas sheets rigged in the back. "The challenge was in making it look like the water was lapping up against the background and ensuring that the shot would be easy to silhouette on the cover since there was going to be a lot of text on it," Saelinger explains. "Megan had less than a week to build the tank and even brought in scrapwood and leaves to throw into the water as she stood out of frame while I took the shot. She doesn't just build something and she's done. She takes ownership of it and is a great collaborator to work with."

She collaborated with several photographers who shot the models she made based on the logo for *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*. She fashioned the T-shaped logo using a variety of media and objects, including a delicate red leaf photographed by Christopher Griffith ("I work with him the most and we bring out the mad scientist in each other," says Caponetto); an 8 x 10 metal letter T she built and overnighted to Alaska for photographer Jesse Chehak in advance of her arrival on location ("We dragged that thing up and down muddy cliffs and glaciers finding the right spot for Jesse to shoot it in," she recalls); and a 200 x 250-foot crop circle in the shape of a T, laid out with 8 miles of string in a cornfield, photographed by Vincent Laforet.

For the red leaf T, Caponetto went to New Hampshire looking for leaves that were just turning color and then

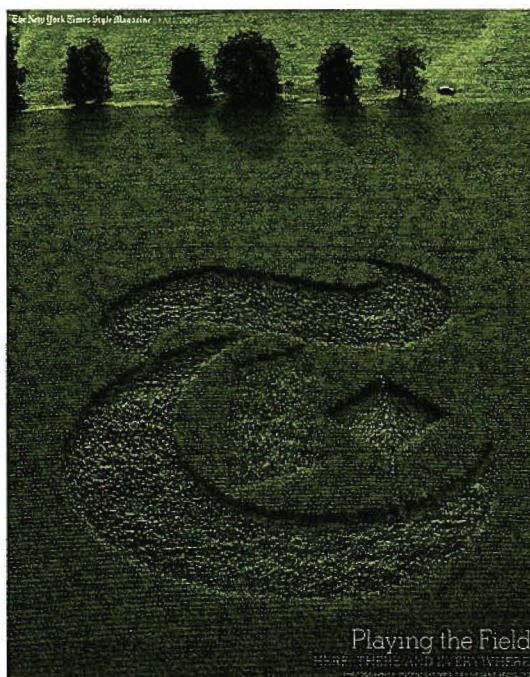
Opposite page: Apple co-founder Steve Jobs. Caponetto studied a photo of Jobs originally shot by Arnold Newman, then recreated his likeness with countless computer parts. Christopher Griffith shot her props for *Fortune* magazine. Right: Caponetto built a room entirely painted and upholstered in a television test pattern for a story on 3D television for *Popular Mechanics* photographed by Dan Saelinger. Below: Three images from the T series for the *New York Times Style Magazine*.



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© T: THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE PHOTO BY JESSE CHEHAK



© T: THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE PHOTO BY VINCENT LAFORET



© T: THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER GRIFFITH

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let them dry for a day. “Basically what I did was used a container of aluminum powder with a kind of needle sprayer on it attached to my compressor and shot the powder at the leaf at a certain speed. It took the meat off the leaf but kept the skeleton and gives the T an almost sand blasted, silver look.”

Caponetto says the crop circle was probably one of her favorite creations. First, she rented an acre of a cornfield from a farmer in upstate New York and ran eight miles of string through the field, then printed the T out on a piece of paper. Next she went through the field—it was early in the season, and the stalks had not yet grown—and staked exactly where the outline of the T would hit each cross point of the strings. Later in the season, when the corn had grown tall, she returned, and began bending over the stalks she had marked in the spring. She soon realized that she was extremely allergic to corn pollen so she had three assistants come the next day and help her bend down the remaining stalks. “The worst part was that I didn’t know if the whole thing was successful until Vincent [Laforet] came in a chopper and could see the T from above. Two days after the shoot, the stalks sprang back and much to the farmer’s and Caponetto’s relief, the bends were barely visible.

