

The Knife and the Sharpener

MY CURIOSITY ABOUT KNIFE SHARPENING began with a man at the Hollywood farmers' market. I met him once and never saw him again. Part of me wonders if he was not real, but instead a benevolent minor deity of cutlery care. He had unblinking close-set eyes the color of Listerine. He wore a floppy fisherman's cap. He presided over a tent-shaded stand—a few stones, an electric sharpener, a chair, and a chartreuse smoothie. I dropped my knives off at 8:05 a.m. and returned thirty minutes later, burdened with vegetables and a pork rib slab.

"Do you have a minute?" the man said. He was handing my knives back wrapped in a blue cloth, turning the bundle over in his hands, carefully, almost tenderly. "Do you know how to use a honing rod?"

Without waiting for my reply, he spent the next fifteen minutes explaining and demonstrating the proper use of a honing rod, lecturing about the angles at which different knives should be sharpened (twenty degrees for Western knives; fifteen for Japanese ones), giving me a mini-history of knife design while another customer waited, her own cloth-wrapped bundle at the ready. As he imparted his expertise at the expense of business, I wondered how he had gotten to this moment himself.

In a 2005 *Forbes Magazine* piece on the tools that have most benefitted humanity, the knife ranked number one (Ewalt 2005). For over two-and-a-half million years, people have used knives (defined loosely) to separate meat from bone and skin, carve utensils and weapons, spear food at the dinner table, and sometimes at the same sitting, stab their enemies. The knife's broad utility is wired into our brains. A sharp knife is a cliché of readiness, whether the wielder anticipates a tough roast or an assassination attempt. The hunter who sharpens his knife is ready to dismember his kill effectively. In movies—*Gangs of New York*, for one—characters sharpen blades between duels, demonstrating preparedness while foreshadowing the violence to come. A sharpener is alert. A sharpener has presence of mind. Popular idioms emphasize the connection: when you're not "the sharpest knife in the drawer," you're dim and helpless.

In *Consider the Fork*, her book on the history of technology's influence on eating and cooking habits, British food writer and historian Bee Wilson (2012: 44) characterizes the knife as every chef's favorite kitchen gadget. She devotes a chapter to the knife, exploring, among other subtopics, carving protocol, how precise knife-work helps develop flavors, and the link between better knife design and evolutionary changes in human teeth. In an email exchange, she also acknowledges that, today, knife sharpening is fairly unnecessary—certainly less essential than buying gasoline or paying the wireless bill.

"We can reduce food to rubble with the press of a button on a Cuisinart," Wilson writes in response to a question about the enduring appeal of knife sharpening. "There's no necessity to have advanced knife-sharpening skills today because so much of our food comes—if we wish—ready sliced. Meat is pre-jointed or ground; vegetables can be bought peeled and sliced. And that's assuming that you are still cooking at all, rather than buying ready prepared food. Ask yourself: would I die of hunger if I had no idea how to manipulate or sharpen a knife? The answer is clearly 'No'. And in the age of cheap factory knives, when a knife becomes unusably blunt it is easily replaced."

Evidence to support Wilson's analysis is everywhere. You can purchase forty-dollar fourteen-piece knife sets on Amazon. Amped pitchmen hawk multi-use choppers on infomercials with a frequency that suggests a certain degree of success. Food processors come with an array of attachments to suit a variety of applications. Pink, defatted, skinned, boned chicken tenders, microwave-in-bag trimmed green beans, and shaved deli meats fill grocery store refrigerator cases. I've watched customers fork over an extra ten dollars for deveined and peeled shrimp.

I also email Joe Kertzman, managing editor of *Blade*, a Wisconsin-based magazine dedicated to the knife. Unsurprisingly, Kertzman doesn't agree with the notion that technology—via processors and prepackaged foods—has dampened the importance of a sharp knife and the ability to wield one skillfully.

"I'd suggest the opposite," he writes. "One trend I've noticed and have had voiced to me in interviews I've conducted with

knife professionals is that people are spending more time in the kitchen, perhaps thanks to cooking shows on television, or maybe as a result of the recession and families tending to go out less and cook in the home more. There's also the theory that people have been modernizing their kitchens and throwing more dinner parties today than in the past few decades. For a home gourmet, it's more important than ever to have sharp knives in the kitchen."

Hunters and weaponry enthusiasts aside, home cooks who want to liquefy ginger with a few flicks of a cleaver and, within seconds, turn frilly mops of parsley into downy piles have to keep their knives sharp. Slicing fish with a worn-out blade creates paste-of-the-sea. On the cutting board, diced tomatoes morph into gazpacho, not a fine dice. At some point, intervention is necessary. Plus, sharp knives are much safer than dull knives that easily slip and nick the tip of a misplaced finger. Chefs who want to cut cleaner, faster, and neater may buy stones and electric sharpeners and read up on knife care. They may develop a deliberate, comforting maintenance routine: Realigning knives by whisking them authoritatively against the edge of a honing rod, the thin cylindrical thing in knife sets that looks a cross between a baster and a prod; sharpening with a two-sided oil or water stone, using the abrasive side to shape the bevel, and the smoother side to even out the mangled bits.

