

It's just too good to look away.

# Obscene Appetites

A picture is worth a thousand...calories? New research proves that the growing obsession with images of seductively delish dishes and sinful dishes can make us feel hungrier—and cause us to overeat. Here's how to stop food porn from screwing up your diet.

*By Theresa O'Rourke*

## Scale Down

It's your classic money shot, the camera tight to reveal every detail of steamy cinnamon buns drizzled just so. Jam-glazed pork falling off the bone. A slice of buttery-crust apple pie letting it all hang out. Sweet or savory, slow-baked or flash-fried, it's food porn—and experts say it's whetting our appetites in ways we never imagined. "Like the sexual kind, food porn allows us to lust after taboo things," says psychologist Susan Albers, Psy.D. author of *Eating Mindfully*. "And now it's on our terms: We can search for exactly what turns us on, enlarge the images, and linger for as long as we want."

In food porn, size definitely matters.



Just a few short years ago, food sites were predominantly recipe-driven. Now, a growing number shamelessly flaunt the fact that few people visit for the articles.

FoodPornDaily.com (tagline: Click. Drool. Repeat.) stripped away recipes altogether in favor of luscious panned-in shots. Food images are also the fastest-growing category on the hugely popular inspiration-board site Pinterest, where they generate 50 percent more re-pins than fashion and style photos. If you don't find anything that turns you on there, log on to Flickr's Food Porn Group. Boasting nearly 600,000 images, it's one of the most active categories on the photo-sharing site.

Problem is, that Flickr group isn't the only thing that's growing. Photos seem harmless, but they provoke a real emotional and physical hunger response that can be tough to control, says neuroscientist Laura Martin, Ph.D., an assistant professor at the University of Kansas Medical Center who studies how we respond to food. And straight out of the "insult, meet injury" department: Those who are overweight appear to be more sensitive to the effect of viewing food porn. Does that mean you can never ogle your cake without eating it too? Not necessarily. There are savvy ways to curb your appetite—online and in real life.

### Eating with Our Eyes

The best food porn plays on the fact that the more indulgent a photo appears, the more likely it will trigger our instincts to eat. "Food porn relies on a phenomenon called 'supernormal stimuli,' which

exaggerates qualities we're already hardwired to love," says Deirdre Barrett, Ph.D., an evolutionary psychologist at Harvard Medical School's Behavioral Medicine Program and author of *Waistland: The Revolutionary Science Behind Our Weight and Fitness Crisis*. Usually, that translates to visual cues that a food is high in calories—things like pooling oils and the sheen of sugar—which were coveted assets back in hunter-gatherer days, when calories (particularly, the gooey, fatty ones) were harder to come by, says Barrett. That might explain why, according to a recent study from 360i, a marketing firm that studies online trends, pictures of desserts are the most likely to be shared online. Cheesy, oozy comfort foods also get "favorited" more frequently on sites like Food Gawker.

But it rarely ends there. A study in the April issue of *The Journal of Neuroscience* found that viewing images of insanely delicious food lit up the brain's reward center and caused women with the most active mental response to overeat. Another study in the journal *Obesity* found that simply seeing food increases levels of the hunger hormone ghrelin, even after eating regular meals. And maybe worst of all, the part of your brain that governs self-control fails to kick in with food porn the way it does with actual food. In a recent study, Belgian researchers found that women who looked at images of chocolate were more likely than women who sat in front of a plate of chocolate to overeat hours later. Fascinating! Not to mention, troubling.

Dieters, unsurprisingly, are among the most susceptible



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to this seduction. A study published in the journal *Appetite* found that non-dieters ate the same amount of candy whether food was featured in the television programming they were viewing or not; dieters consumed 60 more calories when they came across a food image. “Some women go online for inspiration or as

a distraction, just as they do with other social media sites,” says Albers. “But others spend hours there, and they tend to be on restrictive diets. They’re looking to satisfy those urges vicariously.”

Unfortunately, they rarely leave sated. “Food was never meant to be experienced from just a visual perspective,” says Amy Sousa, Ph.D., an anthropologist at the Hartman Group, Inc., a research consulting firm that

tracks food culture. “When we see food, we need to fill in the blanks of what it will taste like. Merely looking makes for an unsatisfying experience.”

### The Food Porn Diet

Cutting back doesn’t mean blocking every friend who Instagrams an amazing meal. But you can start by seeking out healthier foods in your online searches. After all, if photos can make you crave cheesecake, a good enough

shot might turn you on to Brussels sprouts.

What’s more, the same kind of mental imagery that helps kick-start food cravings can also help crush them. A study from Adelaide University in Australia found that women were less likely to cave to a high-calorie food when they were asked to conjure up another (nonedible) object of affection—for instance, imagining the sights and smells of their favorite destination on the planet.

And although food porn

**The Munchie Shot** What makes some food pics particularly drool-inducing? Deirdre Barrett, Ph.D., author of *Supernormal Stimuli*, deconstructs the details that trick your gut in one of the most-liked savory shots on Foodporndaily.com.

**1. It’s larger than life.**

This extreme close-up (you can practically see the pores of the bread crumbs!) is no accident. Zooming in on food makes you feel as though you’re having an intimate experience with it. The result: You end up eating more.

**2. Every calorie counts.**

Even if the portion itself isn’t huge, showing a hyperconcentration of salt, fat, and refined carbs in every bite makes you want to dig in.

**3. Oooh, shiny!** Your body craves fat, so you seek out the slickness

of oils and refractive shine—found, in this case, cradling the pasta in an orgy of butter, three different cheeses, and bacon grease.

**4. Imaginary mouthfeel.**

Blistering at the dome suggests texture—can’t you just imagine piercing through the crust?



GUTTER CREDIT TK



## Scale Down

temporarily disables your willpower, certain activities have been shown to weaken your brain's response to food. A study in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* found that after men and women biked for an hour, their brains' food-reward response barely registered. Researchers believe that vigorous activity dampened the desire to seek out food (and, they theorize, regular intense exercise could keep this effect intact long-term). On the flip side, not getting enough sleep leaves you wide open to food porn's seduction. A study in *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* showed your brain's hunger- and appetite-regulating center is more likely to be stimulated by images of food when you're sleep-deprived. Yet another reason to get those eight hours of shut-eye—or, at the very least, to not prowl the Interweb when you don't.

But the most effective technique is probably the same whether you're using it in the bedroom or the kitchen: Make your online fantasies inspiration to get busy at home. Research shows that we consume fewer calories when we cook because we control portions and ingredients. There are also a growing number of sites that serve up food porn with nutritional information (like Edamam.com) or ones like Foodily.com, which allow you to search for a dish without certain ingredients (say, carrot cake without raisins). And the benefits go beyond the scale: "Consumers who cook tend to have a healthier relationship with food and are more likely to be satisfied by what they eat," says Sousa. "They may peruse these images online, but they are less inclined to mindlessly eat as a result of it because they're actually experiencing all the sensual pleasure that comes with food." ■

## This Meal is Not Yet Rated

Mouthwatering pics don't come with a warning, but maybe they should. WH morphs an innocent scoop of vanilla into a racy, smutty sundae.

**G**



You could show your kids this.

**PG**



Still tasteful.

**PG-13**



Now we're talking!

**R**



Feel dirty yet? You should.

**NC-17**



Oh my! Viewer discretion is advised.