Caponetto has managed to carve out a niche for herself in the industry by creating longstanding relationships with magazines and photographers who know she’s willing to take on new challenges. Caponetto says that each week she’s trying out a new material or working with a new prop—and learning from the experience. One morning she brought in a skull made of sugar cubes to *Men’s Health’s* deputy photo editor, Jeanne Graves, for a shoot with photographer Greg Broom. “I thought I had finally found an adhesive the night

before that wouldn’t dissolve the sugar but I was so wrong and the ‘clinking’ sound of the cubes hitting the table all night made me feel totally powerless,” she says. “Thank God Greg and Jeanne were so understanding and it ended up looking good anyway!”

The key to her continued success, she adds, is “using the knowledge I’ve relied on in the last job and then applying it towards the next one in a new and inventive way.”

—Jacqueline Tobin

KATIE CHRIST: *The Ultimate Foodie*

When it comes to food styling, San Francisco-based stylist Katie Christ says she is a “jack of all trades.”

“I work with all kinds of food,” she says. And it is that range of talent, along with her enthusiasm for fresh, raw ingredients that she says has contributed to her successes, including being the culinary producer of the premiere season of *Top Chef*, as well as winning the first Food Network Challenge for food stylists in 2008.

Christ says her litmus test for judging her finished product is always the same when she’s on a job: “Do I want to eat it [or drink it]? Does it make me want to grab my fork and dig in?” She says she never wants to stray too far from reality or make the food look too perfect. Instead she might simply toss a bowl of pasta and leave it looking a bit “messy,” or garnish it with slices of green onion to add a pop of color, or brush on a chunkier sauce, like a pesto, to add texture. Sometimes, though, certain items she works with aren’t sup-

posed to be eaten, but rather just look pretty.

For example, Christ recently worked with fellow San Franciscan, photographer Maren Caruso, on a conceptual shoot where they worked with an array of vegetables and fruits, including a cluster of Enoki mushrooms that they decided resembled a cupcake, and cucumbers that Christ sliced and configured into a butterfly shape. "Maren shot the items on both white and black Plexiglas—with the white lit from underneath. It all looked amazing," Christ says. "Sometimes the most beautiful things result when the photographer and food stylist—and prop stylist (if there is one present)—have the opportunity to just play." Christ used the final images in her promotional mailers as well as on her Web site.

Christ started styling food in 2003 after abandoning her corporate job writing marketing copy when she developed a repetitive strain injury. "I had to figure out a career that did not include computers and sitting at a desk all day," she explains. "I definitely cared a lot about food when I was growing up watching my mom and grandmother cook and bake." In addition to attending pastry school after leaving her marketing job and apprenticing at Citizen Cake bakery in San Francisco, Christ gained further experience through catering private dinner parties and events with leading San Francisco chefs, filming television pilots and assisting food stylists in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Over the years she has styled a broad range of projects, including editorial, commercial, packaging, television and catalogue work for clients like Williams-Sonoma, Starbucks, Kashi, Chronicle Books, Godiva, The Food Network and Wolfgang Puck, among many others. She's also worked with many photographers over the years, including Caruso, Noel Barnhurst, Annabelle Breakey, Rick Eskite, Sara Remington, Hunter Freeman and Lyndon Wade.

"I love the challenge of having to work just with what's on hand or being resourceful with what I've brought with me when I'm thrown a curveball," Christ says. "That's when the bag of tricks come out, so to speak."

