



Rob Nella tries to avoid getting a paper cut at his divine one-stop culinary store, which offers cooking classes, knives galore and everything else that a kitchen needs — and then some

# Blade Runners

Japanese knives make the cut — big time

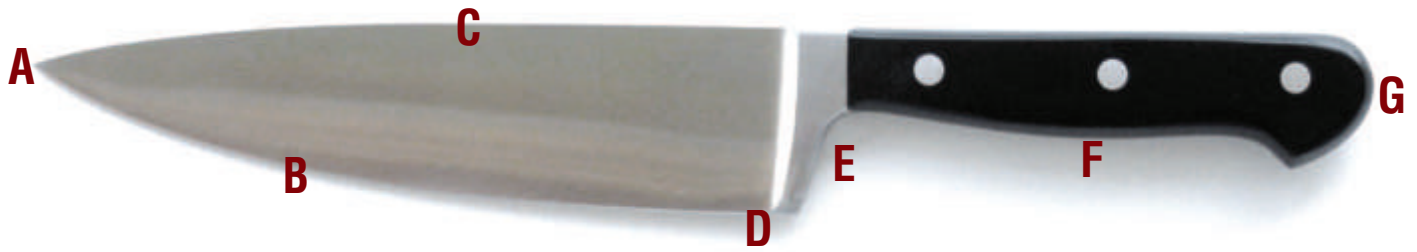
BY IRIS BENAROIA // PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER YIP

There she lay flaunting her lean muscular body and athletic ability. She gleamed up at me catching my eye. Was that flirtatiousness I detected? I knew at that moment I just had to hold her and then I would know. I would know if she was the one.

That may sound like naughty locker-room banter, but ask any chef about how they select a knife and they'll resort to racy talk. "The tang, the tang," said one chef nearly salivating when asked what he looked for. "It's all about the perfect tang." "Oh, I just have to hold it in my hand, almost caress it," said another. After that they all agreed it's best to test the blade out on actual food. Slant that sucker on its side and see what it feels like swishing off paper-thin slices of sashimi. Next, grab a bread knife and saw through nutty



## THE ANATOMY OF A CHEF'S KNIFE



**A. Knife tip.** The tip of the knife is used for handling small items such as shallots, onions, mushrooms, and leeks. Use the point for cutting food products only.

**B. Knife cutting edge.** The most frequently used part of a chef's knife is the centre of the cutting edge. It serves well on firm or soft items, with small chops and long strokes for tiny or large types of cut.

**C. Knife back or spine.** It should be smooth so it can be gripped between thumb and forefinger for controlled cutting and chopping.

**D. Knife heel.** The last few inches of the blade are known as the heel. It is used mostly for heavy cutting tasks, or when maximum leverage is needed. It is most efficient for making quick, coarse cuts, and for jobs which require strength or pressure.

**E. Knife bolster.** The bolster is between the blade and handle. The bolster and the full tang (metal extending into the handle) give the knife better balance. They are standard features of a classic forged chef's knife. On most cutlery, the bolster extends all the way to the bottom of the blade.

**F. Knife tang.** The tang is the metal that extends into the handle. In good knives, it extends all the way to the butt. It gives the knife durability, weight, and balance. The metal usually extends from the knife back (top) to the knife front for handles attached by rivets. For knives with a moulded handle, a round, pointed rat tail tang is used. It is wholly contained within the handle.

**G. Knife butt.** The back end of the knife. For most good knives with handles attached by rivets, the metal of the tang proceeds all the way to the butt and can be seen wedged between the handle pieces.

SOURCE: [www.chefknives.com](http://www.chefknives.com)

farmers' bread. Or hack through a pair of knuckle-sized hocks with a butcher's knife. If you like how it feels, then you know the knife has your name on it.

Forget brand name and price, even the best German steel doesn't amount to much if it feels wrong. "You may have a [pricey] Wüsthof, but it has to feel comfortable in your hand," says Michael Elliot, chef-owner of Liaison College Downtown Toronto. "It doesn't matter how strong the blade is or the steel, it all depends on the individual. How you pick it up and touch it."

Considering the average chef's knife costs about \$300 — and some spendthrifts have been known to drop \$1,000 on a deluxe slicer — that may sound like airy-fairy advice. But it's actually sound when you think of it. After all, purchasing a knife is akin to buying a bra or a pair of shoes (fit is everything). Since we all come in different shapes and sizes, what suits one gender may not suit the other.

"My wife is 5'4" and 135 pounds. That's why I've got lightweight Henckels sitting on the counter at home," says Christopher Ennew, chef

at Ste. Anne's Spa near Coburg, Ont. "I'm 6'4" and 220 pounds. A knife that goes into my hand is fairly large. Weight bearing and handle size doesn't matter to me. I've [worked in kitchens where] I've had to purchase six-inch French knives for ladies because longer ones tire their hand by the end of the day."

Ennew was trained by Europeans in the early 1970s. Back then, he says, professional kitchens had the pall of the macho gentlemen's club. "When I started it was a physical business," he says. "But the knives are getting shorter. These days you won't see them past 10-inch."

Why the circumcision? "If they're too heavy, people get carpal syndrome and they don't want to strain themselves anymore."

You can blame that on magazines and television shows that have sensationalized cooking, removing the brute from the brisket. TV makes it look easy to prepare a five-course meal for 50. What they're not showing viewers is the behind-the-scene chain-gang sawing through gristle and wrapping

ravioli. Students entering culinary schools looking to become the next Nigella may feel sadly misled.

