Demo Guide

TECHNIQUE

PRELIMINARY CUTS

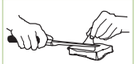
Whether you'll be slicing vegetables for a stir-fry or cubing beef for a stew, preliminary cuts, such as peeling, trimming and squaring off, often make subsequent cuts easier to perform.

PEELING

To peel a thin-skinned fruit or vegetable with a paring knife, hold the blade's edge at a 20-degree angle to the food and shave the blade just beneath the surface.

For fruits and vegetables with thick rinds or skins, such as melons or squash, use a chef's knife to neatly peel the food while removing a minimum of flesh.

TRIMMING



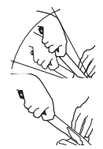
Use a boning or chef's knife to trim exterior skin, fat and gristle from raw meat and poultry. Follow the natural contours of the food, keeping the blade angled slightly upward to avoid removing edible meat.

SQUARING OFF

To prevent round fruits or vegetables from slipping or rolling as they're cut, first slice the food in half to create a flat surface that will rest securely on the cutting board.

To prepare round foods for precision cuts, such as dice or julienne, trim away a slice from the top, bottom and sides to create an even rectangular or square shape.

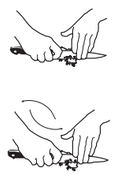
CHOPPING



Chopping involves cutting foods into pieces that are bite-size or smaller. While the pieces need not be perfectly uniform in shape, they should be roughly the same size.

- Perform any necessary preliminary cuts, such as peeling, trimming or squaring off.
- Using a chef's knife, grip the handle close to the blade. Use your guiding hand to hold the food.
- While keeping the knife tip on the board, lift the heel of the knife and cut down through the food with a smooth, even stroke.
- Adjust the position of the food as you cut, sliding it closer to the knife blade while being careful to keep your fingertips away from the cutting edge.

MINCING



Mincing means to chop food as finely as possible. The gently curved blade of a chef's knife allows for the two-handed rocking motion that makes quick work of mincing. Herbs and aromatics, such as garlic and onions, are often minced to fully release their flavors.

Roughly cut any large pieces of food into a manageable size. Remove and discard thick stems from herbs, and pile the herbs into a neat, compact mound.

Grip the knife handle close to the blade (as for chopping). If you wish, rest the fingertips of your guiding hand on the spine of the knife tip to keep it in contact with the cutting board.

Move the knife heel up and down rhythmically, trying not to lift the knife tip from the board. Use a rolling motion, pushing the knife down and forward rather than straight up and down.

As the pieces become smaller, use the knife to occasionally push the food into a tight mound and continue mincing until the desired fineness is achieved.

JULIENNING

Julienning means to cut food into long, thin rectangular strips, which are called a julienne. Vegetables are most commonly julienned, although meats and cheese may be prepared this way as well.

Peel and trim the vegetable, if necessary, then use the squaring-off technique. This will make it easier to produce a uniform julienne cut.

Cut the vegetable lengthwise into slices as thick as the desired julienne.

Stack the slices, then make parallel cuts of the same thickness through the stack.

DICING

Dicing involves cutting food into small, uniform cubes (usually ⅛ to ¼ inch square) so they will cook evenly and be easy to eat. Food that is cut into larger uniform squares is termed "cubed."

Cut the vegetable into julienne strips, as described above.

Gather the strips and cut through them crosswise at evenly spaced intervals.

TECHNIQUE

HOLDING & GUIDING THE KNIFE

The way you hold a knife is determined by your personal preference and the cutting task at hand.
For optimal comfort and safety, the knife handle should feel steady and secure in your grip.

GETTING A GRIP

One classic way to hold the knife is to grip the handle with three fingers, resting the index finger flat against the blade on one side while holding the thumb on the opposite side to provide additional stability and control.

THE GUIDING HAND

While one hand holds the knife, the other controls the food you are cutting. This is known as the guiding hand. For general cutting tasks, many cooks prefer this position for the guiding hand: Hold the food to be cut with your fingers tucked under, curled away from the knife blade. The side of the blade rests against your knuckles, safeguarding your fingers.

When you're peeling, trimming or paring, you may find yourself holding the food above the cutting surface. If so, the guiding hand should hold and turn the food against the knife blade, making the task more efficient.

The Anatomy of a Knife

A. TIP OF BLADE

B. BLADE

A knife's blade has two edges: the sharp cutting edge and the spine on top. Most blades taper from the heel end to a pointed tip.

C. HEEL OF BLADE

D. BOLSTER

The raised area between the handle and the blade, the bolster provides a center of gravity for strength and balance. It also serves as a safety guard for fingers and makes the knife more comfortable to hold.