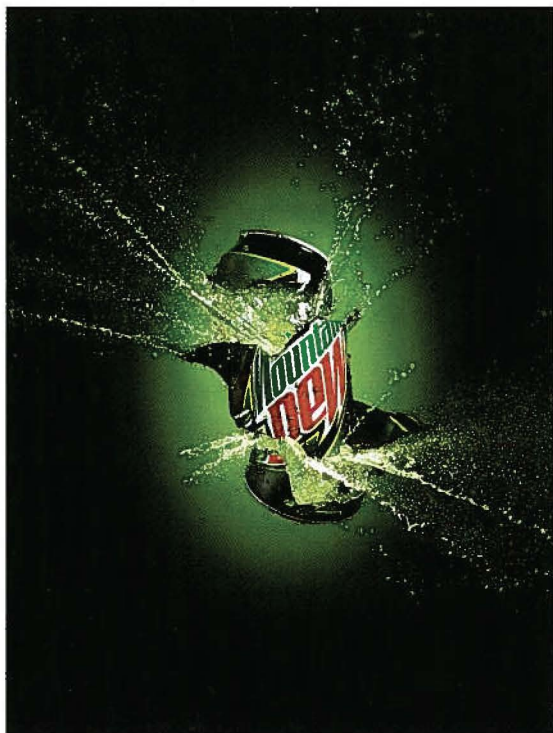
Like when she works with chocolate, which pos-

es a particular set of challenges, including a tendency to get dull when it dries and often arrives to a shoot dinged up from shipping. "That's when I whip out my secret weapon to add sheen," she laughs. As an example, she describes her styling of a recent campaign for Scharffenberger chocolate shot by food and lifestyle photographer Rick Eskite. "We did a whole range of images for that campaign, from single bars, to broken chunks to shavings, even a melted swirl," she says. "It was mostly straight up product, so I did break out my special tool to help it look its absolute best." Different tools and techniques can be used for different types of chocolate, she adds, depending on the percentage of cocoa and fat in a bar or block of chocolate. "Rick liked one of my tools so much he went out and bought one for himself."

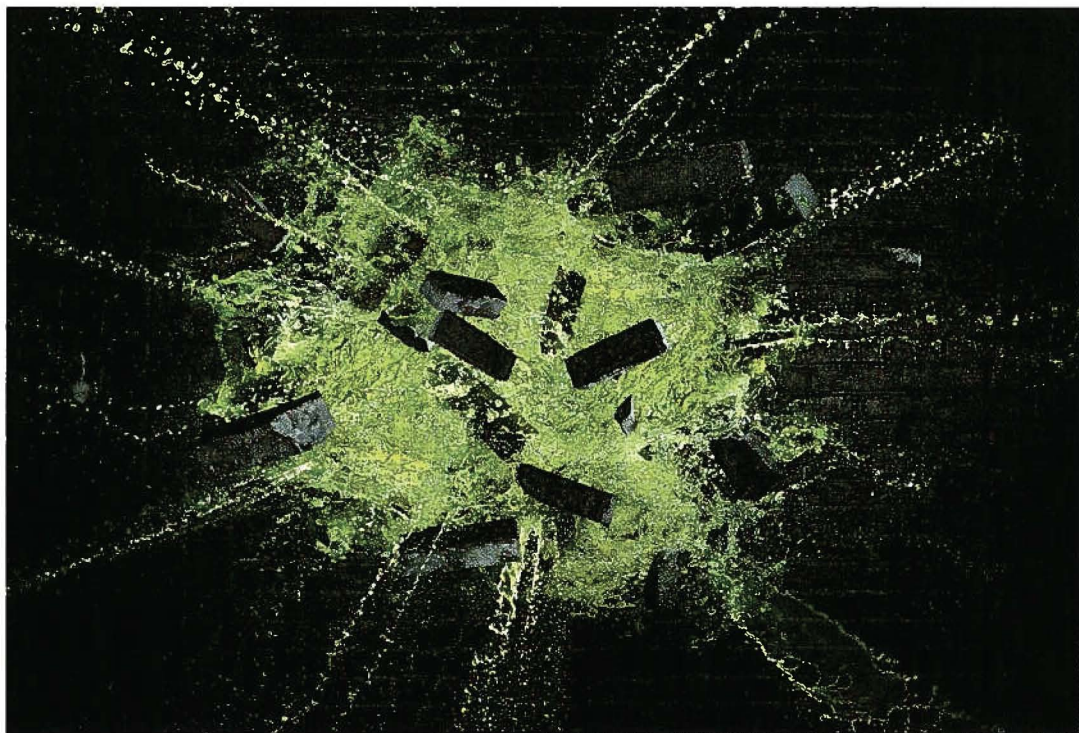
Christ also had the task of turning a lot of brown and beige foods into appetizing dishes when she worked with Sarah Remington recently on a vegan cookbook. In that case, she worked closely with prop stylist Nissa Quanstrom for careful coordination of colorful propping and added appropriate garnishes to make the food pop. She also just wrapped up an ad campaign for Uncle Ben's rice with fashion and still-life photographer Stan Musilek, who doesn't normally shoot food. Christ says, "The reason the shoot went so well was because Stan has such a tremendous breadth and depth of experience. He understands the inherent sensitivity of timing. Plus, he has a genuine love of food. It always comes through in the final product when a photographer is passionate about food," she says. On this shoot she had to style each of the five recipes they were working on twice: once for the company Web site and once for the print campaign. "Working with rice can be challenging because each grain has to be separately articulated so it's very detailed, meticulous work."

