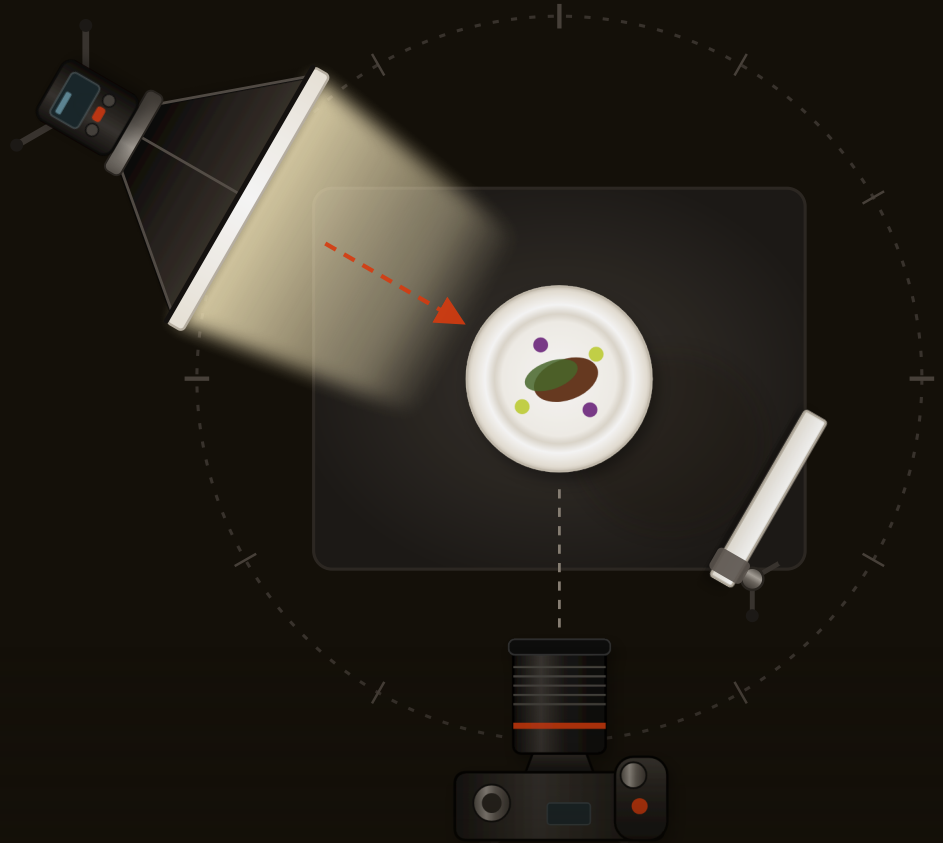




Guess How I Lit This

*Eight chapters on one light, then two.
Read the light first. Then build it.*

KYRAN JOHN

EVERY SETUP DRAWN AS THE GEAR YOU ACTUALLY OWN.

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What this book is

This is a reading book before it is a doing book. Every chapter puts a finished frame in front of you and asks you to work out how it was lit, using only what is visible in the picture. Then it shows you the diagram.

That order matters. Most lighting education hands you a diagram and asks you to copy it, which teaches you one setup. Working backwards from the result teaches you to read any frame you will ever see, including the ones your clients send you as reference at eleven at night.

8

chapters, built from one source upward

30

of my own frames, broken down in full

4

clues that decode almost any frame

Who it is for

Photographers who can already make a clean exposure and want to stop guessing at light. If you have shot a menu, a product flat lay or a cocktail and felt the result was fine but not expensive, this is the gap it closes.

Who it is not for

Absolute beginners. If shutter, aperture and ISO are still a fight, start with the beginner workbook first and come back to this one.

Gear, and why the diagrams still show it

Every setup is described by size, distance, height and position relative to your subject, because that is what determines the picture. A window, a strobe, a continuous panel and a bedsheet in a doorway are the same source if they are the same size at the same distance. The diagrams draw real equipment so there is no doubt what you are looking at, and the shot sheets name exactly what was on the stand. Read the geometry, then use what you own.

How to use it

Every chapter runs the same five steps. Do not skip step two.

01

Look

Sit with the frame for a full minute before you read anything. Longer than feels comfortable.

02

Guess

Write down where you think the source is, how big it is and how far away. An unwritten guess is not a guess.

03

Read the clues

Four things tell you almost everything: highlight shape, shadow edge, shadow direction and how the light falls off.

