

The History of the Chef Knife

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The Rise of the Multi-National Foodie

Globalization has its supporters and detractors. Some have gained greatly, many have lost. Indeed whole cultures are rapidly disappearing, their rich traditions fading into the incessant hum of mass culture.

However, one benefit that the acceleration of international trade has brought is an unprecedented exposure to delicious cuisines from across the globe. The French may disagree about the boon of Big Macs, but despite the downside of the occasional Parisian McDonald's, people everywhere are more likely than ever to have experienced the culinary riches of other cultures. Whether it's a Midwestern American's passion for Thai cuisine, a Vietnamese chef's mastery of the subtleties of French cooking, or a New York hipster's obsession with Japanese "bubble teas," the explosion of food culture is sweeping the globe.

Arguably, there has never been so much innovation in the kitchen. There is a mass exodus of young people away from degrees in marketing, business, law, and engineering and into the culinary arts. All of these new foodies, professional and amateur alike, need a good chef's knife. Along with different styles of food come myriad styles of cooking. The tools and utensils that have evolved among different peoples reflect each one's local character and diet. However, there are winners and losers in evolution, and so it seems to follow for the chef's knife.

It all began with cavemen (well, who are we kidding, cavewomen were probably stuck with the job) hacking away at things with sharpened stones like flint or the finely honed edge of a sea shell. Since then, some definite improvements have been made. The powerhouses of the Chef Knife industry for the last several centuries have been the Germans and the

Japanese, with strong influences on both from the French (It is called a "chef's knife," after all!). But the forces of evolution keep moving and mutating and the next generation of chef knives, blended from the best of the West and the East, is beginning to emerge.

"Mmmm. Me want more Dino Burger."

As previously mentioned, the caveman culinarian started out with the basics, most likely a sharp rock. It would be wise not to laugh at this, however. Many an Aztec sacrificial virgin can testify to the wicked sharpness of an obsidian blade. Indeed, the stone chef's knife lasted for a very long time. It was used by the Egyptians, certainly no slouches when it came to technology. Stone knives were polished and often attached to wood or bone handles, sometimes ergonomically embellished with animal hide.

"Move over stoner, give me the Heavy Metal Chef's Knife."

The big jump came with the discovery and harnessing of metals. In Southwest Asia around 3,000 B.C.E. human beings began to use metal knives. At first these were made of copper and then, once people figured out how to combine copper with tin, the Bronze Age arrived. After a thousand years or so, the new wave caught on and spread to Europe. (No doubt on the sharpened point of a bronze sword.)

Those wiley Greeks

The next stage was the birth of the Iron Age. Somewhere in the near East, the innovation of iron tools occurred, perhaps because all of the copper and tin were being used up to make bronze. Whatever the exact cause, the Hittites began using iron in their weapons and thereby gained a great military advantage over their neighbors (a common theme of this history!).

The Bible tells us that during this period, the Philistines maintained military superiority over Israel for some time because of their monopoly over iron making. The prolonged wars with the Philistines was in part to acquire the knowledge and mastery of iron.

Arguably, the Greeks, with their many city-state cultural laboratories, were the ones to truly harness iron to make quality, efficient steels. Alexander the Great spread this mastery, once again, with the sharpened point of his sword.

From the military to the domestic (and back again)

So why all of this talk about swords and conquest? This is supposed to be a history of the chef's knife. In truth, the two are one and the same. The two world centers of modern chef knife production, Solingen, Germany and Seki, Japan were centers for sword production long before they began making cutlery.

The transition of knives from military use to domestic cuts both ways. We can never forget the bloody origins of steel, even while peaceably chopping carrots and celery. The bloody history of the chef's knife is long and widespread.

For example, King Louis XIV passed a law in 1669 which stipulated that the tips of all table knives be blunted. One of his advisers had pointed out to him the connection between sharp kitchen knives and violence. To this day, this connection continues. A noted Scottish pathologist, quoted in *The Scotsman*, pointed out that, "All the statistics show that for the last 15 years, victims of stabbings, whether fatal or seriously injured, are caused by kitchen knives such as steak knives rather than knives bought specially for the purpose."