As for her special secrets, Christ says for her it's more about knowing how food behaves and how to work with different consistencies under different conditions such as lighting, temperature, humidity, wind, human behavior (models and actors interacting with the food) or what have you. So, she advises, "If you need to do a stencil on a chocolate ganache-covered cake, the ganache needs to be hard enough that the stencil will lift off without marring the surface. You need to have a cool room when you're trying to create steam. And I learned from a stylist I once assisted that you should always carry candles in your kit—you never know when a birthday might crop up on set."

—Jacqueline Tobin



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MAKOTO AOKI: Water Rigger

In his work as a model maker, Makoto Aoki creates props and scale models by carefully shaping and sculpting plastic. He applies the same craftsmanship to fashioning the water rigs he uses to make pours and splash effects for photographers and directors. The only difference is, these creations are typically hidden. Whether he's called upon to make an effervescent splash or a delicate stream of liquid, Aoki's favorite tool is a pressure pump, which releases a liquid from a pressurized tank through tubes at the press of the button. Equipped with a solenoid switch, the pump also triggers the timed flash. He uses the pump on most shoots involving liquid, he says, because the results are precise and easy to reproduce. "You can set up the nozzle at the same point so that each time, the liquid comes out from the same point." To alter the effect, Aoki says, he simply raises or lowers the pressure in the tank, reshapes the plastic nozzle to change the way it sprays the liquid, or resets the timing of the flash by fractions of a second.

On a recent ad for Mountain Dew, for example, photographer Daniel Schweizer wanted to show liquid gushing from several cracks in an exploding bottle. Aoki says the first question he asks when a photographer shows him a layout is: Where can he hide the tubes? That means finding out what color the backdrop is, whether the set will be back- or front-lit, and what the camera's position will be. For the Mountain Dew ad, he knew he could thread the tubes and nozzles through the model of the broken bottle.

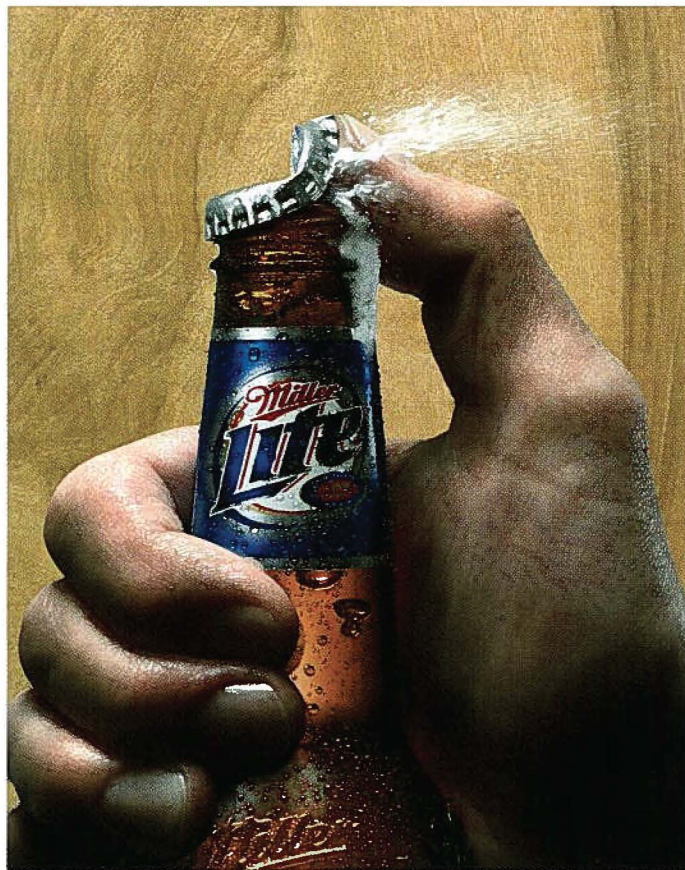
"I made a rig with a vacuum pump so that I could use a solenoid switch. If I flick the switch, water comes out," Aoki explains. "I also put a quarter-second delay on it so that after the splash comes out, a quarter second later, the flash pops."