04

See the reveal

The shot breakdown: the real overhead, the gear on the stand and the settings. Compare it against what you wrote. The gap between the two is the lesson.

05

Build it

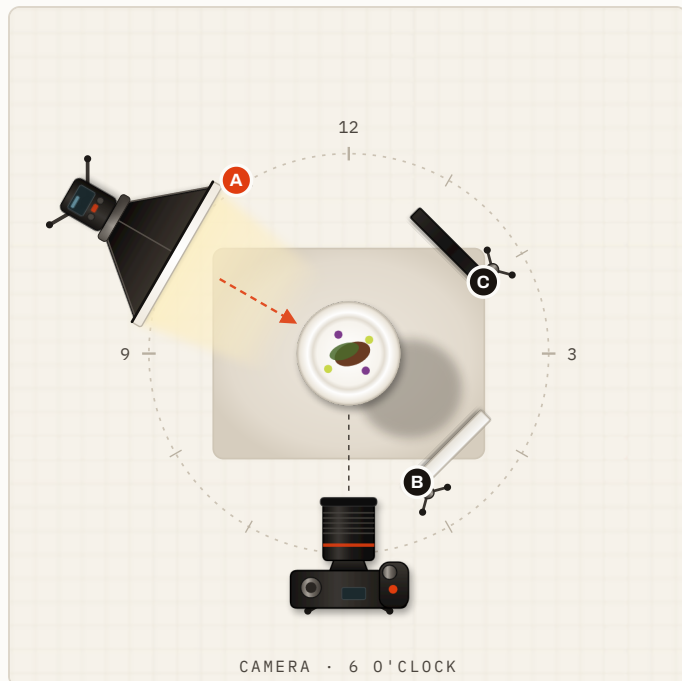
The recipe, the build steps and two alternate versions. Recreate it with whatever you own, then shoot both variations. A setup you have not built is a setup you do not have.

One rule

Do not read the reveal page first. The whole method depends on being wrong in writing before you are right. That discomfort is what makes it stick.

Reading the diagrams

Every reveal uses the same overhead view, drawn as the equipment itself. Here is the whole vocabulary.



Light spill on the table shows where the beam lands. The soft grey patch is the cast shadow, always pointing away from the key.



Soft source

A modifier bigger than a fist. Softbox, scrim, window, bedsheet. Drawn with its black body, the steel rods and the white diffusion face toward the subject.



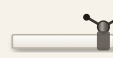
Hard source

A bare head or anything small and undiffused. The exposed flash tube glows.



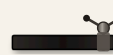
Grid or snoot

A hard source with its spill controlled. Honeycomb drawn on the face.



White card

Bounce. Returns light into the shadow side. Foam core on edge, clamped to a stand.



Black card

Negative fill. Takes light away and adds edge.



Camera

Always at 6 o'clock, looking at the subject. Body, lens and tripod legs, seen from above.

The clock

Position is given in clock hours around your subject, seen from above. 6 o'clock is where the camera stands. 12 o'clock is directly behind the subject. 3 is camera right, 9 is camera left.

Distance

Distance is given in subject widths, never in feet. If the plate is ten inches across, one plate width is ten inches. Scale the whole diagram to whatever you are shooting and the geometry holds.

Height

Height lives in the side view panel beside each overhead. It is given in degrees above the surface, measured from the subject. Zero is level with the plate, ninety is directly overhead. Height controls shadow length. Position controls shadow direction. Size and distance control shadow edge.

The four clues

In order. Each one narrows the answer before you look at the next.

01 Shadow direction

Where the shadows point tells you where the source is not. Trace them back through the subject and you have the clock position. Do this first, always, because it eliminates most of the possibilities in one move.

02 Shadow length

Long shadows mean a low source. Short shadows mean a high one. A subject with almost no shadow underneath it is lit from close to overhead, or is sitting on something that is bouncing hard.

03 Shadow edge

How many millimetres does the shadow take to go from dark to light. A tight edge means a small source, or a far one, or both. A gradual edge means a big source, close. This is size and distance in one reading.