One of the legendary heroes of China, Han Xin, was laid low by a chef's knife. The story goes that his mentor placed a spell over the great general protecting him from every kind of sword and spear. He went on to a fine career of conquest and heroism until he ran into a lady bearing a kitchen knife. (Granted, a Chinese Cleaver is more formidable than your average chef's knife)

"I love my Phoenix 9 so much I named it. Roxanne is not only beautiful, it is laser sharp, holds it's edge better than any knife I have ever used and is practically invincible. It is an amazing knife. I insist on sharp knives in my kitchen and now buy a New West Knife for members of my team when I give them a promotion" - Eric C. Korn, Executive Chef at Good-Life Gourmet in Westchester. [Read more reviews.](#)

The Modern Axis of the Chef's Knife

Discussions about the modern chef's knife inevitably bring us around to Solingen, Germany and Seki, Japan. There are many reasons why these two cities evolved into the knife capitals of the world. It would be a mistake to think that these two centers exist independent of other influences or even the influence of each other. In discussing them, you have to bear in mind that the generalities put forth are based on history and tradition, both of which are constantly changing based on outside influences, including the German knife's effect on the Japanese and vice-versa.

Also, it is important to note the French influence in all of this. We call it a "chef's knife" for a reason. The French knife has had a tremendous influence over the style and shape of what we think of as "Japanese" knives. Many knives, even ones we think of as traditionally and distinctly "Japanese," acquired their shape and function as a response to the French chef's knife.

Big, tough, and burly -- did we mention it's German?

Archaeology has uncovered blacksmith smelters around Solingen, Germany which date back over two thousand years. This means the area and its people have been developing their skill and knowledge for two millennia. Solingen was naturally suited to become a center of

metal production. The soil was rich in iron, coal deposits were abundant, and the surrounding hardwood forests would provide fuel for the forges. Also, the town is situated on the Wupper river, whose fast flowing waters would not only facilitate the smithing process, but make trade outlets easily accessible.

Swords made in Solingen were found throughout Europe and were prized for their craftsmanship as far away as England. The modern era of manufacturing chef's knives can be traced back to 1731 when Peter Henkel founded the beginning of what would become a knife empire.

So what makes a German chef's knife a "German" chef knife? The primary thing is that it is very tough. It is also big and heavy. A German chef's knife traditionally is made of somewhat softer steel. This means you can drop it on the floor, use it like a cleaver, throw it in the sink, and some would say use its heavy weight to aid in chopping. Moreover, the blade is not likely to chip. It also means, however, it won't be as sharp, because sharpness depends on hardness.

Also, the shape of a German chef's knife is distinguished by the curve of the blade towards its tip which allows the knife to be "rocked" up and down. We are all familiar with this "rocking motion" of a chef's knife from watching Food Network, but it should be noted that the shape of the German chef's knife evolved specifically to fulfill this kind of motion. The French and Japanese chef's knives were originally designed for a "slicing" motion, pulling the knife towards you to cut rather than chop. This makes sense given the precision cuts involved in making sushi and the detail work of French cuisine. Slicing -- in the hands of a skilled chef -- gives you much greater control than chopping.

From Samurai to Sashimi

Like Solingen, the city of Seki, Japan was ripe with the natural resources needed to become a metal working center. Iron, coal, wood and fresh flowing water abounded.

Additionally, the Japanese sword makers had another important advantage which transcends mere natural resources. The unique culture of Japan gave rise to swordmakers who enjoyed an almost cult-like status. Even today, the production of swords is very strictly regulated by the government. All swordsmiths must be licensed by the government and a license can only be obtained by serving an apprenticeship under a master swordmaker for at least five years. Even then, to insure quality, a licensed swordsmith may only produce two long swords a month. Finally, once the sword is made, it must be registered with the Agency of Cultural Affairs.

Why all the hoopla? Well, the answer to that question lies in Japanese history and culture. The sword has had an integral role in both.