He had only two days to make the rig and test different pressure settings and nozzle shapes in his Brooklyn studio before the day of the shoot. "Also, I can adjust the timing. If a quarter of a second is too fast, I can make it a little bit slower." Schweizer liked the test photos Aoki showed him, and began shooting. Using a 4 second exposure, he was able capture every splash.

For a Tropicana outdoor campaign that appeared in the U.K., Biwa Studio in New York wanted to show fruit exploding like fireworks. Aoki threaded dozens of tubes and nozzles into globes that had been colored to look like an orange, a grapefruit, and other fruit. When he pressed the button, all the nozzles released a fine spray of droplets in all directions. He also exploded real fruit by attaching it to spikes on the end of an air pump. The sudden release of air from the pump blew the fruit into bits which were photographed and then added to the composited photo in post production.

Even when the shoot calls for a simple pour, Aoki prefers the precision the pressure pump and timer offer. "You can put the nozzle in a grip stand and it shoots the liquid down," Aoki notes, guaranteeing that the same amount of liquid hits the same spot every time. The timer also precisely syncs the firing of the flash to the release of the liquid, while leaving the photographer free to focus on taking the photo. "A lot of photographers do it themselves pouring the liquid by hand, but they have to do hundreds of shots to get it."

Aoki can also turn to more low-tech solutions if needed. The Mountain Dew



Left: Aoki's favorite tool is a pressure pump, which releases liquid from a pressurized tank through a tube. To create fizz, he uses a second tube drawing in air.

campaign, for example, included a photo of the beverage (actually water, which was tinted fluorescent green to match the Mountain Dew logo) appearing to blast a hole through a wall, punching bricks into the air. Aoki first made a 2/3 scale model of a brick wall. To create the splash, his ideal solution would have been to build a slope that would carry the liquid from a tank to the hole, but since most of the budget and prep time had been spent building the wall, he instead suggested simply hurling buckets of liquid through the wall (after he first covered the set and the camera with plastic). Aoki put fake bricks he made of foam in the bucket so they appeared to be pushed from the wall by the blast of Mountain Dew.

Aoki got his training 20 years ago working in the New York model-making studio of his uncle, Hirotsugu Aoki. He went out on his own in 1995 and, after a stint as director of model making for McConnell and Borow, started his own business in 2006. After years of working

with liquids, he says, water has been his favorite medium. "If you splash water, you get an organic shape right away," he says. Liquids such as milk, or its most common substitute, paint, are more difficult because they tend to get bubbles in them. When Aoki needs to create frothy beer, for example, he uses flat beer, but works with two pumps—one that draws up the beer, and one that sucks in air. When the two mingle in the nozzle, he gets fizz.

The most difficult liquid, he says, is chocolate. "We have to melt it and put it in tanks." He uses a heating band to keep the tank warm, Aoki explains. Chocolate, he notes, "usually gets stuck because of the sugar." Brown paint, he says, is easier to work with, but photographers often prefer the real thing. Aoki notes, "It smells good."