You can imagine a fastidious sort of person relishing the process—putting a record on, grabbing a beer, and sitting down to make an afternoon of restoring the kitchen arsenal to its keen height.

Like washing a car, trimming hedges, and maybe exfoliating, whetting a knife satisfies. You take something with a value and purpose that has temporarily, literally, been dulled and you give it back. The ritual of achieving readiness reassures as much as the result of the sharpening. There is maybe a macho element to it for some. “Are YOUR knives this sharp?” you can imagine a D.I.Y. sharpener dude asking his mates as he unveils a razor-edged Excalibur prior to the deboning of a holiday turducken.

When it comes to sharpening, pleasure has supplanted need. Wilson (2012: 45) characterizes knife sharpening as a “private passion” for some home cook, a routine that recalls a more artisanal age when people took pride in their tools and they had actual personal value. Wilson suspects that serious knife enthusiasts often reject expensive, user-friendly electric sharpeners mostly because they deprive the sharpener of the tactile pleasures of sharpening. In other words, the result, not the process, is emphasized, which for many sharpeners may not be the whole point of sharpening.

Being a good home cook who hates chopping to take longer than it should, I prefer my knives to do what they were designed to do. However, I'm dispositionally not cut out for deliberate, comforting maintenance routines, not to mention generally nervous about trying an online mail-order sharpening service. The idea of shipping off a bristling bundle to someone across the country who presumably knows what he's doing—it also seems like a hassle.

That's where professionals come in. While I never saw the benevolent minor deity of cutlery care again, I have met my share of others: a bellowing, tie-dye-clad Santa Claus operating out of a van parked in a Whole Foods parking lot; a vacant-eyed woman in an Urban Outfitters “native”-style dress humming softly to herself as she worked. At best, going to a sharpener for your knives is like seeing a good dentist—the wide-grinning sort who doesn't make you feel bad about your gums and talks about teeth with reverence, a sparkle in his eye. You might be able to keep your knives sharp. After all, you also floss and brush your own teeth. But for superior service, an education, and the chance of encountering a character, you consult an expert.

One of Los Angeles's well-known professional knife sharpeners, Gary Silverstein, tells me that his career was inspired by a daydream. Around eleven years ago, he was working in medical billing, a career that probably has never, on its own, made anyone happy. One day, while staring at the television, his mind wandered back to scenes from his childhood growing up in the early 1960s near Yankee Stadium in The Bronx. “Then,” Silverstein says, “we all had switchblades—big belts, motorcycle boots, cigarettes rolled in our sleeves. It was a New York thing. The knives were a step up from baseball cards. We would play games with them and damage them. And then we would re-sharpen the edges on the curb.” He also recalls how, with a ringing bell, the traveling knife sharpener's truck would sometimes interrupt his neighborhood stickball games. Also specializing in umbrella repair, the knife sharpener was a fixture; he followed a regular route. He'd arrive, announce his presence, and housewives would swarm out of their houses, brandishing their dull knives.

Bee Wilson remembers nomadic knife sharpeners tramping past her home in England when she was a child. The “grinding” tradition obviously goes back much further. Where knives have been indispensable, sharpeners have earned livings—from the carts of Victorian England to the Italian *moleta* who plied their trade on American street corners in the early 1900s to the non-nomadic *togishi* of Japan's Tokugawa Era, respected artisans who honed kitchen knives and swords alike.

Silverstein and his peers are their descendants, beneficiaries of our obsession with the artisan. Great, local, specialized service is no longer a way of life, but we seek it out, itching for an antidote to the distant, detached exchange of knowledge and goods made ubiquitous by the Internet. We don't just desire to do things more slowly, to support the commemoration of our past through handcrafted products and traditions, whether knife sharpening, brewing, pickling, or curing; we want to reclaim the concept of commerce as a defining component of flesh-and-blood communities: face-to-face, real-time human interaction over the meeting of needs. With

his friendly lecture, the minor deity of cutlery care had given me this sort of satisfaction too, this pleasure, as much as he had provided the specific service I had deemed necessary. If I were capable, inspired, and conscientious enough to take pleasure in sharpening my own knives, I would have missed out on it. 

REFERENCES

- Ewalt, David M. 2005. "Number 1 The Knife." *Forbes*, August 31.
Wilson, Bee. 2012. *Consider the Fork: A History of How We Cook and Eat*. New York: Basic Books.