04 Highlight shape

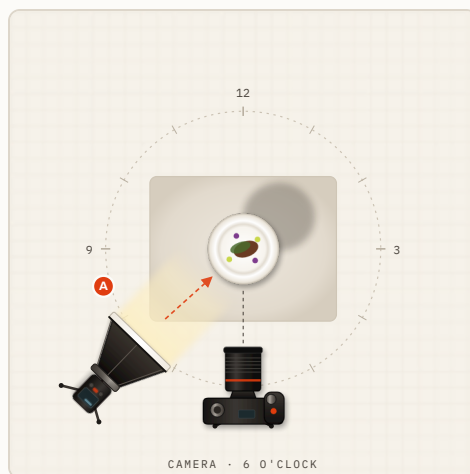
Look at the brightest specular on the wettest part of the frame. That shape is the modifier, reflected. A long soft band is a strip or a window. A round soft blob is an octa or an umbrella. A tiny hard dot is a bare head.

The fifth clue, once you are quick

Falloff. How fast the light dies as it travels across the frame. Fast falloff means the source is very close to the subject. Slow, even falloff across a wide table means it is far away or very large. Falloff is what gives away a window versus a small softbox when everything else looks identical.

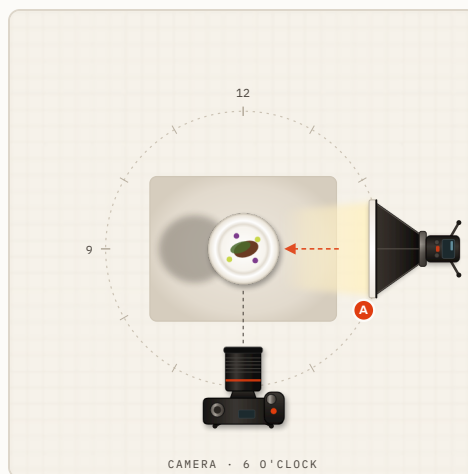
The position map

Four zones. Every setup in this book is one of them, or a blend of two.



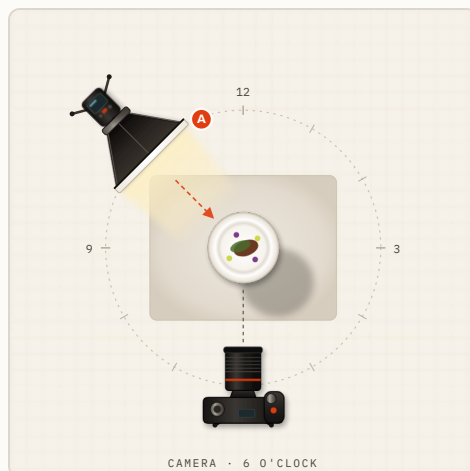
6 o'clock, flat front

Source beside the camera, at 5, 6 or 7 o'clock. Even, safe and flat. No real shadow, no drama. Good for a detail record, bad for mood.



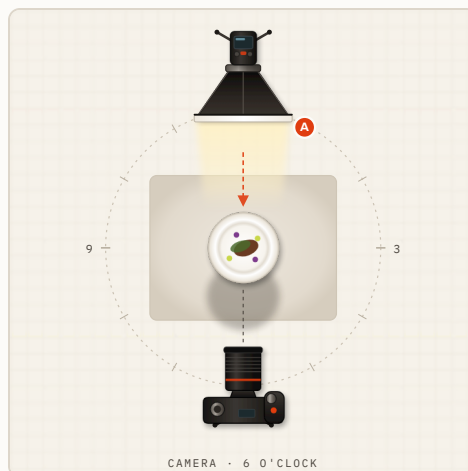
3 or 9 o'clock, side

Strong directional shadow. Texture becomes visible and the subject gains volume. This is the workhorse for food and product, and the safest place to start.



10, 11, 1 or 2, the magic zone

Slightly behind and to the side. You get separation, edge highlight and, on anything translucent, a glow from inside. This is where cinematic food photography lives.



12 o'clock, straight back

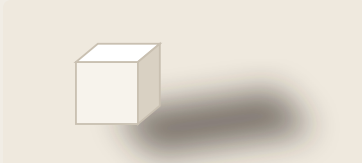
Directly behind the subject. Maximum rim and silhouette, minimum surface detail. High drama and the hardest one to control for spill.

Move it thirty degrees

Same camera, same subject, same modifier, different picture. Position is the decision that matters most. Watch the cast shadow swing round the plate in each diagram above.

Shadow edge is size and distance

There is only one variable behind edge quality: how big the source is from where the subject is standing.