E. HANDLE

The handle should fit securely and comfortably in your hand. The most durable handles are triple-riveted through the tang or permanently bonded around it.

F. TANG

The tang is the steel extension of the blade enclosed by the handle. Forged from a single piece of steel, a full or partial tang provides strength and stability and balances the knife.

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WILLIAMS-SONOMA

Technique Class: Knife Skills

"When you're learning to cook, some pieces of equipment are essential—and a set of good knives is one of them. Using the proper tool for the job will help achieve the best results, allowing you to quickly and efficiently accomplish everything from peeling and slicing to chopping and mincing. With the right knives and a little practice, you'll soon find that food preparation can be fun and very satisfying."

— Chuck Williams

Knife Construction: What Knife Suits You?

Forging is one of the oldest methods of knife construction, while stamping is a more modern method. Each knife we carry at Williams-Sonoma is designed and created by expert craftsmen following centuries of tradition.

Forged Cutlery

Forged knives are made by heating a solid steel bar (or blank) to a very high temperature. This high temperature compacts the molecular structure, which in turns "hardens" the steel. The steel is set into a mold and hammered to form the blade. It is then tempered, ground, polished and assembled, sometimes in up to 50 separate steps, most of which are done by hand. A forged knife always features a bolster and an integrated tang.

Stamped Cutlery

The blade of a stamped knife is punched out from a thin sheet of steel. The process is similar to using a cookie cutter to make cookies. The blade is tempered, sharpened and finished, typically by a machine, then the blade is joined to its handle. A stamped knife has little or no tang, and the blade is generally thinner than that of a forged knife, which makes a stamped blade more prone to breakage and wear. Stamped knives are generally less expensive than forged ones.

EUROPEAN VERSUS ASIAN: BLADE DESIGN

The edge on a German knife is generally more curved in order to facilitate the rocking motion Western chefs use for chopping and mincing. The weight held in the thick bolster of German knives aids in this rocking motion, resulting in the expenditure of less effort by the chef.

By contrast, Asian knives are characterized by a flatter cutting edge and a lesser, or nonexistent, bolster. This flat edge and lack of bolster complement the Asian style of cutting: a straight up-and-down motion, where the knife is lifted from the cutting surface.

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Handle Materials

Handle design is very important in determining how a knife feels in your hand and is often tied to your own ergonomic preference. Therefore, we recommend that you test comparable knives by different manufacturers prior to purchase. In general, knife handles are made out of three different kinds of materials: polypropylene, stainless steel and wood.

Polypropylene is a highly durable, hygienic, plastic material that is impervious to moisture and food acids. Polypropylene can be triple-riveted through the tang or molded around it for a more contoured feel. Some molded handles are textured to prevent slipping when the handle is wet—a must when you are handling raw meats.

Stainless-steel handles are also very durable and can be forged from a single piece of metal or welded directly to the blade. Single-piece stainless-steel handles are forged from the same piece of metal as the blade, bolster and tang, while welded stainless-steel handles are attached to the blade and may be partially hollow.

Wood handles, like those on the French Sabatier knives that Chuck Williams introduced into the United States almost 50 years ago, are a beautiful alternative to the synthetic materials discussed above. In older cutlery, nontreated wood was traditionally used in triple-riveted handles. However, it proved unsanitary and lacked durability, and eventually was phased out in favor of synthetic materials. Some knife makers opted to keep the wood handles and injected the wood with resin to resist water absorption and bacterial growth. Some manufacturers still offer noninjected wood handles.

EUROPEAN VERSUS ASIAN: BLADE ANGLE

Another major difference between European and Asian knives is that Asian knives are typically ground historically to a 16-degree edge, while European knives are ground to an edge of 20 to 22 degrees. Asian cuisine relies heavily on delicate food preparation, such as preparing raw fish or sushi. Therefore, the Asian chef needs a "razor sharp" knife.

EUROPEAN VERSUS ASIAN: BLADE CONSTRUCTION

Asian blades tend to be thinner than European ones, and as a result feel lighter than their European counterparts. Asian blades also tend to be "harder," in that they will hold an edge longer, while European blades may dull more quickly. The edge of a European blade is generally easier to revive.

Blade Materials

Virtually all kitchen knives are made out of steel. In general, there are three different kinds of steel: carbon, stainless and high-carbon, no-stain steel. A relatively new alternative to steel is ceramic.

