



R A C H E L T A N

THE STORYTELLER

I T ' S A L L I N T H E M O O D

Known for her unique and brilliantly distinct style, Singapore-based lifestyle photographer, Rachel Tan, has a way of captivating audiences' hearts through her use of light, space, shapes and color in her images. Her emotion-evoking photography is a combination of talent and technique, as well as her skills in post-processing to fully realize the frame she envisioned in her mind.

Rachel has a diverse portfolio that spans architecture, nature and portraiture, but she is most recognised for her works within the food and beverage industry; an industry she is highly passionate about and one that is close to her

heart. She currently works with a variety of brands like Cloudstreet (#31 on Asia's 50 Best Restaurants 2021), Cheek Bistro (1 Michelin Star), Kotuwa and more. Her works have also been used in newspapers and prominent publications like The Business Times, Singapore Tatler, The PEAK, Men's Folio, TimeOut, and Yahoo among others.

A storyteller at heart, Rachel is passionate about creating unique perspectives and telling stories through her lens as she continues to seek the extraordinary in the ordinary. To find out more about her life and work, we asked her a few questions.



T H E I N D U S T R Y

Hi Rachel, how did you get started within photography? Your repertoire is wide-ranging, but you are best known for your commercial work within the food & beverage industry. Was it a decision to focus on this genre or was it more of an organic process?

I've always had the passion to tell a story. My journey into photography might not be conventional (as with many others), but I enjoyed every minute of it. As a kid, I used to run around with a camcorder. I could visualise frames and scenes from a story and would try to recreate those scenes and record them. When mobile phones with cameras emerged, I used it primarily to capture life's random moments. Looking back, it seems like photography was something I naturally inclined toward. But at that time, I lacked the knowledge and skills to make that scene/image fully come to life, so it wasn't something I actively pursued.

After graduating with a Psychology degree, I turned to the one industry that I have loved for the longest time - food and beverage (F&B). I don't know what it was, but there was something about food, wine and cocktails that intrigued me. It was not only art on a plate, but I was drawn to the 'science' behind it, along with the techniques and balance of flavour; the hospitality, and immense knowledge that revolves around ingredients and the history of food. It is an industry that brings people together. Food is a big part of any culture and it is so

interesting to learn more about the foods from different societies - their uniqueness, similarities, how differently they use and pair certain ingredients, etc. It is a huge community, an ecosystem - from farmers and producers, to suppliers, restaurants and consumers. (Sorry for the nerd rant!)

And it was this love for the food and beverage industry that set me on a course that brought me to where I am today. I always found myself working part time jobs at F&B establishments during my university days.

After I graduated, I started out as a marketing and guest relations manager for a restaurant, then moved into public relations and branding at a consulting agency specialising in F&B. From there, a job opportunity to work

for a restaurant group presented itself that allowed me to not only put my public relations and marketing experience to good use, but also allowed me to pursue my love for photography. It was there where I was given the freedom to explore, learn, express my perspectives and hone my skill.

Though given the freedom, I was on my own and it was completely self-taught - from watching YouTube tutorials, attending workshops, to constantly being on the lookout for creatives and photographers whose images and videos spoke to me. It was a process, a process of trial and error, constant learning and experimentation.

So, that's how it started, and it just evolved from there.

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T H E

CREATIVE PROCESS

You have a brilliantly distinctive style. How would you describe it and how long did it take you to develop that style?

People would describe my work as dramatic, moody, or sometimes abstract. I would say my work leans toward the cinematic side, with my own preferences toward certain compositions, elements, colors and tones. I wouldn't label my style per se, but I think ultimately, it's about expressing my perspective. Everyone sees and composes a scene differently, and post-processes differently – and that's the beauty about photography.

It took a while to find my style, probably a little over a year and a half, but it has definitely emerged from the collective body of my work. With everything self-taught, it was almost like having a crash course into photography. My journey was inspiring, enlightening, satisfying, and despite the hours I was putting in, I felt happy. It was like I could finally express myself how I wanted to, as I developed the skills to make frames that I envision, come to life.

What's your process when you photograph food? What tips do you have for those that are pursuing food photography or those looking to create their own style?

Sometimes I like it simple and a little abstract, with plenty of negative space - showcasing the dish in all its glory and setting a mood. Other times it's fun to get a little messy and bring in ingredients from the dish to give more insight and context to the image.

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From a macro point of view, it's all in the details. Many small decisions must be made during the shoot and post-processing that result in a collective effect of subtle differences. These differences may seem minute individually, but when put together in the right amounts, make the image even more powerful. For example, from the calibration of light and shadow to the choice of textures and shapes. You also need the patience to lay out and set up the scene - from deciding on the surface, background and props, to determining the right amount and angle of icing sugar sprinkling down on a

cake, the fold of a napkin, the placement and angles of cutlery, ingredients, etc. The trick is to make it look natural, albeit intentionally placed, like it was a natural process in the scene. It needs to make sense. From my experience, less is more.