Very soft

Edge takes more than half a plate width to resolve

Source is larger than the subject and very close. Think window at arm's length.



Soft

Edge takes a finger width

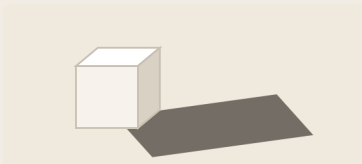
Source roughly the size of the subject, about one subject width away. The default for food.



Defined

Edge is a clean few millimetres

Source smaller than the subject, or the same size but pulled back two or three widths.



Hard

Edge is a knife line

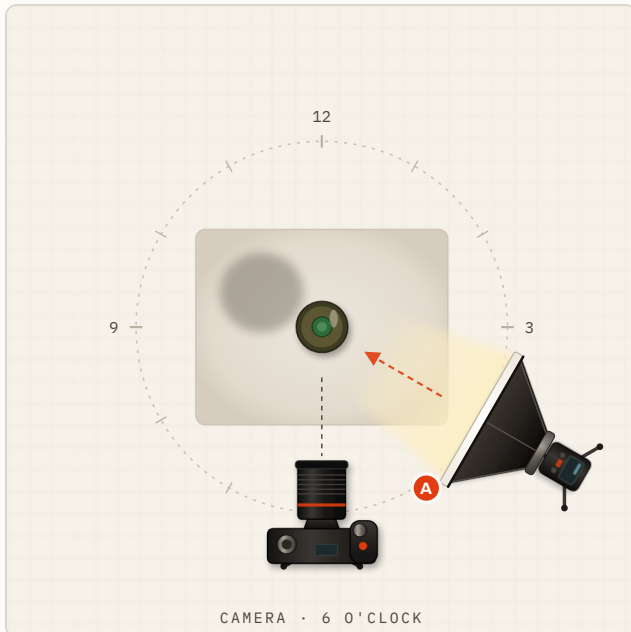
Small source at distance, no diffusion. Sun, bare head, phone torch.

The one thing to remember

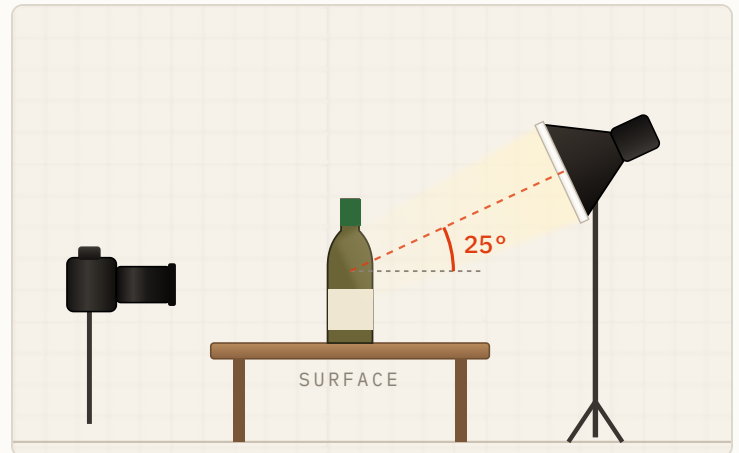
Power does not change edge quality. Turning a light up makes the picture brighter, not harder. If you want a softer edge you must make the source bigger or bring it closer. If you want a harder edge you must make it smaller or take it further away. Photographers lose entire afternoons to this one confusion, so it is worth reading twice.

One bottle, eleven lights

Same bottle, same box, same backdrop, same camera. The only thing that changes from frame to frame is what is on the front of the light. This is the fastest way to learn what a modifier actually does.



The base build. Key at 4 o'clock, low, so the bottle throws its shadow back and to the left.



Side view. Roughly 25 degrees up, which is why the shadow runs long.

WHAT STAYS THE SAME

Subject 2013 Pouilly-Fuissé

Surface white box, plaster wall

Key 4 o'clock, low

Camera two framings, locked

Changes the modifier only

Two families

Five of these frames are soft and six are hard. Sort them into the two piles first using the shadow edge alone. That is one clue and it does half the work.