Carbon steel is easy to sharpen because of its very high carbon content. However, knives made of this material do not hold an edge for very long. Moreover, the lack of chromium makes carbon steel highly reactive. Carbon steel will rust or tarnish if not properly maintained and will discolor when used on certain foods. Carbon-steel knives are less prevalent in today's kitchens, and Williams-Sonoma does not carry these types of knives.

Stainless steel contains chromium and nickel, which make it durable and add luster. However, the high chromium content makes the blade very hard, so it is difficult to establish a fine edge.

High-carbon, no-stain steel is a happy medium between carbon and stainless steels. It incorporates some chromium to achieve a blade that resists stains, rust and breakage, and has a high carbon content that allows the blade to take and hold an extremely sharp edge. The result is a virtually stain-proof steel that is easy to sharpen and holds an edge for a very long time. Most high-quality cutlery is made of this steel alloy, including most knives that Williams-Sonoma carries.

Ceramic is a hard and wear-resistant material that holds its edge much longer than its steel counterparts. On the other hand, ceramic knives are less flexible and may chip if used improperly on a hard cutting surface or on bone-in meats. Ceramic is chemically inert, which means that it is nonreactive and impervious to acids, juices, oils, salts or other elements. Ceramic knives must be professionally sharpened.

Staying Sharp

Working with a sharp knife is safer and more efficient. For top performance, hone the blade with a honing steel before each use and sharpen the blade periodically.

Honing Versus Sharpening

The edge of a blade is made up of microscopic cutting teeth that flatten out over time. A magnetized honing steel helps restore the knife's sharp edge by "trueing" it—that is, smoothing and realigning the worn carbon-steel cutting teeth. Virtually all manufacturers recommend you become proficient with a honing steel. You should hone a knife each time you use it, as this will realign an edge that has "folded over." Most block sets include a honing steel.

Eventually a new edge will need to be created. This process, known as sharpening, removes steel from the blade. Sharpening involves precise angle control, regardless if it's done by the manufacturer or by a sharpening system.

Using a Honing Steel

Position the steel upside down on a towel on your countertop to prevent slippage. Hold the blade at a 20-degree angle to the steel's shaft, then draw the knife lightly in one smooth motion from the heel of the blade to the tip. Repeat five or six times on each side of the blade, alternating with each stroke for an even edge. Keep the number of strokes equal for both sides. Speed is not important, so take your time. Be sure to maintain the 20-degree angle, and keep your fingers away from the blade. After honing, carefully wipe the knife blade with a clean cloth.

Sharpening Knives

Professional knives can have their sharp edges maintained for months by regular honing on a steel. All blades become dull from continued contact with metals, ceramics, Formica and glass. To test the sharpness of a knife, draw the blade lightly over a tomato. A sharp knife cuts the skin by its own weight; a dull knife slides over it. To sharpen fine cutlery, use a whetstone, a manual sharpener or an electric sharpener, or take your knives to a professional knife sharpener.

Whetstone: Moisten the whetstone with water or oil according to the manufacturer's instructions. Place the handle end of the blade on the stone at a 20-degree angle and draw the entire edge along the stone, maintaining the angle. Repeat six times on each side of the blade.

Electric Knife Sharpeners can take the place of both steel and stone. One slot shaves the metal to create a new edge and should not be used more than once every few months. The other slots hone the new edge and may be used daily.

Frequency of Knife Sharpening: Depending on frequency of use, you may need to sharpen your knives four times a year. (For normal household use, every three months is recommended.)

Knife Safety

In commercial kitchens, chefs adhere to established rules of knife safety. These same guidelines are essential for home cooks as well.

- Keep knives sharp. As well as enhancing performance, a sharp blade is safer because less effort is required to cut through food, reducing the possibility of slippage.
- When carrying or working with a knife, always hold it by the handle. If passing cutlery to another person, lay it down on a work surface with the handle extended toward the recipient. When you lay a knife down, make sure that no part of it extends over the edge of a countertop or cutting board. The edge of the blade should face away from the front of the work surface.
- Never immerse knives in a sink full of water. Prolonged soaking can loosen the handles, and someone reaching into the sink could be injured by the blade.
- Never use knives for purposes other than cutting tasks (e.g., prying open jars or bottles or scraping the cutting board). This could harm both you and your cutlery.

Cutting Surfaces

Opinions diverge on whether wood or plastic cuttings boards are superior, but steer clear of those made from marble, Corian or glass, which can dull your knives. For the most versatility, choose cutting boards that measure at least 12 by 18 inches.

To limit the transfer of food-borne bacteria to different foods, consider reserving one cutting board for meat, poultry and seafood, and a second for vegetables, fruits and other uses.