kitchen knife basics
learning to care for your kitchen knives
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A KITCHEN KNIFE is deceptive. It’s simple, yet powerful. And the actual cutting edge, the source of its power, is barely visible to the human eye. Maybe that’s why it’s so easy to take it for granted. But resist that urge. Because just a modicum of knowledge can help you learn the best way to maintain your kitchen knives and keep them sharp.

\[ Image: Cutting edge of Shun chef knife \]
Edge Styles
Every knife has an edge style, a way the blade has been ground to make it sharp. The most common, of course, is a V-edge which looks like it sounds—two slanting sides that go straight to the cutting edge. The great majority of kitchen knives have this type of edge. Or a variation on it called a compound bevel (or double bevel)—a large V with a much smaller V on top of it at the very end. The second V is so small that, unless you happen to have the eyesight of an eagle, you would never see it.

**BEVEL.** The term bevel is commonly used for any surface on the blade that has been ground to form the edge. The primary bevel is the largest (and most visible) and can vary greatly in depth—from a 32nd of an inch to 3/8ths or larger. Go to the kitchen and look closely at the blade of your chefs knife. You’ll notice near the edge of the blade there’s an area where it angles more steeply—that’s the primary bevel.
Along with the standard V, other common edge styles are *convex*, *hollow*, *chisel*, and serrated (see illustration on previous page):

**Convex** is a particularly sophisticated edge that looks a bit like the cross-section of an airplane wing. Two long arcs curve toward each other and intersect at the edge. It’s sharp, but stronger than a traditional V. It’s trickier to sharpen and often, after multiple sharpenings, tends to be transformed into a traditional V.

**Hollow** edges are common for hunting knives and such as well as inexpensive butcher knives, but rare for quality kitchen knives. The shape of the curves that create the edge curve in the opposite direction as convex.

**Chisel** edges are mainly found on traditional Japanese knives, especially sushi knives, and are wickedly sharp. They’re ground on one side only while the other is left flat (more or less) which gives them a very small total edge angle. Yikes. (I explain more about angles shortly.)

**Serrated** edges most people are aware of, and are most common in bread knives. (Also tomato knives, as well as steak knives.) Like chisel-edges, they are ground on one side only, which also makes them quite sharp. They hold their sharpness incredibly well because the actual cutting edge is hidden inside each mini-arch, protected by the pointy outer edge of the blade. Unfortunately, they are time-consuming to sharpen and many professional sharpeners will not bother. They’re also problematic to hone. Some sharpening experts advise simply buying a new one when your old serrated gets too dull.

*Recap*: The odds are, your kitchen knife has a traditional V-edge which will make maintaining it a pretty straightforward affair. But if it does not have this standard kind of edge, then you need to be aware it will need some special attention when being sharpened and honed.
What’s Your Angle?

When you hear a kitchen knife pro say a knife has a 15-degree edge, they are not talking about the overall cutting edge of the knife, they are talking about only one side. To measure this angle—logically called the edge angle—you must draw an imaginary line through the center of the blade and measure from there to the outer side of the primary bevel. (See illustration.)

The complete cutting angle of the knife (which is rarely referred to and is composed of the sum of both edge angles) is called the included angle. Since most knife blades are ground symmetrically, in most cases, the included angle for a knife is simply twice the edge angle. Simple, huh?

Knives manufactured in the Western/German tradition (e.g. Henckels and Wusthof and crew) are typically ground with a 20 to 22 degree edge angle. Which means that the actual knife (the included angle) is cutting with 40–44 degree wedge. Doesn’t seem that sharp, does it? It isn’t. It’s designed to be just sharp enough, yet take a ton of abuse. It can nick a bone and not chip, or saw it’s way through frozen pork tenderloin (something it should never be used to cut through in the first place) and still not crack or break. It’s a warhorse.

Japanese knives (and Japanese hybrids) are factory ground with edges from 10 to 15 degrees. Which adds up to included angles of 20 to 30 degrees—the smallest of these creating a wedge half the size of the typical Western knife. Whoa. No wonder Japanese knives are all the rage—they make everything you slice feel like butter. But beware, there’s no free lunch. Try abusing a Japanese knife and you will pay for it with chips and cracks galore!
There’s another major difference between Western and Japanese knives—and that’s the steel they’re made from. Western knives are generally made from a softer, yet tougher steel, Japanese from a harder, yet brittler.

Before we leave this discussion on angles, let me repeat that not all knives are created with two symmetrical edge angles. There are some notable exceptions—the biggest being the whole family of chisel-edged traditional Japanese knives which are beveled on one side only. One of the reasons they’re designed this way is to take advantage of the geometry. Think about it. Instead of adding up two 15 degree angles to get an included angle of 30 degrees, their second angle is perpendicular (or 0 degrees), thus making the included angle (the total wedge of the knife) a screaming 15 degrees! That’s almost three times the sharpitude of your typical German knife. That’s scary sharp.

The Final Frontier—Under the Microscope

The cutting edge of your favorite chef’s knife may seem to be a smooth ridge of metal, but it’s not. If you looked at it through a microscope, you would see it was made up of very tiny—and very jagged and uneven—teeth. Sort of like an ultra-fine roughed-up saw blade. Depending on the quality of the steel the knife was hewed from, as well as the fit and finish of its latest sharpening, these teeth might almost disappear (under the microscope). On top of this, because the metal has been ground to such a fine wedge, these teeth would be extremely thin.

Why is this helpful to know? Because it should alert you to how delicate, and susceptible to corrosion, a knife blade really is. It’s not like a spoon or fork or some other totally polished kitchen implement. It’s got a raw, unfinished component—the edge—that’s continually being exposed to the elements. Exposed to hard surfaces, to acidic fruit juices, to water and air ripe for oxidation (i.e. rust), to all kinds of stuff it needs to be protected from. That’s why it’s so important not to let it bang around in a drawer or soak in a pot or lie unwashed in a puddle of pineapple juice.

On the next page are two photos taken with an SEM (scanning electron microscope) of a knife blade ground at two different grits—the first significantly courser than the
second. The first is at a magnification of 600x, the second 800x. Notice how rough and unfinished-looking the knife edges are in these photos. How thin and delicate.
Take a tour of the kitchen knives you own. Can you correctly identify what kind of edges they all have? How are you currently storing them? Are you protecting them from getting damaged and dull? Now that you know a little bit more about the nature of your kitchen knives’ edges, hopefully it will inspire you to do your best to care for them. The better you protect and maintain your knives, the less you’ll have to sharpen them and the longer they’ll last. ■

(Photo credits: Both electron microscope photos are from an academic paper titled “Experiments on Knife Sharpening” published in 2004 by John D. Verhoven, a professor at Iowa State University.)
No matter how much moola you paid for your favorite cooks knife and no matter how incredibly well you treat it, it is still, someday, going to get dull. There’s no avoiding it. Pure physics. Fine cutting edges, after continual use, must wear down. Super-tempered steel, while very hard and very tough, is not eternal. So don’t bemoan, or live in denial, but learn what you can do.

Honing will prolong the sharpness of your kitchen knife and avoid having to sharpen it more than necessary.

And what you can do, with a little bit of effort and dedication, is to learn how to hone. Honing will prolong the sharpness of your kitchen knife and avoid having to sharpen it any more than absolutely necessary. Which is what you want, because, ironically enough, sharpening itself is an act of destruction. Every time you sharpen, some of the metal on the blade is ground off, never to be seen again. So, the less you sharpen, the longer you maintain your
knife’s pristine condition. Thus, the only way to sharpen less, and still enjoy a sharp knife, is to hone regularly.

**WHAT IS HONING?** Honing (or steeling) is a nondestructive technique that simply pushes the microscopic-sized teeth that make up the edge of a knife back into alignment. Through use (and misuse), the teeth get folded over, this way and that, which makes the knife duller. But it’s not truly dull—it just needs to be honed.

The illustration below helps explain more about the relationship between honing and sharpening by taking you through one sharpening cycle.

Honing and sharpening, though not the same, complement each other. Doing both will allow you to keep your kitchen knives maximum sharp, with minimum wear.
PART TWO

PRO SHARPENING
What do you do when you’re dying for sharp kitchen knives, but you don’t have the time (or desire) to sharpen them yourself? When—between trimming the azaleas, chauffeuring your kid to soccer, picking up salmon for dinner on the way home from work—plying a chef’s knife that actually slides through carrots instead of prying them open, seems like a hopeless fantasy.

- Do you buy some kind of fast-and-easy electric knife sharpener?
- Do you throw up your hands saying “I can’t deal with this!” and simply buy a new knife?
- Do you sadly and reluctantly just give up and learn to live with dull knives?
› Or do you find a qualified pro to do it for you?

Funny enough, I’m guessing the last answer is probably the least chosen, yet the most viable way to go. And even though using a professional sharpening service may seem like an expensive or cumbersome solution, when you factor in the lifespan of your knives, the cost of having to buy new ones, and the hassle of perpetually putting up with dull-cutting blades, it may be cheaper and simpler than you think.

Pro Quality
For some reason a lot us who are used to trusting professionals to help us with all sorts of other household duties—i.e. mowing our lawns, cleaning our carpets, troubleshooting our personal computers—don’t consider using a professional knife-sharpening service. Why is that?

(Possible reasons—garnered from my own personal experience.)

1) We don’t know they exist.

2) We don’t know how to locate one.

3) We worry that even if we do locate one, they’ll cost too much.

4) We’re afraid a sub-standard outfit might ruin our beloved knives.

5) We can’t afford the time to deal with any of the above, OR, even if we could manage to spare the time, we deeply doubt it’ll be worth it.

Answers to the five reasons above:

**NUMBER ONE**—they’re he-re. Some home gourmets may not even realize these professional sharpening services exist for consumers, and that, along with professional chefs, they service consumer cooks as well. It’s a big knife-sharpening world out there. Don’t shirk an invaluable resource.

**NUMBER TWO**—where? Thanks to the internet, assembling a short list of possible candidates for any given service is not the big hairy deal it used to be. Just google that puppy.
Try “knife sharpening services” and you’ll see an endless scroll fill your screen. And if you’re willing to mail your knives somewhere—and there’s no reason you shouldn’t—you’ll have a long list to choose from, a variety of approaches, and some high-end candidates. Which brings us to . . .

**NUMBER THREE**—how much? As much as it might sound like a luxury, sending your knives to be sharpened somewhere, depending on the service, could cost less than 6 dollars per knife. For example: a 4-inch paring knife could run $5–7, while a standard 8-inch chef knife $6–10. Most services charge by size range, such as $6 for blades 7 to 10 inches long, but some figure their rates more exactly by the inch. Either way, considering you’re getting professional treatment, they’re pretty darn affordable.

A package of two 8-inch chef knives and two 4-inch paring knives, including shipping, could run as little a $33.

Of course, if you’re not dropping them off yourself or using a highly-trained team of super-charged carrier pigeons—you’ll have to pay for shipping. But if you deploy the good old USPS (as long as it’s still in business) and not something pricey like FedEx overnight, it won’t add up to as much as you might think. Plus, the more knives you send in one package, the more you can spread out the shipping costs—thus, you’d be smart to do at least three or four blades at a time.

So, for example, a package of two 8-inch chef knives and two 4-inch paring knives, including shipping, could run as little a $33. Total. ( Barely the price of a movie date and a drink and some popcorn.) Does that sound like too much? Think of what you’re getting—the kind of scintillating sharpitude a professional chef has in their hands every single day. Which could last to a year or more before needing to be resharpened. (That is if you hone regularly.)

If that still sounds like too much to pay, then maybe you should consider buying your own sharpening system and learning how to do it yourself. But, along with the startup cost of investing in a quality DIY system ($120 and up), it will cost you time (depending on the
system—a serious chunk of it) to master and maintain the skill of sharpening. Especially at the beginning.

**NUMBER FOUR**—avoiding ruination. How do you know any of the services you’ve looked up on the web are any good? How do you know they won’t chew up your kitchen knives instead of bringing them back to their original factory sharpitude? This is a really good question and a really important one—so much so that I cover it more in depth elsewhere (see Chapter 4, *Finding a Sharpening Service* and Chapter 5, *Reviews of Three Quality Knife Sharpening Services*, which covers services I have used and can recommend.)

Suffice it to say, I am certain that through the web (or other avenues) and my guidance anyone can find a service that will satisfy even the most finicky customer (of which I am one).

**NUMBER FIVE**—time, time, time. Properly caring for your knives, no matter which way you go, will take more time. No doubt about it. Just as it does for your car, your lawnmower, and, the-mother-of-all-time-sucks—your house. But if you choose to send them to a professional, and in between sharpenings hone them yourself, it will be a matter of minutes, not hours. Sixty-second snippets, every couple days. Not quantity, but consistency, will make all the difference. If you wish your knives to be sharp, all it takes is a little diligence.