Swordmakers, as opposed to their European blacksmith counterparts, were a highly

esteemed class who approached their work with gravitas. Only individuals of impeccable morality and sincerity could become master swordsmiths. Fasting and ritual purification were necessary before the forge was lit. Like priests, they wore only white at their anvils. The result of all of this were the best swords in the world. The Japanese were making steel of a quality 600 years before modern metallurgy could produce anything equivalent.

All of this is important for the history of the chef's knife because the knowledge and skill at making swords is applied to the making of fine Japanese cutlery. In the late 19th century, the carrying of swords became illegal. The craftsmen had to turn to another market, and they found one in the food lovers of the world, many of whom revere their Japanese chef's knife with the same awe as the ancient samurai did their swords.

To produce their superior swords, the Japanese swordmakers had to solve a problem which confounded smiths from all times and places. Swordmakers knew how to make extremely hard steels that would take and hold a sharp edge. The problem is, the harder the steel, the more brittle it becomes. This was undesirable on a battlefield -- what use is a sharp sword that breaks when you try to cleave your enemies helmet in two? The German solution was to create a softer, tougher steel. It might dull and lose its edge in battle, but when wielded by an Arnold Schwarzenegger-sized knight, a dull sword that just holds its shape is deadly enough to get the job done.

However, for the Japanese, this was unacceptable. Their fine aesthetic extended to the field of battle and demanded that even a death blow be carried out with elegance and grace. The solution came in the discovery of the technique of hammering together layers of steel of different hardness and welding them together. The resulting blade was reheated, folded back on itself and hammered thin. This was repeated many times until the steel consisted of thousands of ultra-thin layers of metal of varying degrees of hardness. When the blade was ground, the hard metal stood out creating a razor sharp edge, but the soft steel worked into the blade kept the blade from being too brittle.

The traditional wisdom gained from the evolution of the Japanese sword is evident in the quality of the Japanese chef's knife. When compared to their German counterparts, they are unquestionably lighter and sharper. They take and hold an edge better and can be made very tough as well. Traditional knives tend to be sharpened at different angles than Western knives. A Western blade comes to an edge, with both sides of the blade forming the same angle. A Japanese blade will have one side of the edge at a steeper angle.

Traditionally, the shape of the Japanese knife is similar to a French chef's knife. Designed for slicing, they lack the steep, curved belly of the German blade. However, all of these traditional differences in shape are becoming obsolete as hybrid knives become more popular.

East meets West: the best of both worlds

The Japanese chef's knife has been greatly influenced by the interplay of cultures. There wasn't much of a knife industry in Japan until the Portuguese introduced tobacco in the 1600's. Responding to this new arrival, the Japanese became known for making knives for cutting tobacco.

Later, the Japanese created two fantastic chef's knife styles known as the "Gyuto" and the "Santoku." In the West, we think of these blade shapes as traditional "Japanese" knives. This is extremely ironic, however, because the Japanese think of the Gyuto and Santoku as "Western style" knives. Whatever they are, they are quickly becoming the most popular knives in professional kitchens all over the world. The Japanese created the Santoku and Gyuto as a response to the French chef's knife; now, all of the major German knifemakers make Santokus. So that's the German's version of the Japanese version of the French chef's knife. I guess that's the way evolution works.

Not the end of the story

Although the German and Japanese style seem to be dominant at the moment. It is undeniable that both industries are responding to the demands of the growing global Foodie culture. So, Emiril, Rachel Ray and the folks at Food Network have as much to do with the future of the chef's knife as do the ancient samurai and German blacksmith. Increasingly, companies like New West KnifeWorks are challenging the big German and Japanese monopolies with innovative designs that reflect the tastes and sensibilities of the new Foodies. The new Foodies may make risotto on Monday, Thai curry on Tuesday, and fresh fish on Wednesday. They need knives that are more versatile than those evolved only to slice sashimi or chop knockwursts.

Also, with the rise of China and India as global powers, we may see their cutlery make a comeback. The Chinese Cleaver is gaining popularity and the Indian "Bonti" (a crescent shaped stationary knife) is too cool a tool to disappear in the dustbin of history. I'll give it ten years before we see both of these at Walmart.

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