

MODULE 3: PREP & COOKING I | TRANSCRIPT

LESSON 4

Intro to Knives

Your knife is your most important kitchen tool. You'll likely use one every day, every time you cook. This is why it's so important to find one that feels "at home" in your hand—almost like a natural extension of your arm. Not too long, not too short, not too heavy, not too light—just right. Balanced.

Notice we've said "one" knife. This is because to get started with good food cooking, you really only need one good Chef's knife. Eventually, you can add a serrated knife, a paring knife, and others to the toolbox, but a Chef's knife, kept sharp, can do most cutting jobs. And it doesn't have to be expensive either.

Selecting the best knife for you

We highly recommend going to a store to test drive a variety of Chef's knives. Talk to a pro there, get their feedback, suggestions, and insight. You can buy at the store after testing in person, or come home and do an online search to find a deal for the one you tried—just make sure you can feel the knife in-hand before purchasing.

An 8" Chef's knife is the best size to start out with. They make 6" Chef's knives, but 8" is safer because the blade is longer. When the blade is longer, it has more surface area, which means you have more control. It may take some getting used to but it's worth it. When shopping, know that carbon steel is known to maintain sharpness longer than stainless steel but is trickier to take care of—it can rust, unlike stainless steel, which is rust-proof. There are also ceramic knives available, which make a nice secondary knife, as they're great for precision cutting of soft foods like fruits, but they're more brittle so avoid hard pits, seeds, and winter squash—and don't drop it (it can break)! Ultimately, discuss your needs and cooking tendencies with the shop when test driving a knife.

As we discussed in a previous lesson, serrated knives, often called bread knives make cutting soft or tender ingredients like tomatoes and breads easier. When slicing, the points of the blade grip while the scallops reduce friction. Before

you purchase, we recommend trying one in person just as you would a Chef's knife. Get one with an 8–10" blade length and a handle that grips well and remember, the less serrations on the blade and the deeper the scallops, the cleaner the cut on your foods will be.

You may remember that a paring knife is a small knife with a 3–3½" blade that's used for peeling everything from large root veggies to small garlic cloves, coring fruits and veggies, de-ribbing peppers, and releasing the edges of baked goods from their baking vessels. It offers more maneuverability and precision when peeling, but for everyday home cooking, a Chef's knife will do. As with other knives, when shopping for a paring knife look for one that feels like an extension of your arm and hand, with a grippy handle for safety and control.

Since a serrated knife and a paring knife are extras that you don't really need, we're going to focus on the basics of Chef's knife usage throughout this module, only mentioning the others when you can use them.

General care of your knives

Always cut foods on a cutting board—wood and bamboo boards are less likely to dull the blade because they are softer surfaces that give a little when the blade meets the board.

As soon as you're done using your knife, wash it by hand (not in the dishwasher), dry it well, and put it away. Don't leave it to sit in the sink—it can cut someone, it can come into contact with other dishes that can dull the blade, scratch it, or take off the tip.

Store knives away from other utensils to keep from damaging the blade. If you're pressed for space or want to store your knives in a drawer, you can protect the tip as the knife shuffles around in the drawer by sticking a used cork onto it. And always use caution when reaching into a knife drawer.

Anatomy of a knife:

Tip

Point

Spine

Cutting Edge

Granton® Edge

Bolster

Heel

Handle

Tang

Butt

Blade

Rivet

Sharpening & steels

First order of business, for safety and ease of food preparation: your knives have to be sharp. You should be able to make a clean cut through a peach, or tomato, without pulling on or tearing its delicate skin. [show sharp, not sharp]

A few times per year, we recommend that you have your Chef's knife—and any other knives you use a lot—professionally sharpened. Search online for shops in your area, or mail-in shops that you can ship your knives to for pro sharpening. You can also use whetstones with various grits to sharpen them yourself, or an electric grinder, but a professional is your best bet.

Now, there is an important distinction to be made about maintaining knives. There is *sharpening* and there is *honing*.

Sharpening grinds the knife blade, actually removing some of the metal, to create a new edge, while honing is a way of maintaining that edge.

You've likely seen a Chef run a knife blade over what's called a honing steel—that metal rod that comes in many knife blocks. Honing steels are also known as “rods” or “hones,” but we'll just call them steels from here on out. Many people add the misnomer “sharpening steel,” but that's not quite right because they're technically used for honing, not sharpening. Yes, some steels, particularly diamond steels, can remove a bit of metal from a blade (and some are even magnetized to grab these tiny pieces for easy clean up and safety), but a honing steel is technically designed to realign the knife edge, which warps as you use the knife.

Think about the edge of a sharp knife as being like a Mohawk hairstyle glued to blade-like perfection. After walking around outside for two hours, a few straggly pieces will fall of place and the perfect straight line of the Mohawk will become crooked. Well, this happens to the thin edge of a knife blade as you use it. The perfect edge will fall out of alignment. These warps in the metal can be visible to the naked eye or they can be microscopic. Either way, a honing steel realigns the edge, bringing it back into a straight line. You can actually feel a warped, un-honed knife edge by gently and carefully pushing your fingertips away from back of the blade to the front [show]—if the blade catches your fingerpads, you know that the edge has begun to fall out of alignment and needs honing. You'll want to hone your blade every 2–3 hours of use (this comes out to once or twice per week).

Let's talk in general about the differences between the main steels on the market, and what to look for if you want to bring one home. Overall, you want the rod (not including the handle) to be at least 12" long. This gives you a great runway to safely run your knife along.

Rod steel: this is the honing tool most of us are familiar with. It's a metal, usually stainless steel rod with ridges and grooves that run along the entire length of it.

A diamond steel: this flattened oval-shaped steel is coated with diamond dust and actually removes a bit of metal from the blade edge to keep it sharp. It's considered a more aggressive honing tool.

Ceramic steel: aka “ceramic sharpeners,” this “steel” is actually a ceramic rod. It's pretty delicate and provides more gentle honing, but like the diamond steel it can remove a bit of metal from the blade edge—you'll likely even see evidence of this with grey streaks on the rod.

How to use a steel:

You don't have to get fancy here. Successful honing is all about control and getting the proper angle.

Place a slightly damp cloth down on the counter to create some traction and then press the rod point into the towel—firmly but gently grip the handle. Hold the steel vertically in front of you—straight up and down. You can hold the rod in the air, and you may have seen this done before, but grounding the rod on the counter helps you see the angle from the heel of the knife blade to the tip. This is very important for beginners and anyone who needs to see what they are doing.

Now, set the knife blade heel onto the steel with the blade facing the countertop, and tilt the top edge of the knife away from the steel at about 14- to 20-degree angle—imagine a book of matches nestled between the knife and the rod. If the angle is too wide you can actually roll the knife blade edge to the other side. And if the angle is too narrow, you can scratch your knife.

Now, using control and a bit of pressure, guide the blade downwards and towards you from heel to tip in a smooth arcing motion. Drag one side of the blade heel to tip, then the other side of the blade heel to tip. Repeat 6–7 times alternating with each stroke.

Wipe the knife with a clean slightly damp cloth when you are done. Just flip it blade up, sandwich the blade with the cloth, and starting from the back of the knife, run the cloth along the blade a few times. This removes any metal residue that may be left behind.

Lesson Actions

Use the tips and suggestions we've shared to make sure you secure one sharp Chef's knife and one large cutting board for the rest of this course.

If you test drive knives in person at a store before buying (recommended), help family, friends, or the community do the same by sharing your experience, findings, and tips with us.