*Mailing off my kitchen knives to a quality knife sharpening service has reenergized my culinary life.*

The good news is that mail-in sharpening services are designed to save time and make things easy. Most have simple, clear instructions (which often includes a downloadable form to print out) as well as standard means of payment (credit card or PayPal). The steps required to properly package up and mail out a box of knives can be mastered in 20 minutes. Yes, you’ll have to learn how to roll them up in newspaper without nicking yourself. (Or—you can just buy a set of knife guards.) But after you’ve done it once, and gotten the hang of the whole process, the next time will be a cinch. Plus, KitchenKnifeGuru is always here to help and guide!
Knife Renewal

True confession: Mailing off my kitchen knives to a quality knife sharpening service has reenergized my culinary life. I’m not exaggerating. It’s evaporated the nagging complaint I had carried around for years in the back of my cranium that moaned, “Our kitchen knives are not sharp enough, but what can I do about it?” It’s given me back my cutting edge beauties for a price that’s more than worth it. It’s saved me time. Made prep work fun. Simple tasks like slicing up a melon for breakfast, instead of being a herky-jerky trauma, go smooth and quick. I now enjoy pro-quality blades every single day without having to add “sharpening the knives” to my already long list of duties and errands.

It could do the same for you! Do yourself a favor and seriously consider a knife sharpening service. ■

(Photo credit: Thanks to Chi-Chatty on Flickr.com for her photo of the sharpening wheel.)
**Finding a Sharpening Service**

**REMEMBER THAT TIME** you made copies of your front door key, and even though all the key cutters charged a going rate, the first one you went to made lousy keys and the second terrific ones?

It’s the same with knife sharpening services—there are numerous companies charging comparable prices but not always offering comparable quality. There are also plenty that have been around for a while that you wouldn’t want to entrust your Masahiro chef knife to. And while spending a premium (especially for Japanese knives) definitely
offers you access to a higher level of expertise, it’s no iron-clad guarantee in and of itself. It’s best to be well-informed—about the sharpening service you will be sending your knives to, about the sharpening process in general, and about your knives.

**What Can Go Wrong**

While a top-notch sharpening service is a cook’s best friend, a second-rate one is their natural-born enemy. Here’s how an inferior knife sharpening service can sabotage a knife. They can:

1) Not grind it sharp enough. Duh. This is small potatoes, compared to the others.

2) Grind it unevenly. Which will a) not allow your knife to work at its optimum level, and b) require unnecessary extra grinding to get it fixed.

3) Grind it more than it needs to be ground—thus, shortening the lifespan of your knife. (Every time you sharpen, you take metal off the blade.)

4) Grind it too hot, so the edge is weakened, compromised. The steel is permanently damaged and loses its ability to stay sharp. Time to buy a new knife!

Need I say more? Please do your homework.

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**SHARPENING WEAR AND TEAR** The three chef’s knives on the next page have different degrees of wear from sharpening—from least to most (top to bottom). The blades, when they were brand new, would have been very close to the same shape and height/width. But now you can see the knife on top is clearly taller/wider and has retained more of a curve to it’s cutting edge. The other two are narrower and the curve of their cutting edge has been flattened out. It’s most noticeable in the bottom knife, in the final third of the blade as it nears the tip.
Know Thy Knife

It’s pretty important to understand the style of knife you own before getting it sharpened. It can 1) help protect you from wasting time (and money) with unqualified sharpening services and 2) give you more options as to how you sharpen it. Here’s a quick primer:

There are, basically, two different styles of kitchen knife made today—German (aka Western) or Japanese. There are also a lot of blends of these two styles into models you could call hybrids. Although each of these two major styles fashion knives with their own distinctive shapes and sizes—the most fundamental difference between them is the steel they’re made of.

...if you’re sending out a Japanese or hybrid to be sharpened, it’s wise to be sure the service has experience with sharpening this kind of knife.
German-style blades are thicker and made of a softer, but tougher, type of steel. Which traditionally requires them to be sharpened at a wider angle (20–22 degrees). Japanese-style blades are thinner and made of a harder, yet brittler, grade of steel. Which allows them to be sharpened at a steeper angle (11–15 degrees). Hybrids tend to have the thinness and edge of a Japanese blade, but the shape of a German, and are usually sharpened at the steeper, Japanese-style angle. To add to the mix, some Japanese knives are only beveled on one side (like a chisel), and some have asymmetrical bevels, which demand a highly customized approach to sharpening. (Odds are, if you are not already aware of it, you don’t own this type of blade. So don’t fret about it.)

Although Japanese-style knives are all the rage and popping up like mushrooms, the great majority of knives people own are still German-style blades. That’s the status quo (at least in the U.S.). Thus, the great majority of knives handled by sharpening services are German-style as well. Which means if you’re sending out a Japanese or hybrid to be sharpened, it’s wise to be sure the service has experience with sharpening this kind of knife. Better yet, they should be familiar with the specific brand you’re planning to send them. In general, this shouldn’t be a problem. Most of the services I’ve dealt with were very open to answering questions on the phone or through email. But be aware—there are some unscrupulous outfits out there that will claim they can sharpen anything. The last thing you want to do is send them your custom gyuto from Seki City (Japan).

**WHAT’S YOUR KNIFE?** Henckels and Wusthof are the two major makers of German knives while some of the major Japanese brands are Global, Shun, Masahiro, MAC, Bunmei, and Kasumi. Most of these manufacturers also make hybrids or are hybrids (like Global). Most French, English, and American-made knives are German-style knives (although that is changing).
Cutlers and Grinders

Another major issue to be aware of when deciding on a sharpening service, is the difference between a commercial grinding service and a professional cutler. The first is used mainly by butchers, fishmongers, and super-commercial kitchens (aka Wendy’s, Applebees, Red Lobster, etc.) who generally use fairly inexpensive and disposable knives. The grinding service collects, sharpens, and returns the knives en masse once a week or so, and often even supplies them as well. Very industrial, very crude and efficient. The second (a professional cutler) is used mainly by restaurant chefs and consumers and is designed to handle high-quality cutlery with delicate blades. More care, more quality. Guess which one you want?

*The grinding service collects, sharpens, and returns the knives en masse once a week or so.*

Not to confuse the issue—but some sharpening services do both kinds of business. If this is the case with a service you’re considering, they might be fine, but proceed with caution. Try asking them some questions from the list I’ve supplied at the end of this article. If they begin to balk, or simply don’t respond (if you’re doing it via email or something), then they’re probably either 1) not as much of a cutler as you desire or 2) not big on customer service. Both are negatives in my book. Unless there are other compelling positives for keeping them in the running—like they’re just down the street, or a foodie friend of yours raves about them—I would look elsewhere.

Tools of the Trade

If you take your knives to a knife sharpening service, odds are they will be sharpened on a machine-powered system. The standard process for
cutlers these days is to use a belt sander in combination with a buffing wheel. Another common method an aluminum-oxide wheel (running at a slow speed) cooled with water. Depending on the condition of the knife or the modus operandi of the service, the knife might go through a couple of different grits of abrasion (from 150 to 600) before being finished, or buffed/polished.

If you own a traditional Japanese or Japanese hybrid, you have another option for sharpening—a Japanese water stone system. Japanese knives were traditionally sharpened on these stones which look like western whetstones, but are much finer and softer and come in an incredible wide array of grits—from 500 grit (course) to 10,000 (super-fine for polishing). Professional Japanese knife sharpeners usually use a powered water stone wheel that rotates at a slow speed and dips the stone in water as it spins around (horizontally). Then, they may finish off by doing the final polishing work by hand on a regular water stone. If you own a traditional Japanese knife, this method is the one and only way to sharpen it correctly while preserving the integrity of the knife.

There are a number of first-rate sharpening services that offer water stone sharpening through the mail. To be honest, this is a bit outside my area of expertise, mainly because I do not presently own any traditional Japanese knives. Nonetheless, from my in-depth research, I know of at least three top-notch services I can recommend. (See the end of *Reviews of... Sharpening Services*.)

**Man Over Machine**

My experience has been that the most important factor in producing a sharp knife is the expertise and dedication of the person sharpening it. Equipment can only take you so far, and the equipment needed to sharpen a knife well doesn’t need to cost thousands of dollars. It can be gotten for a couple hundred. What can’t be bought is the sharpener’s skill and passion for the work. So that’s what you want to look for when finding a sharpening service.

*My experience has been that the most important factor in producing a sharp knife is the expertise and dedication of the person sharpening it.*
Added to this, there’s a broad array of varying levels of perception, approach, and sophistication in professional sharpeners and their clientele. An edge that works fine for a line cook at Applebees, might not be adequate for a sashimi chef at Japonica. Or an experienced home gourmet with a Murray Carter gyoto might be much more exacting than your young mom with a Henckels classic and a million other things to be concerned with. Thus, though there are many viable sharpening services out there promoting their wares, one size does not fit all. Find a quality outfit. Find the one right for you.

*POSTSCRIPT TIP:* Please understand that when you send out your knives—especially if it’s the first time they’ve been sharpened—no matter how excellent the sharpening service is, they might not come back looking quite as pristine perfect as when they left. Nothing major—maybe a little nick on the handle, or a fine scratch on the blade. That’s the nature of the beast. Don’t let it throw you. Often these things were there already, and you just hadn’t noticed. Repeat after me: “My knives are beautifully crafted tools, not works of art. They’re meant to be used.”

**Suggested Interview Questions**

Here’s a list of questions that might be helpful for interviewing prospective knife sharpeners. Pick the ones that work best for you.

- How long have you been sharpening? How did you get into it? How were you trained?
- Who’s doing the actual sharpening? How large a crew? What is their training?
- Describe the process of sharpening an 8-inch blade chef’s knife with your system. What machinery/equipment do you use?
- Any problems you might you encounter?
- What if an edge needs to be completely reprofiled?
- On average, how long should it take? What’s your typical turnaround?
Do you sharpen all knives the exact same way? Or do you adapt to the style of the knife? Or to the condition of the knife?

Do you put a straight knife edge, or do a secondary angle? Convex? Anything else?

Do you do Japanese-style knives? What brands are you familiar with? Have you worked on ______ knives?

How do you recommend a customer maintain a blade you have sharpened? Why do you recommend it?
I'M A VERY very very very very picky person. Especially when I want to be. So, when it came around to compiling a short list of quality kitchen knife sharpening services, rest assured, I did not take the mission lightly. I hunkered down.

Generalities
First off, know this: All three of the finalists—Seattle Knife Sharpening, D&R Sharpening Solutions, JustKnives101—have history. They’ve all been doing what they do for over a decade and one of them has the lineage of a family business going back to 1922. None of them are newbies or fly-by-nights.

Seattle Knife Sharpening at work
Secondly—although they are all well established as regular bricks-and-mortar businesses, they have substantial experience as mail-order businesses as well. They’ve all shipped and received a whole lot of sharpened metal. They have clear instructions and procedures as to how to send them your kitchen knives. And they are all dependable and highly competent.

Thirdly—I have personally tried them all. Yes, pinky promise (as my 8-year-old says). I am not simply parroting what I’ve heard or read about or garnered from multiple websites, but sharing my own personal experience as a fellow consumer.

Very Important Note: I do not receive a penny from any of these knife sharpening services for referring customers. It’s a freebie. If for some reason this changes, I’ll be the first to let you know!

Seattle Knife Sharpening
I first found out about Seattle Knife Sharpening (www.seattleknifesharpening.com/) by accident from a YouTube video. Early on in my knife-sharpening education, I stumbled onto a clip of a very satisfied Seattle Knife customer showing off his newly sharpened set of Global knives. He sliced off slivers from a sheet of paper with ease and raved about the sharpitude. I was entranced.

I went to the Seattle Knife website and liked what I saw (literally as well as figuratively—it’s a nicely designed site). The business seemed to be a small operation by one guy, Bob Tate, which I found attractive. Personalized service. He had learned his craft from Bob Kramer, one of the most well-known and high-quality bladesmiths alive. And—judging from what he wrote on his site—Bob (Tate, that is) seemed open, friendly, personable. I wrote him an email or two with questions about his craft, how he ground his edges, and he answered back quickly.

I zipped through a tomato—the first time in years without a serrated in my hand.
His method is unorthodox, but wickedly sharp. He explained that for each knife he started from as sharp an angle as he dared as his primary angle, and then ground the rest of the blade down so that it smoothly segued from the edge up to the spine. It sounds thorough, and it is. As he mentions on his site, it’s a 6- to 7-step process using belt sanders and polishing wheels along with sharpening compounds. On a German-style knife this often means thinning down the blade and creating an edge angle much sharper than usual. Fine with me!

I boxed up a bunch of my knives as per Bob’s instructions and sent them off to Washington state. Almost two weeks later I got them back (unfortunately, I live on the other side of the country). I was a little disappointed at the turnaround time—but the knives, the knives! They looked sharp. I took my chef’s and immediately tried what I’d seen the guy in the YouTube video do. Oh, yeah. Right through paper, not only without resistance, but not leaving any roughness either. The cut edges of the paper were perfectly smooth—like I’d used a pair of scissors. I zipped through a tomato—the first time in years without a serrated in my hand. This was true for the Henckels I’d sent him as well as my Japanese-made Global.