Here are a few tips when shooting on location:

1. It's crucial for me to understand the scene, what is available (from textures, props, plate ware and ingredients) and my light source. From there, I weigh my options and plan before I begin to compose.
2. Shoot with a purpose. Have an idea and intent on what you aim to achieve. Have a chat with the chef, learn how the dish was made, what inspired it – it gives you a narrative you can use. With food photography, it's great to experiment and play around with positioning and ingredients along the way, but it's also vital that you have some sort of concept and direction to execute. It will give you guidance and a framework that provides structure to your shoot. That is key.

3. After having a feel for the scene, I dial in my settings. Everyone has their own preferences, but for my style, I tend to shoot underexposed more often to not only preserve my highlights but based on how I envision the edit will look and how it aids in my post-processing flow.

I try to do all the work in camera as much as possible as I found that it helps in the efficiency of post processing. With that in mind, I want to capture the scene in the best way from the get-go, so I provide myself the leeway in editing. I think the preparation and planning is just as important (or sometimes even more important) than the post work. One of the things I strongly believe in: work smarter, not harder.



4. Once you have everything set, it's all about getting in the groove and working efficiently. Have fun, switch things up, move things around, etc. But keep in mind that being efficient is a valuable trait. It saves everyone time and keeps the spirits high – and clients love that.



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All in all, trust in the process. Enjoy the journey. Have fun. Put in the work and find your own unique way to express your creative perspective. Through time, you learn to trust your eye and respect your craft. It is as much of the nitty gritty of photography's "rules and regulations" like composition, rule of thirds, leading lines, etc., as much as it is the big picture, the frame as a whole - like a scene in a movie or a mood that invokes an emotional connection and reaction.

Oh, and for the record, yes, I'm lucky to be able to eat most of what I shoot. Perks of the job I guess!

How important is your marketing background when planning promotional shots for businesses?

Understanding marketing and branding is extremely helpful when discussing and planning shoots. It gives you an edge when the client knows you really understand and can encapsulate their brand and take it to another level.

As a photographer and a branding specialist working with different food clients, I usually try to understand and conceptualise images based on each brand and their requirements, which is different for every client. I think the versatility is important, while still portraying your point of view, creative vision and style. I believe that this versatility and ability to really

understand the brand, to not only produce work that is on brand, but to fulfil or enhance a brand's story through the thought and care you put into your work - the details, creativity and vision; that sets you apart from other photographers.

Your headshots show the personalities of the people and businesses so brilliantly. Is it important for you to get to know them first?

It definitely helps to get to know them beforehand. It gives you a better idea of how they are on the job, what they do and how they interact with customers. These are things I can bring into the shoot - to showcase their personality, the business, and what people can expect with this person at the establishment. Also, through this initial conversation/interaction, they get to know me a little better too, and it helps them to feel more comfortable during the shoot.

However, you don't get the luxury of getting to know the subject in advance all the time. Portrait shots of chefs and service staff usually take place on location and it can be tricky to encapsulate the personality of people in portraits especially when they are not used to posing for the camera and when you're in a time crunch. Sometimes I do get more expressive people than others, but through my short interactions with them, I try to get them to feel comfortable enough to let as much of their personality to shine through as possible.





T H E W O R K

Do you tend to follow a brief or do people come to you because of your particular style?

There is a good mix of both. I personally feel that having a brief is great, so I have a clear guideline and understand what the client wants. From there, I plan how I can work my creative perspective into the picture.

Some people do come to me because of my particular style, and they give me free reign to interpret and run the shoot as I like it. It's great to be able to have the freedom to express my vision, but I work better when I have some sort of structure. So, in these cases, I usually use the brand's guidelines or owner's preferences to give me some framework.

What issues do you regularly face and how do you overcome them?

Being primarily a natural light photographer, every shoot is different. Depending on location and the light (or absence of it), I need to adapt accordingly. Settings need to change quickly just because a cloud decides to pop by or go away. Certain set ups need to be moved a certain way depending on where the sun is at that time of day and in which direction I want light coming into my image or where I want my shadow to fall (and how harsh). Adaptability is key. And I guess it has become part of the job.

With food photography, you need to work quickly with items that melt or quickly lose shape – like ice cream, chocolate, ice cubes, foams, soufflés, etc. It is the same with action shots, especially in the kitchen or at the bar – cooking, pouring, shaking, smoke, plating, etc. – sometimes you only have one shot, and you need to make it count.

Don't get me wrong, I like shoots with artificial light too. But there is just something about natural light that I love - how it hits the subject, and with the right angle, amount, time of day, the result can be magical.

Do you have any advice for people looking to create a commercial photography business?

There are many aspects of a business and you need to take on multiple roles. You need to take into consideration things like legal, finances, business development, marketing, branding, public relations, website, social media, etc., on top of photography.

Pointers:

1. I'd say take it one step at a time. Take your time to understand each role and learn to play them well.
2. Determine your brand and the direction you want to take. Find what makes you stand out from the crowd in a saturated market. It is an important step in moving your business forward.
3. Set up a user-friendly website and be active on your social media channels – have your work prominently displayed and easily available for potential clients' viewing.
4. Have a list of brands you would like to work with and don't be afraid to reach out to them.
5. Establish good rapport with clients – it pays off. Repeat business and first-hand recommendations spark from clients having a good experience with you.
6. And when your business grows, consider hiring a team and scaling.