—Holly Stuart Hughes

NIR ADAR: The Ice Cream King

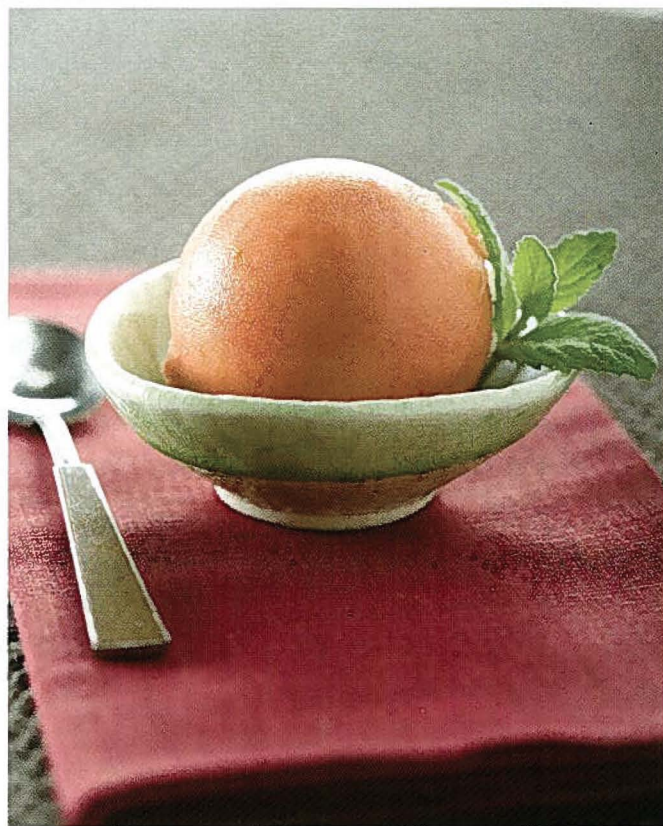
Food styling is a cold business for Nir Adar. While Adar works with all types of food, his calling card is his reputation as the "King of Ice Cream."

Successful ice cream styling is all about the scoop, Adar relates. Producing a photogenic scoop of ice cream requires good physical technique, attention to composition and, when you get the scoop right, fierce intensity in the brief moments before the ice cream begins to liquefy and becomes worthless for a photography job. "When you work on ice cream it's a very strange dynamic because you can scoop and scoop and scoop and nothing happens in the studio," Adar relates. "Then that moment that I stop [and have the perfect scoop], there are extra moves that you do, the most intense five seconds, and then you get the shot."

"Once the crystals start condensing they're going to melt, there's nothing in between," he says. "It's either solid or liquid—so I love the intensity of it."

And what are the "extra moves" that he does when he gets a perfect scoop before taking it to the set? Adar laughs. "I would have to kill you if I tell you that. There are certain things that the industry knows and there are certain things the industry doesn't know about what I do," explains Adar. "Everyone

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has their own style for doing these things, I just developed my own style."

Whereas other stylists might put a scoop of ice cream in a chest with dry ice for a period of time before the shoot, making it rock hard, Adar prefers a more organic approach. While he still uses dry ice to briefly prolong the life of the ice cream, he says that freezing it solid actually speeds up the condensation on the surface of the ice cream because it is at a colder temperature in relation to the set. (Condensation on the surface of the ice cream means a scoop of chocolate, for instance, looks white when reflecting the light from a flash.)

Freezing a scoop of ice cream with dry ice also limits the number of options you can explore, Adar says. "I can get six [flavors] with three options each," Adar relates, because he is physically able to scoop ice cream at a faster rate and bring more scoops to the set. He can also work a bit with the ice cream because it is soft, not hard.

Adar works with one photographer, Peter Pioppo, on 80 percent of his ice cream jobs, he says. He and Pioppo have a great collaboration because they communicate quickly when time is of the essence, and because they both listen and speak their mind. "The relationship I have with Peter or Matthew Klein or anybody I work with is that they actually listen to me as much as they listen to the art director, as much as they listen to themselves," Adar says. While some photographers, especially in the past, believed in a hierarchy that subordinated food stylists, Adar says, "I don't subscribe to that style. It's a collaborative effort. I listen to what people have to say and you have to listen to what I say."