As if this were not enough, Bob was also big on follow-through. He recommended the best hone to use to keep my knives sharp as long as possible [see the Hones tab], and even gave me honing instructions over the phone. What a guy! I was off to a great start with my first professional knife sharpening service.

**D&R Sharpening Solutions**

I first heard of Dave Martell—the owner, chef cook, and bottle washer of D&R Sharpening (www.drsharpening.com/)—from my favorite kitchen knife book, *An Edge in the Kitchen* by Chad Ward. Dave has been building a reputation in knife sharpening for over a decade and has a special passion for Japanese blades. Actually, he’s divided his business into two separate sharpening services—one for Western-style knives, the other for Japanese.

Having no Japanese knives that needed sharpening, I chose the more standard Western-style service. I queried him about his sharpening process and he confirmed that it was
the usual combination of belt sander followed by polishing wheel. But, unlike Bob in Seattle, Dave prefers to sharpen Western knives at the traditional angle of 20–25 degrees. Although he feels it’s not as “pretty”, he’s found it to be the most durable angle for this style knife. Different strokes for different folks.

*The poor bread knife had been seriously abused over the years, sawing through frozen bread among other things.* . .

I packed another box, not quite so many this time, and the knives were returned in one week. Yes, half the time of Seattle Knife, but then Fleetwood, PA, where D&R is located, is only a 5-hour drive away. The bevels (the part of the blade that V’s in to the cutting edge) were impeccable—as even and straight as if they’d come from the factory and the sharpness matched factory standards as well. They cut through tomatoes, sliced cucumbers nice and thin. They slivered paper—just like the YouTube video. That said, if I were to be persnickety (and that is my job as KitchenKnifeGuru), they weren’t quite as searingly sharp as Seattle Knife. But more than sharp enough for my kitchen or any other that’s not filigreeing radishes a mile a minute.

One of the knives I sent D&R was a workhorse Henckels—a wedding present—that not only had many years of faithful service to its name (decades, really), but many sharpenings of mixed-quality that had left it with an ugly, uneven edge. If you chopped parsley on a flat board, you’d miss sections with every chop. Sure enough, when I got it back from D&R, the edge was straight and even. No more gaps on the cutting board. Hurrah!

I also sent them one of my serrated bread knives which they sharpen for an extra charge. Not every knife sharpening service can handle serrated, but both Seattle Knife and JustKnives101 (the next service I review) do as well. The poor bread knife had been seriously abused over the years (another wedding present), sawing through frozen bread among other things, and really needed an overhaul. It came back refreshed, but not fully restored—which may be the best one can hope for a serrated blade, I know they’re challenging to fully resuscitate. (Though I might send my other bread knife to one of the other two services sometime and compare.)
D&R’s website is not quite as stylish as Seattle knives (not that it really matters), but they do have a mailing form you can print out for totaling up your charges (Seattle does not, you must create your own). They also have a very convenient payment system where they email you a Paypal invoice when the knives are ready to ship back. Very fast and easy for the customer to process—a big plus in my book. All-in-all, a top-notch operation. Next. . .

**JustKnives101**

JustKnives101 ([http://www.justknives101.com/](http://www.justknives101.com/)) rose to the upper reaches of my professional knife sharpener’s list from a simple google search for “knife sharpening service.” What attracted me right off was:

- their professional-looking and informative website
- the fact that they were a family business that had been around a long while
- the fact that they sounded like they knew what they were doing and were into quality.

The only thing I was a little wary of at first was that they might have a large crew doing high volume and thus be more of a grinding service than a professional cutler (see *Finding a Sharpening Service*). But after talking on the phone with Paul, the owner, my concerns evaporated. He assured me, personally, did 90 percent of the sharpening, all on a very expensive belt sander imported from Germany. Among things that made it unique was the fact the belt ran over a hard rubber wheel as well as through water which helped protect the knife edges from overheating. It was the only machine of its kind he knew of in this country. Paul usually sharpened to about 20 degrees, but was flexible to the demands of each knife. He also mentioned that a lot of his customers were chefs from near and far—just what a quality-conscious kitchen-knife owner like me wanted to hear! I packaged up three more and mailed them off.

*My impression of the blades was similar to D&R’s—they had smooth, even bevels and were plenty sharp.*
A week later they were back in my kitchen (JustKnives, like D&R, is located just a half-day drive away). My impression of the blades was similar to D&R’s—they had smooth, even bevels and were plenty sharp. They sliced beautifully, but still not quite as effortlessly as the knives from Seattle. (I told you I was picky.) They came sheathed in cardboard knife guards which was a nifty touch. And like D&R, JustKnives had a mail-in form you could easily print out to figure your invoice.

Three up, three down!

**Money, Money, Money**

Right about now you might be asking, what about price? Did they all charge the same? And the short answer is a definite, No.

D&R and JustKnives structure their prices in a cost per size-range—for example, $4 for blades 1- to 4-inches long. Seattle does it differently and charges a flat $1.25 by the inch (except for single-bevel which are $2). On top of that, Seattle charges a standard processing fee of $10. (Thus, it pays to send a bunch at a time.)

So, say you sent off three knives to each service—an 8-inch chefs, a 6-inch chef’s, and a 4-inch paring knife. What kind of bill would you ring up? (Not including shipping.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sharpening Service</th>
<th>Three Knives</th>
<th>Six Knives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seattle Knife Sharpening</td>
<td>$32.50</td>
<td>$55.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D&amp;R Sharpening</td>
<td>$24.00</td>
<td>$48.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JustKnives101</td>
<td>$15.00</td>
<td>$30.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That’s quite a spread, isn’t it? With Seattle Knife over twice the cost of JustKnives. If you double the amount of knives, Seattle’s cost comes down proportionally because the $10 service charge averages out more. And the distance between Seattle and D&R also gets much closer—but there’s still quite a gap between Seattle and JustKnives. Which begs the question, why would Seattle be worth it?
I don’t view my job as KitchenKnifeGuru as someone to talk you into using one sharpening service over the other, but simply to shed as much light as possible so you can make your own educated decisions. But there are two obvious reasons why Seattle might be worth paying more for:

1) Their knives are sharper and more refined. The edge has been ground, buffed, and polished to a higher degree than the other two.

2) Their knives will probably stay sharp longer. This is mainly due to the simple physical fact that Bob’s process of creating a long gradual bevel from spine to edge tends to make the blades thinner. As the edge wears down, it’s still pretty darn thin and will continue to cut better. We are talking Western blades here. For Japanese, where the blade is already thin, this might be a different story.

There is one negative to Seattle’s sharpening method though, and that is, because the knife edges are thinner, they are more delicate. They won’t take as much abuse. So if you plan on slamming into frozen cookie dough (don’t laugh, one of Bob’s customers did), or if you just can’t afford the mental energy to think about protecting your kitchen knives, then Seattle might not be the best choice for you.

Bottom line moneywise—Seattle Knife Sharpening is pricier, D&R Sharpening in the middle, and JustKnives101 quite a bargain.

Other Possibilities
To fill out the list, here are a few more sharpening services I have not had a chance to take out on test rides yet, but seem promising:

**The Epicurean Edge** [EpicEdge.com]: Recommended from ChowHound website; looks very impressive; expensive though.

**Accurate Sharpening** [accuratesharp.com]: Uses the Edge Pro sharpening system, one of the finest sharpening systems out there; unusual because they sharpen by hand, not using any machines, and yet are quite reasonably priced. Recommended by
kitchen knife master Norman Weinstein. Appeared in a Wall Street Journal review, but knives did have a problem finding their way home.

**Precision Knife Sharpening** [precisionknifesharpening.com]: Very pro website, explains a lot and sounds very competent; recommended in Wall Street Journal review.

**Ky Sharp** [kysharp.com]: Compelling history and modus operandi; no other references.

**Perfect Edge** [perfectedgesharpening.com]: Impressive website. It talks the talk—can it do the walk?

**Wrap Up**

As far as I’m concerned, you could not go wrong with having your knives sharpened by any one of the three services I have personally used and reviewed. They are all masters of their craft, consistent, and well-organized. They all produce sharp knives. Yes, Seattle’s knives are a touch sharper and may stay that way longer. But you pay more for it. On the other hand, both D&R and JustKnives101 seem to have better turnaround times, even if you factor for the shorter distance traveled. So if that’s crucial, especially if you live on the East coast, these two services will be quicker. (Unless you’re willing to pay for premium delivery, of course. Then it’s irrelevant.)

If you love and appreciate handling a sharp kitchen knife, there’s no reason to put it off any longer. I have done the homework for you. If you don’t have a clear preference—relax, close your eyes, and pick whichever one your finger falls on! You really can’t go wrong.

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**KNIFE REPAIR** If you’ve got a knife you know needs some minor repair work, here’s a quick snapshot of the three sharpening service’s repair policies:

- Seattle Knife will straighten a bent tip for free; but fixing a broken one is $6.00. Don’t know their policy on chips.

- D&R has a large disclaimer up front from that they do NOT fix anything extra (“no edge nicks or broken tips”) for free. They don’t say anything about a bent tip though. And they did even out my well-worn blade at no extra charge.
Postlude—Japanese Knife Sharpening Services

Every knife sharpened (with one exception) in my knife-sharpening odyssey was a Western/German-made knife. But there’s a whole world of Japanese-made knives out there that need sharpening as well. Most traditional Japanese knives (which Global is not) should only be sharpened by a specialized service in the Japanese tradition using a water stone (usually a combo of motorized and manual). I do not currently own any of these thoroughbred Japanese knives, so this particular market is outside my personal experience. This much I know though:

– Seattle Knife sharpened my Global knife beautifully and would probably do an excellent job on other Western-styled Japanese blades as well, such as Shun and MAC. Just ask.

– JustKnives101 on their website says they are “factory-authorized” to sharpen Global, Shun, and Masahiro knives. Although I could not confirm their “factory-authorized” status with the knife importers for those brands, judging from JustKnives’ reputation and their work on my knives, I’m pretty confident they would do a fine job.

If you own a traditional or high-end Japanese blade, here is a list of Japanese knife sharpening services with impeccable credentials. The first three have huge reputations and the fourth is up-and-coming. They are not cheap—but you are probably getting a half hour or more of a master sharpener’s loving tender care (and expertise). If you value your Japanese knife and wish to use it for years and years, do not skimp!

Japanese Knife Sharpening [japaneseknifesharpening.com]: As mentioned earlier, this is Dave Martell of D&R Sharpening Solutions’ other sharpening service (his true love, really) that specializes in Japanese blades. He is passionate about his craft and a
longtime master. Check out this quote from his website: “Dave still continues to hone his skills everyday. He strongly believes that the most intriguing part of sharpening is that you never achieve pure perfection no matter how long you work at it.”

**Korin** [korin.com]: Written and talked about everywhere, Japanese master Chiharu Sugai is the name brand in Japanese sharpening. Recommended by the *The Wall Street Journal* and, apparently, everybody in the world.

**Carter Cutlery** [cartercutlery.com]: Created by another legendary bladesmith, Murray Carter, the twist being he’s an anglo who studied in Japan 18 years. He mastered age-old Japanese knife making and sharpening techniques and became a 17th generation Yoshimoto Bladesmith. Fascinating story. Still sharpens everything himself.

**Tosho Knife Arts** [toshoknifearts.com]: Not as well-known as the first three, but both partners have solid credentials and much promise. Located in Toronto, Canada.

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**Post Postlude—Knives List (what knives I sent to each sharpening service)**

**Seattle Knife Sharpening**
- Henckels professional S chef 8-inch
- Henckels chef 6-inch
- Global G-48 7-inch
- Sabatier slicer 8-inch
- Calaphon santoku 8-inch
- Henckels paring 4-inch
- Henckels paring 3-inch

**D&R Sharpening Solutions**
- Henckels 4 star chef 8-inch (worn down)
- Henckels professional S chef 6-inch
- Henckels professional S bread knife 8-inch
Just Knives101

Henckels chef 8-inch
Henckels slicer 8-inch
Calaphon paring 4.5 inch

(Photo credits: Sharpening wheel courtesy of Bob Tate of Seattle Knife Sharpening.)
PART THREE
HONES/STEELS
You’ve probably heard about honing steels before—more simply known as steels. You might even have one stashed away in your knife block—that metal rod with a handle that came with your knife set that you’ve rarely, if ever, taken out and used on your kitchen knives. You might have seen a butcher use one, if not in real life, at least in...
movies. (Most famously, Daniel Day-Lewis in *Gangs of New York.*) But what the heck are you supposed to do with it? Sharpen knife blades? Impress your guests?