Then read the wall

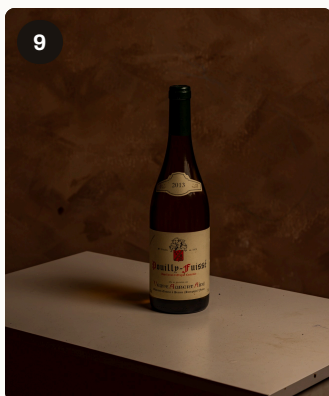
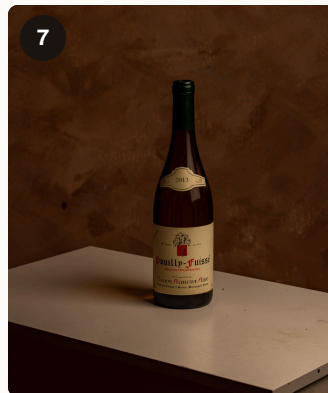
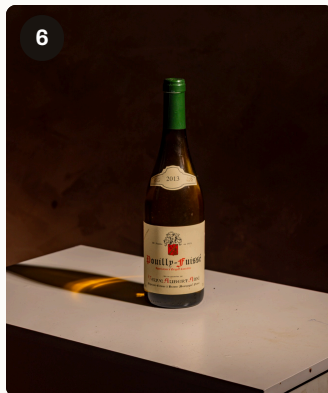
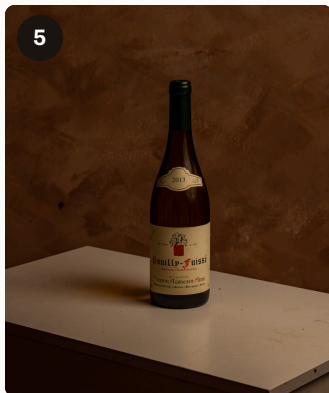
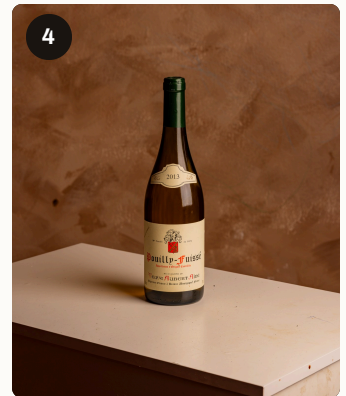
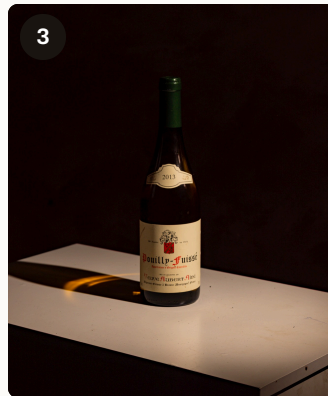
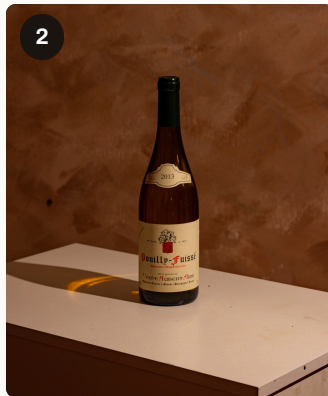
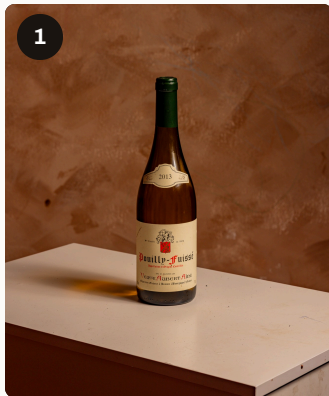
Inside each family, the backdrop tells you how much spill the modifier allows. Bright wall means nothing is controlling it. Dark wall means a grid, a snoot, a feather or a flag.

How to run it

Turn the page and write a modifier under every frame before you look at the answers. Score one point for the right family, one for the right modifier. Eighteen or more out of twenty-two and you are reading light, not guessing it.

Name the modifier

Write your answer under each frame. Soft or hard first, then the exact modifier.



Score

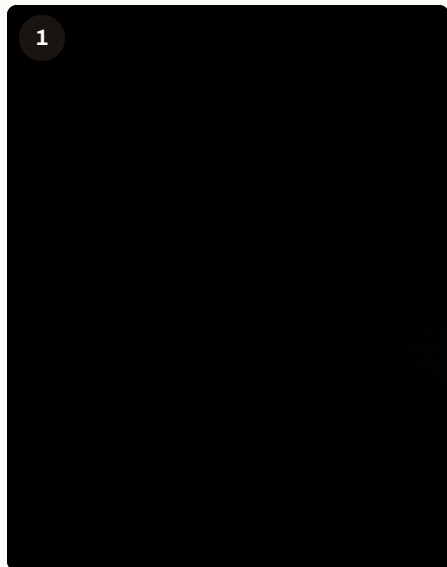
Family ___ / 11

Modifier ___ / 11

Answers are in the full book.