So, what makes the perfect scoop of ice cream? For a flavor like vanilla or chocolate, he can get a perfect scoop of ice cream using only a single carton. But the ever-expanding number of different flavors and combinations on the market has made scooping far more complex. Think, for instance, about Ben & Jerry's ice creams, which can combine two types of fudge, nuts, pieces of candy bar and so forth. "The chance that you're going to get the perfect scoop that will show the product as it should be," without overpromising or under-

This page and opposite:
Styling ice cream requires physical techniques, attention to composition, and intensity, says Nir Adar.

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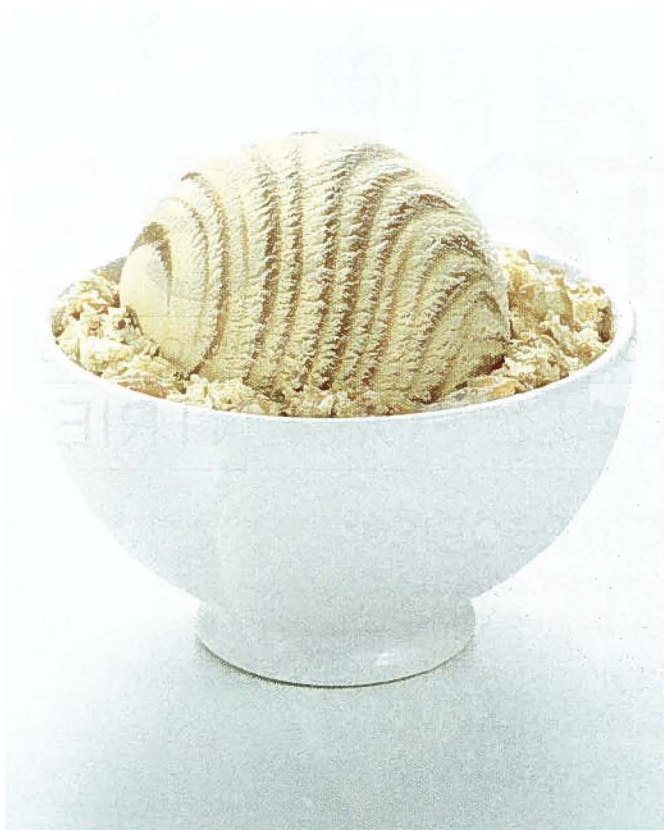
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promising on the amount of the ingredients, is low. For clients like Friendly's, he has to add things like nuts or sprinkles to show a complete dish.

Adar recalls a job he did a few years ago for one ice cream maker that took five weeks. At the end of the job Adar estimated that he had made 12,000 scoops of ice cream.