In the kitchen-knife world, a flurry of confusion surrounds what a steel—or honing steel, or honing rod, or hone—actually is and does. For good reason. There are a lot of terms floating around out there for similar and not-so-similar tools. And sometimes what looks like the very same tool (no matter what you call it) will have two rather different functions. To top it off, many manufacturers seem to have taken a vow of secrecy and offer descriptions of their products that are cryptic at best. So if you’re looking for some clarity . . . read on.

**Terminology**

The term steel traditionally refers to a metal rod about the length of your forearm you can stroke your kitchen knives with to bring back their sharpness. Notice I say, “bring back”, not simply “sharpen” because, traditionally, a honing steel functions differently than a sharpener. A steel simply realigns the edge of a knife blade while a sharpener grinds off metal to create a new edge. They both achieve the same end, a sharper knife—but accomplish it in different ways. Honing is non-destructive while sharpening is not. Honing is a maintenance task to be performed quite often while sharpening should be done as little as possible. You hone a knife until the edge finally gets so worn down that you need to sharpen it again.

*Honing is non-destructive while sharpening is not.*

What’s especially confusing is that what looks like the very same tool—a rod with a handle on it (aka a steel)—may be designed to either hone or sharpen, and sometimes do both. To understand this better, we need to take a quick close-up of a knife blade.

**Make the Bent Places Straight**

As you might imagine, the steel at the cutting edge of a knife is very very thin. That’s one of the main qualities that enables it to cut. But it also makes it vulnerable to stresses it was not designed to handle. Like hitting a chicken bone. Scrapping against a mango pit.
Slamming into a cutting board. All of these events will cause the delicate edge of a knife (which on a microscopic level looks more like ragged teeth) to fold over in spots. The sharp edge will still be there, but portions of the blade will have been bent to the side or completely rolled over, so that the knife can’t cut as well anymore. It will feel duller. But it’s not, really. And it doesn’t need to be sharpened.

What’s needed is for those sections on the blade that have been temporarily folded over to be realigned and straightened. Enter—the Honing Steel. It pushes these problem areas back into place. All along the blade edge. Again and again. (It’s amazing how tough, yet elastic, steel can be.) Eventually, these sections (remember they’re like jagged teeth) begin to wear down or break off to the point they can no longer be refurbished and rehabilitated. A new edge needs to be ground—the knife needs to be sharpened. (See the illustration at the end of Chapter 2, *The Sharpening Cycle of a Kitchen Knife*.)

Hypothetically, you could hone your kitchen knife with the edge of a steel letter opener—as long as the letter opener was made of a steel harder than what the knife was
made of. Or you could use the back of a porcelain plate. (That’s actually a neat trick if you get stuck at your aunt’s carving turkey with a super-dull knife and nothing to tune it up with.) But what works best is to use a honing steel. It’s quick, it’s safe, and demands minimal skill and effort.

Types of Hones/Steels

Based on the material they’re made of, honing steels can be divided into three basic types—steel, diamond, and ceramic. (To be more accurate, diamond and most ceramic hones are layered substances on top of a steel core.)

**Steel hones** are the oldest, most traditional, and most common. They are the type that often comes with a kitchen knife set. They can either be perfectly smooth or have fine ridges running their length. The smooth kind is the most benign, while the ridged roughs up the knife edge a bit while it realigns. For a while at least, this roughing-up treatment lends the edge more tooth and will make it cut more aggressively. But it’s not long lasting and tends to wear the edge down faster. (The courser the ridges on the honing steel, the greater the knife wear.) Thus, this is not my favorite type of hone.

The totally smooth steel hone (which is virtually non-destructive) is much superior to the ridged, but is still not my first choice—one of the main reasons being that it cannot be used with a Japanese-made knife. The steel that Japanese knives are made of is harder and brittler than German (or Western) steel and will tend to chip on a steel hone. This is true for all steel hones that I’m aware of.
Diamond hones have no problem with handling any kind of steel. German, Japanese, planet Mars—they work on them all. Diamond is hard. But the problem with using a diamond hone/steel for regular maintenance is that it’s not truly a honing steel. It’s a sharpener in disguise. Oh, it may look like a honing steel because it’s in the shape of a rod, but it’s functioning more like a sharpener. Granted, depending on how fine the grit is (and how hard you press), it will not be any way as wicked as a full-fledged sharpening stone. But still—odds are you will be sharpening more than honing. Which is fine if your knife is beginning to get dull and you don’t have time to do a full-fledged sharpening session and you just want to give it a quick tune-up with a few light swipes. But it’s definitely not fine for regularly realigning your blade every other day. Keep that up and you’ll have no knife left. Please—never use a diamond steel/hone for regular maintenance.

Oh, it may look like a honing steel because it’s in the shape of a rod, but it’s functioning more like a sharpener.

Ceramic hones mix the best of both worlds. They’re harder than any kind of steel, so they can be used with Japanese knives, but they’re not too hard. (Ceramic is much less aggressive than diamond.) And they’re usually manufactured with a very fine grit (1000 and up) that, although slightly destructive, won’t unnecessarily wear a knife down. It will clean the edge up a touch while it realigns which is not a bad thing. Any of those microscopic teeth that have been weakened will be taken away leaving the edge stronger and able to stay sharp longer. Only a miniscule amount of metal will be lost (as long as you don’t bear down and try to use the honing rod as a sharpener).

The abrasion of a fine-grit ceramic is infinitely finer than the ridges of even the finest steel hone, so it will be much easier on your knives. This is why a number of my favorite professional knife sharpeners recommend a fine-grit ceramic as the ideal hone. I’ve been using one on my knives for over a year now since they last were sharpened and they all still slice through paper with ease. Hard to beat that! (Oh, there is one negative—if you drop a ceramic hone on a hard floor, it can break.)
**RECOMMENDED HONING STEELS**  Like everything in our highly-commoditized world, there are a variety of ceramic steels to choose from. (I’m not sure how much the quality can vary, but I wouldn’t trust anything under $20.) There are two brands I’ve had personal experience with—DMT and Messermeister. They both make a 12-inch model (not including the handle) which is easily long enough to use with even a 10-inch blade. The DMT is 2200 grit, the Messermeister 1200. Thus, the DMT is almost twice as fine as the other. Does this matter? Maybe some, but it’s not significant—1200 grit is fine enough and if the DMT feels too pricey, then Messermeister is a high-quality alternative.

I own the DMT and it works like a dream. The Messermeister I’ve handled, but not actually used—I bought it for friends as a wedding gift (along with a Shun knife, I’m not that cheap). One of the professional sharpening services I’ve used actually prefers it to the DMT. If you’re in the mood to shop, here’s where to go:

*Diamond Machining Technology [DMT] CS2 12-Inch Ceramic Steel @ Amazon / $37*
*Messermeister 12-Inch Ceramic Rod @ Amazon / $25*

Please note: Both manufacturers make diamond and steel models as well, so be sure the honing steel you select is ceramic.

**Length and Cleanup**

There are two other simple, but important, details to be aware of regarding a honing steel: 1) make sure it’s the right length and, 2) keep it clean.

1. You want the length (not including the handle) to be 2-inches longer than the longest knife you intend to use it on. (Bread knives and other serrated knives don’t count because you can’t easily hone them.) You need the extra inches in order to comfortably run the entire edge of the knife down the hone in one complete swipe. So if your king-of-the-kitchen is a 10-inch chef’s knife, you should buy a hone with an 12-inch long shaft.
2) You must clean your honing steel. Otherwise, it will get clogged up with the superfine metal particles from the knives you’re using it on. And it will gradually lose its effectiveness. After each honing session, give it a thorough wipe with a clean cloth. Then, every few weeks or so, scrub it in hot soapy water with a synthetic brush or scrub pad just the way you would a gourmet cooking pan. No steel wool or anything harsh that could scratch. (Some recommend using cleansing powder on ceramic hones, but I shy away from it because I’m worried the abrasiveness of the powder will wear down the surface.)

_No matter how well you maintain your hone, it will wear out._

Ceramic hones are bit more troublesome to keep clean because even if you scrub them regularly, the metal residue tends to build up a bit anyway turning them greyish. That said, my understanding is that because ceramic is usually such a fine grit in the first place, this thin, leftover build-up doesn’t impact much on the hone’s effectiveness. Nonetheless, if you wish to clean a ceramic rod more thoroughly (which I keep meaning to do, but haven’t gotten around to yet), the most effective solution seems to be using an erasure. Idahone (a well-known hone manufacturer) makes one specifically designed for this task and it’s supposed to work wonders. (It’s on my shopping list.)

Finally, be aware, no matter how well you maintain your hone, it will wear out. Depending on the brand/quality and how much and how hard you use it, it might only last 2 to 3 years. So don’t expect it to last the lifetime of your Henckels knives.

**Japanese Knives and Honing Steels**

Word to the wise: Honing steels are primarily designed for maintaining Western-style knives made of Western-style (or German) steel. This type of steel is tough and pliable. If you own a Japanese knife, please do yourself a favor and do some research before you try honing it.

Western-styled Japanese knives (Global, Mashiro, MAC, etc.) can be honed, but only with a ceramic or diamond honing rod—never one made of steel (either ridged or smooth). Japanese steel is harder and brittler than German-style steel and can chip. Only a ceramic
or diamond hone (which are much harder and a finer grit) can handle this Japanese steel without damaging it.

Traditional Japanese knives you should be even more careful with. They should never be steeled/honed at all. Period. They should only be touched up with a waterstone—the same thing you should sharpen them with. This is the blessing and curse of Japanese knives—they’re super sharp, but they’re also more finicky. (*Note: I’ve garnered this from research, not personal experience, since I do not currently own any traditional Japanese knives.)*

**Honing Steel Recap**

1. Be clear about the difference between honing and sharpening. Honing realigns, sharpening grinds. For regular maintenance you want a steel that hones, not sharpens.

2. Of the three types of honing steels, I (and my sharpening professionals) recommend a fine-grit ceramic. It will be gentle on your knives while still cleaning them up a bit. And you can use it on Western-style Japanese knives.

3. Make sure to buy a hone that’s 2-inches longer than the longest knife you will use it on. And keep it clean. ■
OTHER THAN NOT mashing your kitchen knives into things like porcelain, glass, metal, frozen chicken fillets, (the list goes on)—the single best thing you can do to keep them sharp is to hone them regularly. No, make that hone them religiously. (Because honing is a calling, a holy task, something that works best when done with dedication and consistency.) And I am not exaggerating—it is the single most important thing you can do. So if you love the idea of having continually sharp knives, it’s a skill worth learning. And it’s EASY!

Vitals
There are three simple things to remember:

1) Find the right angle and keep it there. (I’ll get to that shortly.)

2) Don’t press hard. Just a little more than the weight of the knife itself.

3) Don’t overdo it. Generally, 2 or 3 swipes per side’s enough.
Remember—honning is not the same as sharpening. With a sharpener you’re actually grinding away metal to form a new edge, while with a hone (or steel) you’re simply realigning.

**Type and Length of Hone**

The type of honing steel I recommend is a fine-grit ceramic rod. It is the most dependably hard, the least destructive, and is well-suited for German-style knives and some Japanese hybrids. Fine-grit ceramic hones were first recommended to me by one of my favorite professional sharpeners (Seattle Knife Sharpening) who trained under Bob Kramer of Kramer Knives fame. And they have since been recommended to me by other pro sharpeners as well. So, from what I’ve learned so far, they seem the wisest choice. (And, yes, most ceramic hones will likely break if you drop them.)

Hones/steels come in varying lengths and the rule of thumb is that your hone (the ceramic part, not including the handle) should be a couple inches longer than the longest knife you plan to use it with. It makes for ease of use. There are a number of brands and
models of fine-grit ceramic to choose from, but two high-quality ones I can personally recommend are: the DMT CS2 12-Inch Ceramic Steel @ Amazon / $37 and the Messermeister 12-Inch Ceramic Rod @ Amazon / $25. I own the DMT and I’ve handled the Messermeister.

Honing Angle

The object of honing is to stroke the hone with the knife at the same angle the knife’s been sharpened at—which can depend both on the knife’s design and who’s last sharpened it. Sound like a free-for-all? It’s not. Because there are time-honored traditions, standards.

If it’s a German-style knife (which most likely it is) like a Henckels, Wusthof, Sabatier—no problem. German knives traditionally come from the factory with two even edges, both at the same angle of 20–22 degrees. Sometimes people cheat them to sharper angles (like my Seattle Knives sharpener guy), but if you know no differently, then assume the knife’s been sharpened at around 20 degrees. (Note: the angle we’re talking about here is called the “edge angle” which is the angle on only one side of the knife.)

If your knife is Japanese or a Japanese hybrid, then it’s been sharpened at a more acute angle, probably between 11 to 15 degrees. Japanese knives, traditionally, are made of a harder steel than German knives, and can hold a thinner, more sharply-angled, edge.