Build sequence: snoot and softbox

One iced coffee, six frames, nothing moved but the lights and one white card. Shoot a build like this every time you add a second light: one source at a time, then together, then fix what the pair breaks.



COFFEE • NO FLASH

No flash

Ambient check first. At 1/250s, f/9, ISO 100 the room records as pure black, so every bit of light in the next frames is light you put there.



COFFEE • SOFTBOX ONLY • 4 O'CLOCK

Softbox only, 4 o'clock

The front of the glass and the tabletop read cleanly, but the coffee looks flat and opaque. A front source only gets reflection.



COFFEE • SNOOT • 11 O'CLOCK

Snoot only, 11 o'clock

Backlight on its own. The ice and the top of the coffee glow, a hard shadow runs at the lens, and everything outside the beam falls to black.



COFFEE • SNOOT X SOFTBOX

Snoot x softbox

Both lights on. The glow and the clean front are there together, but the wall jumps up with them. Too much spill reaching the backdrop.



COFFEE • W FILL, FLASH, SNOOT

Fill, flash, snoot

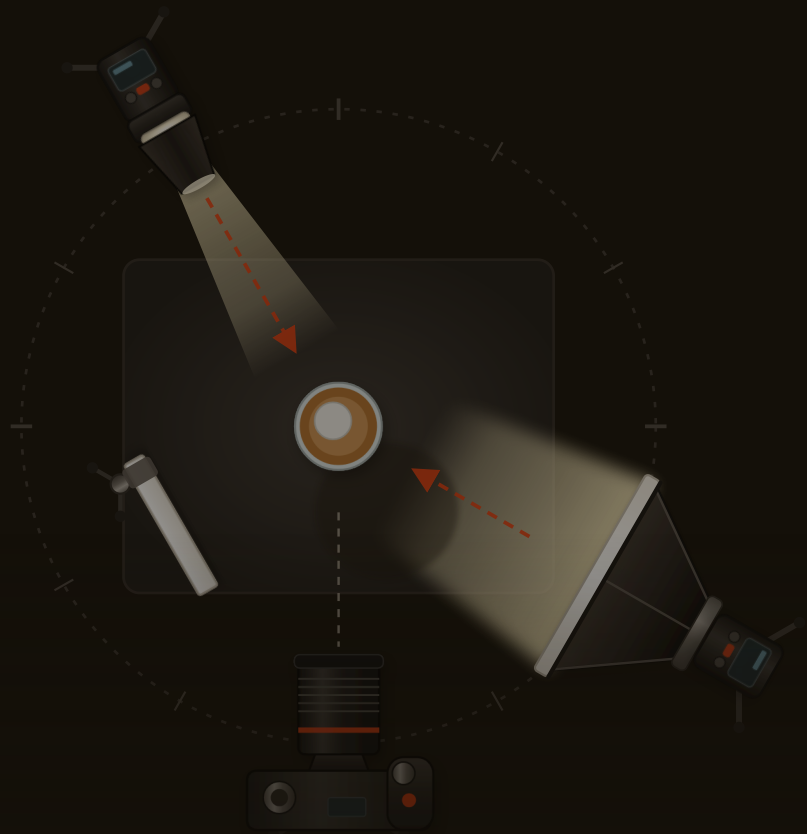
The wall drops back down and a white card comes in at camera left. You can see its edge in frame. The front of the box lifts from near black to readable.



FINAL SHOT • COFFEE

Final

Card pulled just out of frame. Backlit glow from the snoot, a soft clean front from the box, open shadows from the card, and a dark backdrop.



— THAT WAS THE FREE PART

You just guessed eleven frames. The answers are in the book.

The full book walks every frame backwards: eight chapters from one light to two, 30 of my own frames, every reveal drawn as the gear on the stand, and the answer key to every practice frame you just tried.

Get the full book

Digital and print. Link in bio, or foreignkmedia.com.

Post your guess

Tag @foreignfoodkollektive with your answer for frame 6. I read every one.

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