But Liaison College puts an end to that claptrap. Last year, the 151 graduates from Elliott's school went out into the workforce fully adept at slicing every food from the toughest ligament to the most delicate terrine. He says it takes students about two weeks before they understand how to handle a knife. One area he focuses on is proper posture. It's good practice, since anyone who has toiled with the pros knows it's not uncommon to spend eight hours a day on your feet.

The knife must do all the work, insists Elliot — guided by the person, of course. "If I'm slicing, my body should be on a 20-degree angle going with the slice, so I'm not forcing my whole body into it, I'm allowing the knife to do all the work. Some cooks that come through here get kind of lazy and don't use the knife to the fullest, they just focus on one area of the knife and just chop, mince and dice everything in that area."

By the time you're a master culinarian like chef-owner Patrick Riley, knife work will take on a whole different meaning. Riley can be seen executing fabulous food at Perigee in Toronto's Distillery District, where the sunken open kitchen allows those seated around the perimeter to witness the spectacle of creation. If you watch closely, you'll notice Riley has quite the set of knives. Like most chefs each is task specific, and like most Riley is picknickety about how his knives are handled.

"Knives are such a personal thing. Even the way they're used," he says. "When I sharpen my knife I find it only needs sharpening every two weeks, whereas if someone uses my knife and cuts a certain way it'll last maybe a day or two." He's not sure why that is, how something as elusive as cutting makes a difference. "It's hard to explain exactly. But I sharpen my edges a certain way."

As for what brand is best, well, they all are. "I don't have a bunch of Henckels or a bunch of Wüsthofs. I find certain brands are better for certain tasks," says Riley. "Wüsthof is good for hard work like big cutting. Henckels are hard to sharpen so I use them for delicate work like slicing. I use Mac for cutting terrines. And I don't covet the most expensive knives. All my

## SO WHERE DO CHOPSTICKS FIT IN?

When it comes to cutlery as we know it today, knives were the first to be invented. Cavemen used crude stone knives to cut meat. Spoons were next. The earliest forms found (carved from bone, stone, or wood) suggest they were invented 25,000 years ago. Forks are the newest. Invented in the 11th century, they were demonized by the Catholic Church, the elders stating that it would be heresy for anything other than hands to touch the food that God created. They finally gained acceptance in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries when French noblemen began using them, ostensibly to keep their clothes clean as they dined.

SOURCE: THE HISTORY CHANNEL

boning is done with Nella knives, which are inexpensive and easy to sharpen."

There's a hint of excitement in his voice as he discloses one last point: "I have a \$300 Mac knife with an edge that never touches anything but flesh and never even hits a board. I only use it for thinly slicing sashimi."

Japanese knives are being handled quite a bit by the professionals. Witness their stardom on the big screen, too. Who can forget Uma Thurman's famous swordsmanship in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *2* (or her banana-yellow cat suit for that matter). The Japanese samurai, after all, have a long history. In the kitchen, not so long.

"The demand for Asian knives started about five years ago," says Rob Nella, a third-generation Italian whose name is synonymous with knives across Canada. He's also the owner of Nella Cucina, a one-stop operation where you can catch a cooking class by superstars such as Susur Lee, shop for an espresso machine or get your knives rented and sharpened (chefs prefer the pick-up service). "Mac is hugely popular," he says. "Whereas before we had a big range of German knives now we've expanded our Mac range because a lot of female chefs like them."

Nella explains it's all about construction. "Mac is a well-balanced knife, which means from tip to tail the weight in the hand and the blade is almost equal. And the handles are smaller. It's Japanese steel, so it's a little harder, meaning it

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stays sharper longer compared to European steel.”

Even traditional French or German knife companies are coming out with their own Asian-style lines, adds Kevin Patrick Brown, an enthusiastic rep at Nella. “I love knives. People are very brand conscious of their knives, right from students starting out up to professional chefs. No matter how many knives they have, they always want more. Knives

are a bit of a cult item.”

Jason Malloff, the 33-year-old chef at Fiddlehead Joe’s in Vancouver, prefers Japanese ones. “I like the design and shape of the steel Mac uses. It holds an edge really well. They’re fairly thin and easy to sharpen,” he says. “I use two knives on a regular basis: a chef’s knife — a classic style by Global — and a Japanese boning knife.”

As for using a knife-rental service for sharpening, he believes you should do it yourself. “It’s embarrassing if you’re a cook and can’t sharpen your own knife,” scoffs Malloff.

That sentiment is shared by Stephen Vardi. The Ottawa-based chef of Beckta can’t imagine allowing anyone else to touch his precious, ahem, tool. “I sharpen my knives differently. Most chefs sharpen their knives 50/50 — or 10 strokes on one side and 10 on the other — I sharpen mine using 10 on the front and three on the backside. I also sharpen the tip much sharper, which is an Eastern technique. Cutting with the heel is more a French technique. I use the top four inches and the heel doesn’t get touched too much.”

But ask a third-generation knife sharpener and you’ll find he knows more about the knives than the chefs themselves. Joe Malacarne of Acme Malacarne Grinding in Toronto is full of knife lore. No surprise, since he’s been grinding knives since airplanes had smoking sections. He says large companies like Loblaws, Dominion and Cara Operations regularly use his knife-rental and sharpening service for practical reasons.

“It’s similar to using a mat or linen rental service. You need the machines to clean and maintain them.” There’s also the capital outlay of buying the knife. “This way it’s a fixed cost for the year and they know what they’re getting for the money.”

Plus, Malacarne, like Nella, is a pro.

Says Nella, “Some of my knife sharpeners have 30 years of experience doing this. We don’t let anyone who doesn’t have at least 10 touch people’s personal knives.” He adds, “I find chefs are ecstatic after their knives are returned because they’re really sharp.”

Or it could just be they’re happy to be reunited with their true loves. □