But it gets weirder still—because some Japanese knives have a chisel edge (also called flat ground) with only one side sharpened instead of two. And some even have unequal edges—like Mashiro’s which are 20/80. (If you don’t understand what I mean by 20/80, please don’t fret, because odds are you do not own this kind of knife.) If you own one of these more unusual Japanese knives, and you own German-styled knives as well, I would recommend starting with the German. As a matter of fact, for many Japanese knives, especially those brands fashioned in the traditional style, it’s best not to hone them at all with a steel (ceramic or otherwise), but rather use a water stone. (I’d be glad to research your specific brand further—post your request in the Forum area of this site or email me.)

Most Global, MAC, and Shun knives (all hybrid Japanese brands) are beveled evenly on both sides in the Western tradition and can be honed—albeit at a sharper angle. (I believe
Global’s sashimi knives are the major exception and have a chisel edge.) Again, please make sure you understand the edge of the knife you’re working with because if you hone at the wrong angle, you will dull the edge even more instead of restoring it’s sharpness.

**Honing Lesson**

There are a number of techniques people use to hone/steel, some of them quite brash and showy, but the technique I use and recommend is the safest and most reliable. Especially for those of us who are not doing it 10 times a day, 6 days a week.

1) With a cutting board or a dishtowel underneath as a buffer, stand the hone on your kitchen counter perpendicular to it, straight up and down, with the ceramic tip resting on the counter. (If you’re right-handed, hold the hone with your left hand. Or visa versa.)

2) Next, you want to approximate the correct angle:

*Trick 1:* With the knife in your right hand, bring the blade close to the hone at a 90 degree angle (parallel to the counter, as if you’re going to slice the hone in two). Visualize that invisible 90 degrees. Then, rotate the spine so that the knife now halves that imaginary 90 degree angle—that’s 45. Then, halve the angle once more—that’s 22.5. You
can leave it there, or cheat it in bit (for 20 degrees), and you’ve got the right angle to hone a German knife.

**Trick 2:** Fold over a sheet of paper diagonally, to make a 45 degree, then fold that in half for 22.5. (As if you were making only one half of a paper plane.) Trim it down so it’s small enough to hold up with your hone hand and nuzzle your knife up against it. If you need a sharper angle for a Japanese knife, fold it one more time for 11.25 and cheat your knife out a bit for 15 degrees.

Don’t worry if the angle(s) seems fuzzy to you at first. The more you do it, the sharper your eye will get.

3) Starting at the heel (or base) of the knife and the top of the hone, with the knife at the correct angle, pull the knife toward you as you let the blade slide down. Use very light pressure. By the time the blade reaches the tip of the hone, you should be at the tip of the knife. *Again, don’t press hard, very light*—use the weight of the knife and a little extra. *Note:* Avoid letting the tip of the knife slide off the edge of the hone, try to stop while it’s still on the hone, or you run the risk of rounding the tip over time. (See step-by-step photo montage on next page.)
1 – Begin at the heel of the blade, high on the hone.

2 – Pull towards you as you slide down.

3 – Finish at the tip.

4 – Switch to the other side.

5 – Pull as you slide.

6 – Finish up. (Repeat 2 or 3 times total.)
4) Do the other side of the knife on the opposite side of the hone. It will feel a bit awkward at first try, but you’ll get used to it. Go as slow as you want—nobody’s watching and speed has no effect whatsoever on quality!

5) Alternate back and forth—one swipe on the first side, one swipe on the other—until you’ve done around 2 or 3 swipes per side. If your knife edge was in pretty good shape to begin with, it shouldn’t take much. Check to see if your edge has come back and is sharp again. Try slicing some paper. If not, do a few more.

6) If you find, after doing 6 or 7 swipes per side, that there’s very little improvement, then there are two possible reasons: a) you’re not honing at the correct angle, b) the knife you’re honing is too far gone and needs to be sharpened. [OK, there’s one more possible reason—c) you’re not pressing hard enough. But I hesitate to mention it because I don’t want you to get into the habit of using too much pressure.]

Angle Adjustments

Scenario 1: If your angle is too steep, too acute, for the knife you’re honing, then you can hone all day and you will never push back a micron of steel. The problem is the cutting edge of the knife is not quite making contact with the hone. Knife and hone are connecting, yes, but on a rim of steel that is millimeters away from the actual edge. Widen the angle slightly (tilt the spine of the knife a touch further out and away from the hone) and try again.

Scenario 2: If your angle is too wide (which is worse), then you are actually dulling the knife further instead of honing it. You are bending over the steel on the edge as if you were chopping on a porcelain cutting board. Stop, stop, STOP! Narrow the angle and try again.

When in doubt, always start with an angle that is steeper/smaller than you might need, then widen it out if it’s not working. This kind of adjusting will have no effect whatsoever on the knife edge, while the other way around, you will inadvertently be worsening your problem before improving it, which makes no sense at all.

If, after adjusting your angle (and perhaps using a touch more pressure), you notice no more sharpness returning to the edge of your knife, then stop honing. Your knife edge is
dead—and no amount of honing will bring it back to life. This deadness (or dullness) is not so much from the microscopic steel at the edge being temporarily curled over as it is from it being worn down completely. Time to get that puppy sharpened! (Actually, to be searingly honest, you can bring even a dead knife back a bit with a hone, but I don’t recommend it because: one, it won’t last long and, two, it will wear hard on your hone.)

Get On a Schedule
How often should you perform this silly ritual? Believe it or not—ideally—every time you use a knife (a serious session, like prepping a meal). Seems a bit obsessive, doesn’t it? But you’d be surprised what you might be able to train yourself to do, once you reap the benefits—a perpetually sharp knife. Remember, it only takes about 60 seconds.

Technically speaking, it’s better to hone right before using a knife than after—the reason being that if a large amount of time has elapsed between honing and use, the knife can regress some and the edge bend back out a bit. But it’s no biggie. If honing right before is too much hassle, then do it later when you feel less pressured. The main thing is to do it!

And, of course, it’s sort of a paradox: If you don’t hone much, then your technique won’t improve much, and every time you do it, it will still take more time than it should. While the more you make yourself hone, the better and faster you’ll get at it, and the easier it will be to do it on a regular basis. At a bare minimum (if you’re cooking 3 or 4 times a week), you should do it once a week. Less than that and you’re greatly diminishing the benefits gained. It will still help, but you’ll need to get your knives sharpened sooner than necessary and you’ll needlessly deprive yourself of working with sharp knives.

Again—the main thing is to do it! And do it regularly.

Ergonomics
One final note: Please take some time to think out where you store your hone and make it as accessible as possible. Easy to get to and close to your knives. Don’t make yourself have to dig through the back of a cabinet, scattering whisks and spatulas, every time you need to use it. You’ll never last. Make it handy—this will support you in doing what you need to do.
And it’s OK if it doesn’t fit in your knife block—mine doesn’t—store it in a convenient drawer, or hang it on a hook near the action.

It’s all about developing a simple useful habit. If you can teach yourself to hone regularly, you’ll have sharp knives at your fingertips all the time. You’ll begin to get addicted. You’ll show off to your friends—slicing cucumbers paper thin. And depending on 1) how much you cook 2) how dutifully you hone and 3) the quality of your knives, you may be able to go a year or longer before having to even think about sharpening.

Buy a hone today—you will never ever regret it!

**BONUS TIP:** At the beginning at least, try printing out a cheat sheet—a short list of instructions you keep with the hone that can remind you of the main points until you’ve memorized the routine. (See following page for Honing Cheat Sheet.)
HONING CHEAT SHEET
- hone/steel after every other use
- at same angle, or slightly steeper, than sharpened angle—20° for Western knives, or 15° for Japanese.
- remember the two tricks for finding the angle
- always better to err being too shallow, then go steeper
- best on low table, at the level of your hips
- lock wrist and elbow to keep angle consistent
- avoid letting tip of knife slide off of edge of steel
- use barely more pressure than the weight of the knife itself
- alternate side to side
- 2 or 3 strokes per side; 7 or 8 max
- test sharpness—if not improved, tweak angle
- hand wash honing steel occasionally and wipe dry

When to steel?
- ideally, right before using, just a couple of strokes
- otherwise, once a week
- do it regularly
FACT: One of the easiest things you can do to insure the long life of your kitchen knives is to give them the right kind of cutting board to cut and cube on. And believe it or not, even in this age of high-tech materials and nano-bred wonders, just about the best substance for your knives to chop on is still—you guessed it—good old wood. Plastic, high-tech darling of yesteryear, is the other most favored material. (Not any plastic, and not any wood.) Each of these

KKG’s cutting boards
two has their strengths and weaknesses, their lovers and detractors. But the cool thing is, there’s no reason you have to take sides—you can mix and match. At least, that’s what I do.

**Never Ever**

Before we get into comparing and contrasting wood and plastic though, and in case you haven’t read my Top Ten Tips to Keeping Your Kitchen Knives Sharp, let’s be clear about what you should NOT be cutting on:

- granite
- steel
- hard plastic
- porcelain
- Corian
- any other material that is hard and unyielding and does not score when you slice it with a knife.

Why? Because even though a knife is made of steel and steel is a hard and very tough material, the finely sharpened edge of knife is actually rather delicate. And cutting and chopping on these verboten materials will dull your knives quicker than you can say curried cous-cous (in the course of dicing one large onion). It will make you have to either sharpen them more frequently or perpetually put up with dull knives. Who wants that?

**In the Beginning, There Was Wood**

Wood is not only a beautiful, natural material, it’s also very strong, and very durable. Yet, it’s most attractive quality—as far as the health of your knives is concerned—is that it will yield to their sharp edges. When you cut on a wooden board, the wood fibers break and
leave a mark—which helps prevent the fine edges of your knives from rolling over and
turning dull.

Not just any kind of wood from just any kind of tree makes a great cutting board. Some woods are too hard, some are too soft, some lack a uniform texture, some are not
dense enough. The great majority of quality boards in the U.S. are made of hard maple
because it’s got just the right balance of durability to softness, and it’s uniform, dense, and
fine-grained. Plus, it’s in plentiful supply.

*Not just any kind of wood makes a great cutting board* . . .

Some people do make cutting boards out of soft maple and other
more pliable woods—and they don’t
wear well. But there are a number of
other woods that can still do the
job—birch, walnut, cherry, white oak,
ash, along with more exotics like teak
or royal mahogany. You can also find
boards made out of a combination of
woods, but I must admit I’m a little
wary about using them for heavy
chopping. Because unless the types of wood are perfectly matched in hardness, you could
be subjecting your knives to uneven wear and tear.

**WHAT ABOUT BAMBOO?** *Bamboo is actually a grass, not a wood (not that it
really matters). It’s suitability as a cutting board is mixed and I discuss it separately
later in this article along with two other materials—hard rubber and wood fiber
composites.*
Three Constructions

Although you can still find boards made from one slab of wood, most modern cutting boards are made from a number of planks that have been glued together. This makes them stronger and less likely to crack or warp. There are three types of construction: end grain, edge grain, and flat grain. An easy way to understand the difference between them is to conjure up an imaginary 2 X 4.

**End grain:** To make an end-grain board, you’d use the end of the 2 X 4—where the grain is open, like a sawed-off tree trunk—for the top of your board. Of the three types, this is the easiest to identify because of its checkerboard pattern. Traditional butcher’s blocks are end-grain construction.

*End grain is the kindest to your knives and will wear the longest.*

End grain is usually the most expensive because it’s the most labor intensive to make. But it’s also the kindest to your knives and will wear the longest. The wood fibers are pointing upward, so you are cutting into the fibers, instead of across them. The knife edge spreads the fibers apart (sort of like pushing a ruler into a scrub brush) and then allows the fibers to come back together and mend themselves. There’s less pressure on the knife edge which will keep it sharper longer. As an added benefit, you will notice less scoring on an end-grain board. The only real negative is that by the nature of their construction end-grain boards tend to be thick (try 3 to 4 inches) and heavy. Not much fun to lug over to the sink.
Edge grain: If you laid your imaginary 2 X 4 down with the long narrow side facing up (the 2-inch side), you’d have an edge-grain board. Ideally, the grain pattern of each composite plank would be vertical to the countertop—in practice it’s often mixed. But you get the idea.

This kind of construction is by far the most common because it balances strength and durability with cost. These boards last a long long time if you care for them (i.e. don’t soak them in water and oil them regularly). I’ve had a couple of mine over 20 years. They can vary in thickness, but on average run only an inch or so, and come in all sorts of sizes. So you can choose exactly the size and thickness that works best for you.

Flat grain: If you turned your imaginary 2 X 4 so that the wide edge (the 4-inch side) was facing up, you’d have a flat-grained board. Even though it may look similar to an edge-grain board, it’s not comparable. Because no matter how well-made a flat grain board is, it’s still not as strong, and it won’t last as long. It’s the nature of the grain pattern. Yes (as mentioned above), many edge-grain boards use face-grain, or quasi-face-grain, planks mixed in as well. That’s fine. Wood is a natural medium—no need to be fanatic about it. As a matter of fact, you’d probably be hard put, nowadays, to find a pure flat-grain board. The main thing is to have a preponderance of edge-grain which will give the board strength and resist warpage.