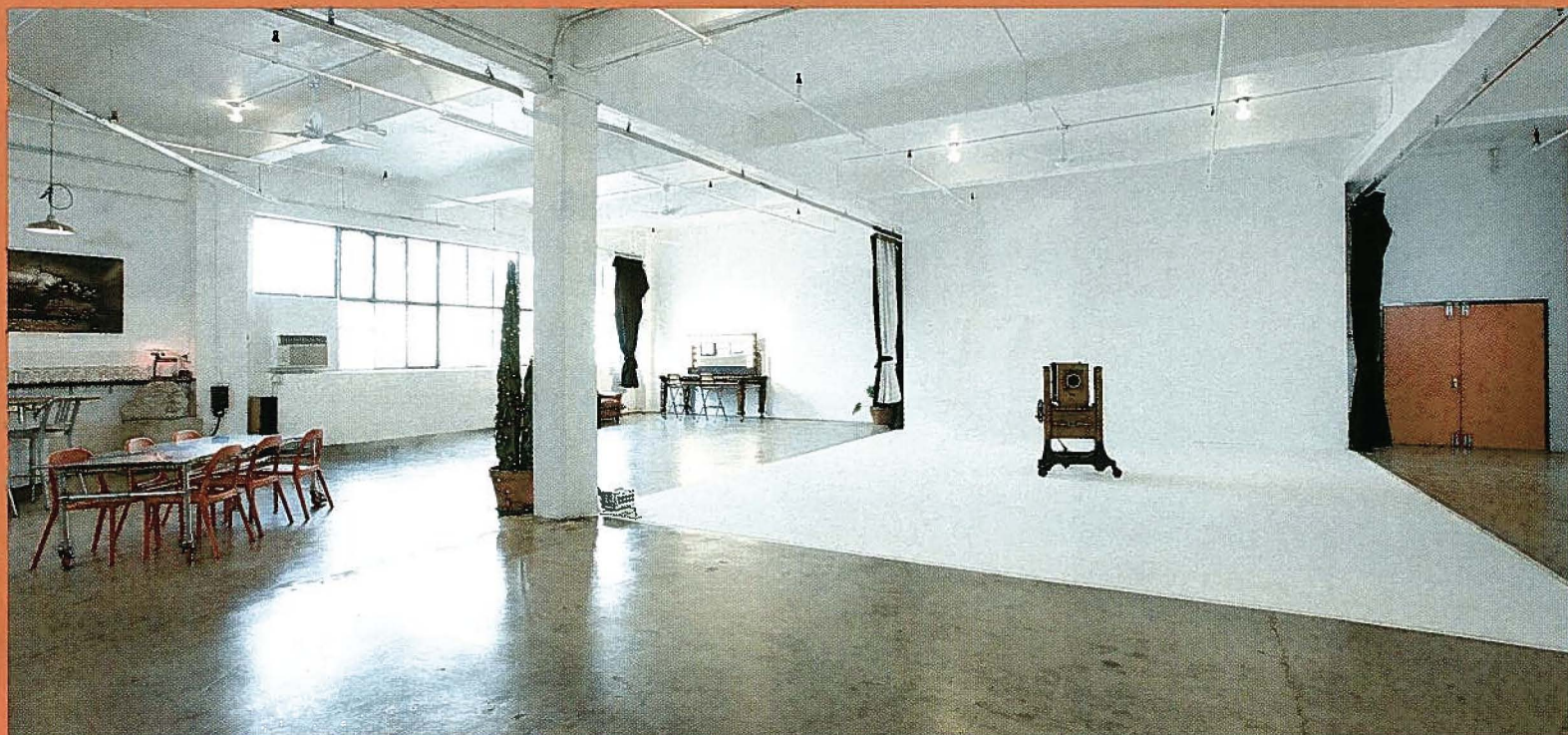
Adar was working as a chef in Israel when a photographer from New York came into his restaurant and asked him to style food for a photo shoot. Adar says he immediately decided he wanted to style food, and he moved to New York in the early 1990s. He connected with the photographer he met in Israel to make some portfolio work, then took those images to Michael Batterberry at *Food Arts* magazine. Batterberry commissioned a cover and interior spreads from Adar, and introduced him to food photographers in New York.

As he was trying to get into styling for photographers, he met and observed Ann Zekauskas, who was "the only one" styling ice cream, he says. He asked her if he could try his hand at scooping ice cream and says she was amazed at how quickly he was able to get a good scoop. "I think she realized that she would have to compete with me one day," Adar recalls. "And I realized that she was really the only person in the industry for years." At the time a lot of food shooters wanted ice cream in their portfolios, so he offered to style ice cream for them if they would shoot his work with other foods.

Now Adar works with all types of foods, both commercially and as a medium for making artwork. He has seen editorial food photography become more loosely styled to meet people's "desire for more simplicity and more realistic food." This style evolution means that more and more stylists—and photographers—are able to create good editorial photographs, and thus more people are getting into the industry. This new generation, however, can struggle when it comes to styling commercial assignments, Adar says. "In editorial photography everything looks appetizing, but when you have to do packages for Healthy Choice and work six weeks on 140 [products], and everyday you have to arrange peas and carrots according to a certain guidelines," that loose, realistic style doesn't apply. "The good paying jobs require meticulousness, an eye for compositions and a lot of thick skin."

—Conor Risch

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