QUALITY WOODEN BOARDS  If you’re in the market for a quality edge-grain cutting board, here are two that would be worth looking into. They’re produced by the leading manufacturers in the U.S.—J.K. Adams and John Boos. I do not personally own one of these, but if I were to buy a wood cutting board tomorrow, these are the two brands/models I would consider. Both are hewed from hard maple and come in a
Then, There Was Plastic

Strangely enough, high-density polypropylene (i.e. plastic) has similar properties to wood. It’s tough, yet soft enough not to dull a knife blade. It doesn’t heal up quite as well, and it doesn’t look as good after it’s accumulated hundreds and hundreds of score marks. (Somehow we don’t mind the look of weathered wood—we often pay a premium for it—while plastic creeps us out when it gets too worn and used.) On the other hand, a board made of plastic will generally be cheaper, so it won’t cost as much to replace. It will also be thinner and lighter than your average wood board. And, as an additional bonus, you can throw it in the dishwasher if you choose. (More about this later—but don’t even dream about tossing your wooden board in the dishwasher.)

One of my favorite professional cutlery sharpeners says, “I look for a plastic board that you can easily slice a strip from the side with your knife.”
Before you go riding off into the sunset with a stack of plastic cutting boards in your saddlebags, please make sure of one important thing—that the plastic you buy is soft enough. Because just because all the online retailers say, “safe for professional knives,” “will not dull knives”, doesn’t necessarily make it so. Bob Tate, one of my favorite professional cutlery sharpeners says, “I look for a plastic board that you can easily slice a strip from the side with your knife.” That’s pretty soft, isn’t it? After learning this, I checked out the polypropylene boards in my kitchen and three out of the four passed with honors. The one that didn’t, I only use occasionally and never for chopping, so I’m not concerned about it. It’s a classic dilemma, really: Harder plastic will look nice longer, but be tough on your knives. Softer plastic will turn ugly quicker, but be gentle on your knives. I vote for the knives.

Plastic boards come in a lot of fun colors which you can use as a coding system if you want. Red for raw meats; green for vegetables; etc., etc.—this is what professional kitchens do to help prevent cross-contamination. (I touch on this more in the next section.) Otherwise, you can just enjoy the rich colors. Another nice thing about plastic boards, is that unlike wood, they don’t tend to take on as much the flavors of pungent tasting foods like onion and garlic. If you’ve ever cut up strawberries on a wooden board that had recently been used to mince a clove of garlic, you’ll know what I mean. Garlic strawberry shortcake anyone?

In our kitchen, because even with plastic we’ve tasted garlic and onion residue, we’ve taken it a step further. We’ve dedicated two plastic boards (one large, one small) to fruit only—and written the word “fruit” on them in magic marker. (In very small type, I might add, near the edge.) Nerdy. . .but it works!

**QUALITY PLASTIC BOARDS** There are two plastic cutting board brands I can swear by—Oneida and Dexas. Both pass the softness test and come in a number of sizes and zesty colors. I’ve chopped and sliced on their boards for quite a few years.
and they’ve held up really well (but I have not washed them in the dishwasher). If these brands don’t work for you (or are unavailable), then you’ll need to either go to a store where you can handle boards yourself, or try a hit-or-miss approach ordering various brands online. Fortunately, the prices are low enough you can afford to make a mistake or two. (Dexas Jelli Board in royal blue @ Amazon / $20; Dexas Grippboard in red @ SurlaTable / $12; Oneida Cutting Board in purple @ Amazon / $16.)

Cutting Board Cleanliness

I can hear some of you madly screaming all the way from the top of this article: What about cleanliness and contamination? Everybody knows that wood is a germ monger and plastic is clean. (Or maybe the other way around.) Aren’t you going to address this? So, here goes. . .

. . .according to a definitive study done by Dr. Cliver at UC Davis, a scarred plastic board will actually hold more bacteria than a scarred wooden one.

When it comes to bacteria and other nasties, what it boils down to is not what your cutting board is made of—but how well you manage your boards and how well you clean them. No matter what you’ve heard or read (including advice from your mother and dated pronouncements by the USDA), neither wood or plastic are inherently more sanitary than the other. It’s all in the maintenance. As a matter of fact, according to a definitive study done by Dr. Cliver at UC Davis, a scarred plastic board will actually hold more bacteria than a scarred wooden one. (Crazy, huh? If you’re curious why, see the sidebar below.) Sure, a brand new plastic board, without any knife cuts in it, is a cinch to sanitize, and beats out wood. But how long does a cutting board stay in that condition? Not very. And that’s where wood excels.

At any rate, no matter what kind of board you use, you still need to wash it—especially if it’s handled any kind of raw meat. You should scrub your board thoroughly with soap and hot water (flowing from the tap, not standing in the sink), wipe it off well with a paper (or
cloth) towel, and air dry it standing up to ensure you rid it of all moisture. To be totally honest, in my kitchen the only board that gets a guaranteed serious scrub is the one that’s handled raw meat (or fish). The others may vary according to the mess. But everyone has their own standards, so do what you’re most comfortable with.

Of course, with plastic boards you have the option of popping them in the dishwasher. (Though you should rinse them off first.) If you’ve got the right kind of dishwasher, it will even sanitize them. The only thing you need to beware of is the dry cycle which tends to warp polypropylene. So don’t let the dishwasher dry them—take them out early. Just for the record, I do not do this. I hand wash all my boards.

FURTHER RESEARCH For those who want more on cutting board hygiene, here are links to three articles which discuss it in more detail. The first is the original research paper published by Dr. Dean O. Cliver at UC Davis and the other two are follow-up articles based on his research.

Original Cliver study: http://faculty.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/faculty/docliver/Research/cuttingboard.htm

Rodale follow-up article: http://www.rodale.com/cutting-boards-and-bacteria?page=0,1

The Rustic Dish follow-up: http://www.therusticdish.com/science[/message]

The Two Boards Concept

It pretty much comes down to common sense. Would you lay a raw chicken breast on top of your fresh tossed salad? Of course not. Then why would you slice up chicken for your sautée, wipe off the very same cutting board, and then proceed to separate lettuce leaves, slice up tomatoes, on the very same spot you just had raw chicken on. Not very appetizing. And not very clean. The technical term is cross-contamination. Even if you scrubbed the board with soap and hot water, there are still bacteria (chicken fat is especially good at insulating them) that could survive in the knife cuts in your board. The board would need to be thoroughly dried out before they would be nullified.
Enter the Two Boards Concept. Although I like things clean, I am by no means a sanitation freak. That’s why I’m a big fan of dedicating a cutting board (or two) to nothing but raw meat, poultry, and fish. All you need to do, on the most basic level, is to keep the raw animal produce separate from everything else. If you can just do this, you’re doing a lot. Then, all that’s left is to scrub thoroughly as described above.

Once you get you used it, it’s pretty simple. It’s sort of like pretending you practice a special brand of kosher cooking. Don’t kill yourself trying to scrub a cutting board clean in the middle of prepping a meal ever again. Use two boards—one for raw meat, the other for everything else.

**Bamboo, a Love Affair Gone Bad**

Bamboo has become the eco-friendly wood of the new century and it is quite a wonder. It looks super cool and it’s lightweight but strong. It’s tight-grained and dense, so it’s easy to clean. What’s not to like?

I can’t in good conscience recommend bamboo as the material of choice for your main cutting board.

I’d used my two smaller-size bamboo boards for years and swore by them—until I saw a negative comment on the web and asked one of my professional sharpening services their opinion. I already knew bamboo was roughly 15 percent harder than hard maple which is the standard—but 15 didn’t seem that far out of line. Turns out hardness is not the main problem. It’s all about consistency. “Maple is far more consistent in hardness whereas bamboo is super hard at the nodes and soft in between,” my sharpening guy said. The nodes
will kill you. Or the soft in between. Or, more accurately, the uneven wear between them tends to shred the edge of your blade. Especially if you’re doing a whole lot of chopping.

So I can’t in good conscience recommend bamboo as the material of choice for your main cutting board. But it seems fine as a supporting cast member. That’s how I use my bamboo boards, anyway—for lighter roles like slicing up an apple or serving cheese. Especially since bamboo is so pleasing to the eye. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a bamboo board I didn’t want to buy immediately just to take home and look at.

**BAMBOO BOARDS** Here are links to a few of my favorites—I own the first two models by Totally Bamboo and the last is made by them as well. I have rarely used mine for heavy chopping, but have washed them with soap and hot water (NOT submerged) and they have held up very well. (Below: Totally Bamboo’s 3-Piece Cutting Board Set (20-7930) @ Amazon / $13, their Kauai single board 11.5 length @ SurlaTable / $20, and their Striped 3-Piece Set @ SurlaTable / $25.)

**Other Options**
There are three other types of cutting boards worth discussing—the last of which, like bamboo, I don’t recommend for heavy usage. But you see it marketed on a lot of kitchen gear websites, so I thought it would be worth covering.

**Hard Rubber:** Hard rubber boards, the Sani-Tuff® brand specifically, are big in the food industry. And for good reason—they’re as pliant yet durable as wooden boards, won’t trap bacteria like plastic boards, are easy on knives, and can even be resurfaced by sanding. And to top it off, they can go in the dishwasher.

So where’s the rub? The biggest downside is that they’re not that attractive—unless you have a thing for industrial beige. They look like they belong in exactly the place they were designed for—a commercial kitchen. They also lean toward larger sizes (which can be cumbersome and heavy), tend to grab your knife blade more than wood or plastic, and are not cheap.
So it’s up to you. If you don’t mind the look and heft, they are worth looking into. But whatever you do, don’t order anything thicker than the 3/4 inch—unless you like to weightlift while you cook! (Disclosure: I have no hands-on experience with these, but am relying on my own research.)

**SANI-TUFF® BOARDS**  Here’s a link to (currently) the best-priced merchant: Global.com. You can also get them on Amazon through a third party, but they cost more: Amazon.com.

**Thin, Flexible Plastic Mats:** Although their thinness varies according to the manufacturer, the big appeal of these cutting mats is that they are ultra-light and ultra-portable. Which means you can stow them away anywhere—in a drawer, behind your knife block—and quickly whip one out whenever needed. Converts rave about the fact you can use the board itself to funnel whatever you’ve chopped up directly in a soup pot. Kuel. And they come in all sorts of festive colors like regular plastic boards, so you can easily code them for different foods if you like. I’ve never used them, but I can see the appeal.

_Mats are not designed for heavy-duty jobs._

Please be aware that—depending on the thinness—you should, ideally, use them over something with some give in it like a wooden cutting board. If you put a mat that’s only a couple of millimeters thin over your granite counter and mince away with your favorite newly-sharpened chef’s knife, you will quickly fold over the cutting edge (i.e dull it). And please don’t even dream about chopping with a cleaver on one of these—you’ll slice right through. Mats are not designed for heavy-duty jobs. Also, be aware that, in general, they won’t hold up to sustained dishwasher use, but will warp and curl.

Perhaps the best way to approach them is as a disposable accessory that might last for a year max. (They’re extremely affordable, depending on the brand.) Use them when you’re in a crunch—like slicing some fruit over a board you just smashed a garlic clove on—and once they get cracked and scarred, buy a new pack.
CUTTING MATS—TOP PICKS  Here are four well-researched possibilities. It’s impossible to know which, if any, of these cutting mats will work best—considering the fuzziness of product specs and range of customer reviews. But all of these brands/models should be thicker than most and less prone to curl. My personal faves are the Röse from Sur La Table and the Dexas Flexi from Williams-Sonoma. The former is German-made with a lifetime guarantee and the latter has a plethora of positive reviews with hardly any negative.

Röse Cutting Mats, set of four @ Sur La Table / med 19.95; lrg $34.95

Dexas Grippmats, set of four @ Sur La Table / $20

MIU Flexible Cutting Board, set of 5 @ Amazon / $9.95

Dexas Flexi Cutting Boards, set of 4 @ Williams-Sonoma / $19.95

Wood Fiber Composites: Richlite is a wonderfully green material made of layers of paper pulp and resin. Epicurean makes a long line of Richlite cutting boards which are quite stylish and quite the rage. One can understand why—they’re incredibly durable, won’t stain easily, can take up 350 degrees of heat, are completely sanitary, and can even go in the dishwasher. There’s only one big problem—they’re pretty darn hard. Significantly harder than hard maple, which makes them less-than-ideal for heavy cutting-board use. Even though all the websites selling these boards claim they won’t dull knives, I find it hard to believe. (Disclosure: I have tested out Richlite, but do not use it myself.)

Nevertheless, these Epicurean cutting boards are handsome and sophisticated and can fill a certain niche. If you find them irresistible, I would recommend making them supporting players (like I recommend for bamboo). Relegate them to lighter tasks—halving a melon, sawing up a baguette, serving figs and cheese—and save the heavy lifting for other boards made of more yielding materials.
Conclusions
Remember, the two best all-around materials for cutting boards are wood and plastic—which you don’t have to choose between, but can use in combination. Both can be hygienic if used properly because the main thing is how you manage and clean your cutting boards, not what you cut on. To this end, adopt the Two Boards Concept—have a separate cutting board for raw meat only (including poultry and fish). You’ll find it indispensable to making your prep work sanitary and simpler.

Take care what your knives cut on and they will return the favor by staying sharp longer!

Cutting Board Recap
**Wood**
*pros:* protects knives; beautiful, natural look; weathers well; variety of styles; lasts long time
*cons:* can’t wash in dishwasher

**Plastic**
*pros:* protects knives; looks great at first; variety of colors; dishwasher safe (except for dry cycle)

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Epicurean Non-Slip Series Cutting Boards @ Sur La Table / lrg $34.95.
Same, except with brown grippers, @ Amazon / lrg $36.27.
**cons:** eventually scars—doesn’t weather as well as wood; careful drying in dishwasher

**Bamboo**

**pros:** attractive unusual patterns; lightweight; weatheres as well as wood; variety of styles; lasts

**cons:** hard on knives; only light usage, as backup—bread, apple for lunch; no dishwasher

**Hard Rubber (Sani-Tuff®)**

**pros:** protects knives; more sanitary than plastic; dishwasher safe; lasts forever; can be resurfaced

**cons:** not attractive; no style selection—only one color, beige; heavy; pricey

**Thin, Flexible Plastic Mats**

**pros:** portable and light; variety of colors/styles; inexpensive; semi-dishwasher

**cons:** flimsy; minimum knife protection; wear out quickly; not meant to last; will warp in dishwasher

**Wood Fiber Composite (Richlite w/Epicurean)**

**pros:** attractive modern designs; wears well; variety of styles; lasts as long as wood

**cons:** hard on knives; should only use lightly as backup—bread, etc.
How to Buy a Great Chef Knife

A CHEF KNIFE (or cook’s knife) is the soul of the kitchen. It’s the tool you most use without even thinking, but can’t live without. It’s in your hands pre-dinner, when you slice up an avocado for guacamole, and there again when you quarter a watermelon for dessert. So buying the right one is worth some thought.

For me, it boils down to two big things:

1) How does it feel in your hand?

2) How well will it hold its edge (i.e. stay sharp)?
Do I hear someone whining, “But what about looks? Don’t they count for something?” And I would have to say—sure, as long as the two biggies are taken care of first. Then feel free to go to town. But beauty is no guarantee of usefulness. What matters most are the two big things.

**HENCKELS KNIVES** The knife on the previous page is a classic 8-inch chef’s from one of Henckels oldest top-quality lines, the Professional S series. It’s a hand-me-down from my Mom and, I must admit, I love how it feels in my hand—balanced, with a nice sense of heft. Although Germany has hundreds of knife makers, Henckels and Wusthof are the two that are most well-known internationally. And for good reason—they make dependable knives (usually backed by a lifetime guarantee) that will stand up to a lot of hard use (and misuse) and still retain their edge. If you’re in the market for a knife, here are links to two reputable online merchants that stock a full line of Henckels Pro S cutlery at competitive prices—MetroKitchen and SurLaTable. And make sure to check out the Short List of recommended knives at the end of this article.

**Access to the Merchandise**

In an ideal world, we would all live near a major gourmet kitchen store that had walls of knives we could touch in the flesh before we bought. Oh, the salesperson probably wouldn’t let us chop up an onion, but we could get a general feel just by handling them a bit, pretending to slice and dice.

Alas, that’s not the case for most of us. And it presents a challenge when trying to understand how your future kitchen soulmate will feel in your grip. Nonetheless, no matter how limited a selection the stores near you offer, it’s worth making a visit to whichever ones carry quality knives. Don’t let the salesperson intimidate you. Ask to take out as many as you need from behind the glass display case and into your eager palm.
Most reputable online merchants have reasonable return policies because it’s in their best interest to encourage you to buy.

Also—be open to other non-trad avenues of getting a hands-on experience. Ask your foodie friends what knives they own and if you can try them out sometime. Or how about friends of friends who might work in restaurants? Be creative! And then, of course, there’s the online universe. Today’s consumer has shopping options never possible before. And most reputable online merchants have reasonable return policies because it’s in their best interest to encourage you to buy. Thus, your best bet might be to simply do some research, take an educated guess, and buy online.

**WORD OF CAUTION** Depending on the knife and how it’s packaged, you will be able to handle a knife purchased online before committing—and if it’s a total disaster, mail it back for a nominal charge. But make sure to talk with a telephone salesperson to find out which knives have problematic packaging and what the merchant can do about that.

**Decoys**

There are certain features that manufacturers or merchants might tout about their knives that don’t necessarily matter. They can act like smoke screens clouding the issues of quality, the things that are truly important. Let’s look at a few major ones.

**Full tang versus partial tang:** The tang is that part of the blade that sticks into the handle, that keeps the two
connected. The tang is often sandwiched between two pieces of handle that are held together with rivets. A knife is described as "full-tang" when the metal from the blade runs all the way through the handle.

There’s nothing wrong with a full-tang. But the problem is, sometimes knifemakers, and especially merchants, tout a full-tang as the ultimate measure of quality and durability. While, technically speaking, a knife with a full-tang structure might be stronger, it’s basically irrelevant. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. You’re not prying off two-by-fours with your chef knife, you’re chopping carrots. Many custom hunting knives and Japanese swords are not full-tang, and they are (and were) built for more heavy-duty uses than your average chef knife. Don’t get hung up on the tang. Go with the overall quality of the knife.

*There are high-quality stamped blades and low-quality forged blades.*

**Forged versus stamped:** Historically, there has been a huge difference in quality between a blade that was pounded into shape (forged) and one that was cut out of a sheet of metal like a cookie (stamped). But today, thanks to the wonders of modern manufacturing—the accessibility of high-end steel, the sophistication of heat treatment—the gap between them has narrowed to none. It all depends. There are high-quality stamped blades and low-quality forged blades. Yes, the majority of bargain basement knives will still be stamped, and the majority of high-end blades ($200 and up) will still be forged. But in that wide middle ground ($70 to $200), if you match each type of knife at comparable price points, a quality stamped blade will meet a forged head-on and hold its own. It’s more about the feel and what you like.

**Bolster bluff:** The bolster is the part of a knife between the handle and the blade that is built out a bit and can 1) help protect your gripping hand from sliding up against the back edge of the blade, and 2) help balance the knife. A bolster, along with
a full-tang, used to be the mark of a quality forged knife. But now in our polyglot world, with the mixing of Western and Eastern knife styles and the proliferation of inexpensive manufacturing (i.e. China), this element is not a guarantee of quality. Most forged German-made knives have traditionally had bolsters while Japanese-made have not. A bolster is not essential, it’s a matter of taste.

**The Feel Factor: Weight and Handle**

Assuming you can audition a physical specimen—how does this baby feel in your hand? Is it too heavy, too light? Does the handle seem comfortable? Too bulky, too small? How’s the balance? Does it want to stay in your hand while your work? Most cooks prefer a knife
that weighs evenly between the blade and handle. Some prefer the blade to weigh a touch more and tug down toward the food. In the end, only you can determine what feels right. And you can’t be sure what works for your favorite celeb chef will work for you. You need to trust your own senses.

*German-style [knives] are thicker and heavier. Japanese are thinner and lighter.*

Nowadays most quality chef’s knives (or cook’s knives) can be grouped into three general categories: German-style, Japanese-style, or hybrid. German-style (or Western) are thicker and heavier. Japanese are thinner and lighter. And hybrids are usually in the Japanese mode, but not always. It helps to know this when trying to figure out what you like.

For example, if you’re holding a Japanese-made G-48 by Global (which is a hybrid), you’ll definitely find it lighter and the handle skinnier than a German-made Classic Chef’s by Wusthof. So skinny, in fact, that when you open your grip, the knife will want to flop over sideways in your hand. (The Wusthof will stay put.) Do you mind the fact that it can’t rest in your hand without flopping sideways? Or are you so delighted with the lightness that it’s a non-issue?

In the last decade, heavier German-style knives have been giving way to the lighter Japanese-style model. One of the pluses of the Japanese-style that’s been extolled is that because it’s so much lighter, you feel less fatigue. And it’s true—but it might not be a big factor for someone cooking only four meals a week for a family of three. At any rate, don’t just follow the trend, follow what feels good. (For what it’s worth, even though I own and use both, I still gravitate toward the heavier, Western, style.)

And while you’ve got it in your hands, pay special attention to what the handle’s made of. Do you enjoy the texture? Materials can vary. For example, both Henckels and Wusthof have top-of-the-line models with very different-feeling...
handles—one with a hard smooth finish that imitates wood and another that’s more plastic-looking, softer, and has more grip. And then, of course, there’s the trademark pebbled steel that Global knives sport. Remember, anything that mildly irritates you during a test might drive you nuts after using it a hundred times. Then again, if the blade keeps on cutting supremely . . . you just might get used to the handle.

**THE RISE OF SANTOKU** [san-TOH-koo]  For a hundred years at least, the standard chef knife in the West has pretty much looked like the one at the top of this article. It’s the one everyone thinks of as a cook’s knife or even just a kitchen knife. But in the last decade or so, there’s a style of blade from Japan that’s been gaining prominence as a new favorite all-around knife. Enter santoku . . .

**One Size Does Not Fit All**

Before we leave the world of ergonomics, there’s one more design factor worth thinking about—the length of blade you’re most comfortable with. A 7-inch santoku? A classic 8-inch chef’s?
A large knife blade definitely is something many find intimidating (like my sister, for instance, and I can empathize). Yet for others, like Norman Weinstein who’s taught professional chefs for over 20 years, nothing will do but a 10-inch chef’s. That’s fine. Choose whatever size you’re most comfortable with. And what will work best for the range of tasks allotted to it—from dicing a shallot to splitting open a melon.

**9-INCH KNIFE**  In the last few years, more and more German manufacturers have begun to offer a 9-inch chef knife. Which is awesome news because it’s a great in-between size! I’ve featured one by Messermeister in my Short List of recommendations at the end of this article.

Let it be noted though that if you’re cooking for an army or handling a lot of cumbersome foods—like pumpkins and squash and bundles of kale—a 10-incher can come in quite handy. And the width of the blade enables you to scoop up piles of chopped carrots effortlessly. Also, if you have large hands, a wide blade insures your knuckles don’t get pinched between the handle and cutting board when chopping up onions.

*6-inch chef, 7- and 7 1/2-inch santokus, and 8-inch chef. Please note: I do not recommend choosing a 6-incher as your main chef knife. It’s too short.*
If you’re not sure about the length, then I’d recommend going with a standard consumer-sized 8-inch chef’s. Or if you favor Japanese lightness, then maybe a 7-inch santoku. (One great thing about the santoku is you can have the extra width of a 10-inch blade without the length.) Leave it up to experience to eventually teach you what you do, or don’t, favor. Actually, I’m in limbo a little on this issue of size myself. I keep going back and forth between my Henckels 8-inch chef’s and my Global 7-inch santoku. One night I’ll use just the Henckels, and another night just the Global. And some nights I’ll switch between them both.

Whatever works for you. You, you, you!

Sharpness that Lasts (know what you’re buying)
Here’s my main criteria for sharpness: I want a chef knife that can cut through a tomato without any resistance. Time and time again. If it can do this, then it’s probably sharp enough for my uses. Simple and sweet.

Practically any knife you buy today—yes, even at WalMart—will start off this sharp. But it won’t stay that way. Only the good ones, assuming you’re not chopping on glass or metal or something insane, can retain their sharpness, or more accurately, have their original sharpness revived again and again for quite a few years. And the quality of the good ones, their strength and resilience, their ability to hold their edge, totally depends on the quality of steel they’re made of.
Steel is an entire subject in and of itself, but suffice it to say, it’s a material that lends itself to a ginormous range of quality and character, and the steel in a cheap knife is light years away from the steel in a more expensive knife and it will not hold up. The edge will fold over and dull too easily and will require much more sharpening. And the sharpening itself will wear away much more metal, so that you’ll find yourself with either a perpetually dull knife, or a knife who’s cutting edge quickly wears away to nothing.

So how do you know you’re getting a knife with high-performance steel? Go with a name brand. Here’s a short list to start with: Henckels, Wusthof, Shun, Global, MAC, Messermeister. But, unfortunately, it’s a bit more complicated. Because most of these brands have quite a few product lines (try 11 or more for Henckels) that vary enough in quality to make them not the least bit comparable. And to wade through all the styles and models of just these six brands would take a whole website in itself. So the main thing I can do for you here, in wrapping things up, is to 1) give you a warning, and 2) point you to a short list of suggestions. (And encourage you to check out other areas of this site where I delve in deeper.)

First, the Warning: There is NO FREE LUNCH. If you find a brand of knife that’s trumpeting it’s specialness but is significantly cheaper than brand-name models of similar size and design, let the buyer beware. It’s not humanly possible. (Well, maybe if it’s stolen merchandise. But you don’t want to get into that, do you?) You get what you pay for.

Secondly, the Short List: Just a short scroll down is a list of six high-quality chef knives that are worth taking a look at. They’re purposely from a variety of makers in various styles. Of course, ideally, you’d be in a store where you could physically interact with them before you buy. But, again—no bricks-and-mortar store on the globe could offer you so many choices. Or such low prices.

Priorities
One final thing: In thinking about how much space I’ve spent in this article on how a chef knife should feel, and how short a space in discussing the importance of its ability retain its sharpness—I don’t want to leave you with the wrong impression. In my experience,
sharpness has been just as important as ergonomics. Believe it or not, my hand (and arm) have readily adapted to the feel and shape of a variety of knives (and their handles) that I’ve used over the years. Whether they were chunky or thin, heavy or light. But when a sharp knife went dull and refused to be revived, I never ever could get used to it. It continually annoyed the heck out of me.

So, when in doubt—go with quality!

The Short List

Six different kinds of quality chef knife from six different manufacturers. To learn more about each knife and knifemaker and why they’re on the list, check out Chapter 10, Quality Chef Knives—Six Recommendations which should really be called How to Buy a Great Chef Knife, Part 2.

Henckels Professional S 8-inch Chef Knife
@MetroKitchen: $130 / 10-inch: $150

Wusthof Classic Ikon 7-inch Santoku
@ MetroKitchen: $110

Messermeister Meridian Elite 9-inch Chef Knife
@ Amazon: $120 / 8-inch: $80

Global 7-inch Santoku (G-48)
@ MetroKitchen: $123
MAC MTH-80 – Professional Series 8-inch Chef Knife with Dimples
@ Amazon: $130 (+ $5 shipping)

Shun Classic 8-inch Chef Knife (DM0706)
@ MetroKitchen $170 / 10-inch $190
HERE ARE SIX suggestions for buying a quality chef knife (or cook’s knife), each produced by a different world-class knifemaker. This short list is designed not only to highlight quality knives, but to give you a sense of what’s out there (a lot!) and help you find the knife that’s right for you.

This is not a Top Ten List (or Top Six). “And it’s not comprehensive. (You’ll notice there aren’t any traditional Japanese knifemakers on the list. Sorry, (Clockwise from upper left) Henckels Professional S, Wusthof Classic Ikon, Messermieister Meridian Elite, Global G-48, MAC MTH-80—Professional Series, Shun Classic
can’t explain why now.) But it should aid you in making some sense of the kitchen knife world and give you some ideas!

... a chef knife, depending on how hard you use it, could easily last 30 years or more.

The brands covered are: Henckels, Wusthof, Messermeister, Global, MAC, and Shun. The first three are centered in Germany, the last three in Japan. Most of these manufacturers produce a range of sizes/lengths as well as slightly different models of the same caliber. For example, although I’ve chosen Global’s santoku knife for this list, Global also makes a number of regular chef knives that are comparable quality. So, if one of the models on this list doesn’t exactly work for you, poke around some, you may find what you’re looking for.

Also—before you bemoan the prices, remember that a chef knife, depending on how hard you use it and how well you take care of it, could easily last 30 years or more. I’m not exaggerating. Plus, it’s the single most important tool in your entire kitchen. (What would compete, your large sauté pan?) If you dollar-cost average the price of the most expensive knife on this list (say, the Shun 10-inch for $170), over 30 years it would cost you a whopping $5.66 per year! So try to see the BIG picture.

**Henckels Professional S 8-inch Chef Knife**
@ MetroKitchen: $130 / 10-inch: $150

Henckels is one of the largest knifemakers in the world and has been around since the 1700s. They produce at least 11 different lines of knives, so it’s especially important to be clear what model you’re buying. The Pro S line one of their finest and it’s manufactured in Soligen, Germany where their core factories are located. They also have factories in Spain, and as a newer development, in Japan as well. It’s in Japan where they produce their latest
creation, a model designed by Bob Kramer, the American bladesmith who has set the bar high for kitchen-knife quality.

The Professional S is fully forged from one hunk of steel—and with a bolster, a full-tang, and a three-rivet handle, it’s as classic as it gets. Although the handle’s been made to look and feel like wood, it’s not. Wood handles are no longer the norm and most manufacturers assume customers would rather have the longevity offered by a synthetic material.

This chef knife is one of the mainstays of my kitchen and I loooove the feel—nicely balanced with a little heft, but nothing that tires my hand out (for the record, I don’t spend hours prepping). I got it sharpened well over a year ago, and with regular honing its kept its edge. It comes in two sizes, an 8-inch and 10. (There’s also a 6-inch, but that’s too small for an all-purpose blade.)

**Wusthof Classic Ikon 7-inch Santoku**

@ MetroKitchen: $110

Wusthof is the other of the “Big Two” German knifemakers and some pros swear by it over Henckels because they feel the quality is higher. Not sure if this perception is justified, but it’s probably aided by the fact Wusthof has been family-owned and run for almost 200 years. Interesting enough, both Wusthof and Henckels are manufactured in the same German town (along with dozens of other blademakers) which is one of the knife-making capitals of the world. (What’s another capital? Seki City, Japan.)

Although Wusthof makes a terrific classic chef knife very similar to Henckels, as a contrast, I recommend looking at this model because:

1) it has a curved handle that might feel better to some people’s hands
2) it’s a santoku, Japanese-style blade, which some might prefer. It gives you the width of a longer knife without the more cumbersome length. And it should be noticeably thinner and lighter than your traditional 8-inch chef knife.

*Whether or not you like a bolster is up to you, it is no measure of quality.*

Like the regular high-quality chef knives made by Wusthof, it’s fully forged and has a full tang. But, unlike them, it does not host a full bolster. Whether or not you like a bolster is up to you, it is no measure of quality, but will make the knife easier to sharpen. This santoku also sports the scalloped edge that is all the rage to, theoretically, keep food from sticking. Because this model is in the Japanese-style, but made by a German knifemaker, I would call it a hybrid of sorts. (Henckels makes santokus as well.)

If you like the santoku style, but don’t care about the handle and would like to save some cash, check out the santoku Wusthof makes in the Classic line. But please note—while the Classic is still an excellent knife, it is not at quite the same level as the Ikon.

**Messermeister Meridian Elite 9-inch Chef Knife**

@ Amazon: $120 / 8-inch: $80

*Messermeister* knives, like the name sounds, are rooted in Germany—the Meridian Elite line being forged in the very same German town as the preceding knives from the Big Two. While Messermeister is not as big an operation as Henckels and Wusthof, they’re no less revered for their quality. Maybe even more so.
This knife makes this list for three reasons:

1) it’s highly recommended by Chad Ward in his book *An Edge in the Kitchen* as being uber-sharp. It comes from the factory with a highly polished edge that Ward claims is superior to any of the “big-name knife brands” and will hold it for a substantial amount of time.

2) it has a partial bolster which makes it easier to sharpen (and is a nod to Japanese knives)

3) it comes in a 9-inch size that’s a perfect compromise between an 8- and a 10-inch—but doesn’t cost any more than your average 8-inch. Neat, huh?

There’s only one caveat—the blade width (of the 9-inch) is too wide for your average knife rack. You’ll have to make special provisions. If that concerns you, or, if you don’t care about the extra length, then buy an 8-inch—at $80 it’s an outright steal.

Global 7-inch Santoku (G-48)
@ MetroKitchen: $123 / @ SurLaTable: $123 (+ shipping $16.50)

Global revolutionized the kitchen-knife world in the 1980s by creating a series of high-performance knives that were on the cutting edge of fashion (forgive the pun), yet still affordable. Like traditional Japanese knives, they’re extremely light with a thin, razor-sharp edge. Yet in blade design, they generally owe more to Western tradition than Japanese. That’s why I call them Japanese hybrids.
in that they graft one tradition of knifemaking onto another. Most of Global’s knives are not forged, but made of a high-quality steel that has been tempered and heat treated to new levels of sophistication.

While the shape of the blade on the G-48 is similar to the Wusthof santoku, the balance and feel should be quite different. To say nothing of the styling. No major knife brand stands out as so stunningly modern. (Interesting detail: Global injects the perfect amount of sand into the hollow handle to make it balance correctly.) As mentioned before, if you prefer a traditional Western-styled chef’s, Global has plenty of those also. Try a G-2 or G-61.

I own this santoku and am embarrassed to admit I treasure the edge so much that I can’t bear to do much chopping with it, but save it mainly for slicing. Which it does amazingly! (Crazy, I know.)

MAC MTH-80 – Professional Series 8” Chef Knife with Dimples

@ Amazon: $130 (+ $5 shipping)

MAC knives seem to be one of the best kept secrets of the consumer kitchen knife market. Professionals seem to know all about them with famous chefs like Thomas Keller and Charlie Trotter unabashedly endorsing them as the ultimate cutting machine. But ask your average home gourmet, and odds are they’ve never heard of them.

Japanese designed and manufactured, like Global, they’re a new breed of knife, a hybrid—that incorporates the harder and thinner Japanese steel with a Western-shaped
blade. They’re not as stylish as Global, but probably even sharper. And (like Global) they’re also not forged, but highly machined.

As the Messermeister above, Chad Ward (in *An Edge in the Kitchen*) raves about the pure cutting fury of the MTH-80. So for those who worship sharp, this one’s for you!

The MTH-80 Professional is the workhorse of MACs various product lines and I’m guessing it’s the most popular because it offers the maximum sharpitude for your dollar. Plus, the welded-on bolster creates an unusual combination of super-thin blade with added weight that keeps it balanced in your hand more like a German-style knife. According to *Gourmet Magazine*, a MAC knife is “the difference between a minivan and race car.” Care to take one out for a spin?

(Nota: Please be careful not to confuse the MTH-80 Professional with the TH-80 – Chef Series 8” Chef’s Knife with Dimples, a lower-level model that goes for $40 or more less.)

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**Shun Classic 8-Inch Chef Knife (DM0706)**

@ MetroKitchen: $170 / 10-inch: $190 • @ Amazon: $170 / 10-inch: $170 also

*Shun*, along with Global, is probably one of the most popular and well-known Japanese brands in the U.S. It’s no wonder—their flagship line, Shun Classic, is very attractive and very sharp. They’re manufactured in Seki City which, along with Solingen, is another knife-making capital.

Don’t let the beautiful wavy pattern on the blade fool you—it’s much more than a pretty face. Sandwiched between 32 layers of swirly-patterned softer steel (16 layers per
side) lies a thin hard core that creates the edge. At Rockwell 61, it’s harder than half of the knives on this list. Which gives it the ability to hold a 16-degree edge for a very long time.

I have to admit when I first unpacked my new Shun 6-inch chef’s not so long ago, I was stunned at how light it was. For someone used to weightier German blades, the lightness felt almost chintzy. Silly me. Over the past year I’ve now come to fully appreciate the way the thin sharp blade can slice through denser foods with ease and less resistance than my thicker German knives. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not ready to abandon ship—but it’s great to have Shun as an option.

Another reason the Shun Classic is on this list is it’s distinctive Pakkawood handle. It’s similar to the nimble feel of a traditional Japanese knife, but different. The unique D-shaped contour might fit certain cook’s hands better than others. So, if a typical Western-style knife handle always feels too clunky, here’s another way to go.

To briefly summarize:

- If you like a knife with heft, then the Henkels or Messermeister will probably please you most. They’re forged German steel through and through and will feel the most solid.

- If you want light and nimble, then the Global and Shun should be at the top of your list. The Wusthof and MAC could be back up.

- If you have a smaller-sized hand and want your knife to fit snugly in it, the Shun and Wusthoff should be your fist picks. The handles on both are more streamlined and less bulky.

- If you have a larger hand and don’t want it to feel squished on the cutting board, the Messermeister and the MAC should give you the most clearance. The handles are long and the width of the blades should keep your knuckles from banging the countertop. (Actually, the Global will work equally well in this regard, it’s pretty roomy.)
For pure beauty, the Global and Shun would be hard to beat. The Global is designed in high-tech modern, the Shun in classic contemporary. The Wusthof also, with it’s curved handle, has some extra swish. (And rest assured, there’s no sacrifice of looks for performance on any of these knives.)

If you love tradition, or know you want a knife with a classic look and feel that will never go out of style, the Henckels is your man. It is the closest to a vintage chef knife.

Finally, if you crave sharposity, if you’re aching to get your tired chef hands on one of the meanest slicing-and-dicing machines on the planet—go with the MAC. You will not be disappointed. (And, as a more elegant second, consider the Messermeister.)

Six up, six down! As you can see, there are a lot of wonderful chef knives out there. Hopefully this short list has given you a taste of the possibilities. Remember, stay with quality brands—there’s no free lunch—and stay with what feels and works best for you. It’s your body. It’s your kitchen. Have fun cooking!