

Knife Skills 101 for the SCA Kitchen

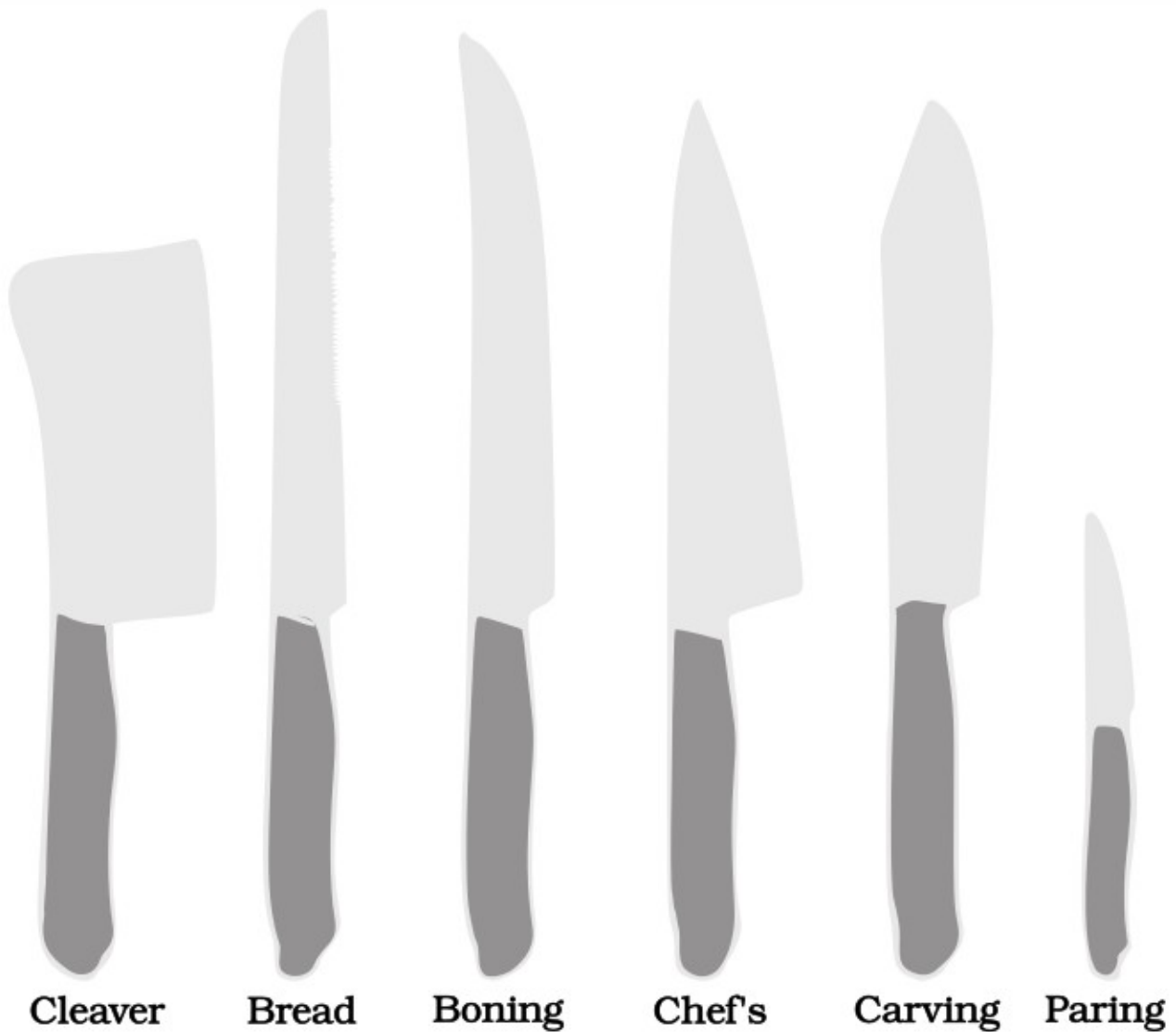


Image Credit: "Themightyquill", Wikimedia Commons

1. The Essential Hardware

- 1.1. Anatomy of a knife (text and image courtesy of [Wikipedia: Kitchen Knife](#))



- a) Point: The very end of the knife, which is used for piercing
- b) Tip: The first third of the blade (approximately), which is used for small or delicate work. Also known as belly or curve when curved, as on a chef's knife.
- c) Edge: The entire cutting surface of the knife, which extends from the point to the heel. The edge may be beveled or symmetric.
- d) Heel: The rear part of the blade, used for cutting activities that require more force
- e) Spine: The top, thicker portion of the blade, which adds weight and strength
- f) Bolster: The thick metal portion joining the handle and the blade, which adds weight and balance
- g) Finger guard: The portion of the bolster that keeps the cook's hand from slipping onto the blade
- h) Choli: The point where the heel meets the bolster (ed: I honestly didn't know this had a name.)
- i) Tang: The portion of the metal blade that extends into the handle, giving the knife stability and extra weight (Ed: This is 'j' in the diagram and all the rest of the letters are off by one.)
- j) Scales: The two portions of handle material (wood, plastic, composite, etc.) that are attached to either side of the tang (ed: Some knives may have a solid dowel instead, especially Asian-style knives.)
- k) Rivets: The metal pins (usually three) that hold the scales to the tang
- l) Handle guard: The lip below the butt of the handle, which gives the knife a better grip and prevents slipping
- m) Butt: The terminal end of the handle

1.2. The basic knives you want to have

- a) Chef's Knife
 - Usually 8-10 inches long, small hands might prefer 6.

- The all-purpose workhorse knife
 - Western (“German”) styles have a curved edge and a flat spine
 - The Japanese “santoku” is their modern take on chef’s knives; has a straighter edge and a down-turned point.
 - East or west? A matter of personal taste...just be aware they have different cutting motions.
- b) Paring knife
- 3-5 inches long
 - Handles more delicate tasks
 - “Paring” is a type of cut where you cut toward you to take thin shavings off an item...can be used for peeling in lieu of a veggie peeler, takes practice to do well.
- c) Boning knife (a.k.a. filet knife)
- 6-8 inches long, very slender and can be flexible (my preference)
 - For getting into tight crevices between bones and joints
- d) Kitchen Scissors
- Ideally with detachable blades that come apart for easy washing
 - Those cutting a lot of bone-in poultry might consider spring-loaded poultry shears
- e) Honing steel – more on this later...
- f) Other things worth considering:
- Slicing/carving knife
 - Long and possibly serrated – longer blade = cleaner slices
 - Serrated knives are best for things like bread and other things that might smush when you apply pressure to them (but any sharp-enough knife will reduce that risk).
 - Some slicing/carving knives have a scalloped (“granton”) edge to reduce the tendency of food to cling to the blade.
 - You *can* use a chef’s knife for most slicing jobs, it’s just less ideal.
 - Meat cleaver – big heavy hacking blade
 - Specialty knives for specialty jobs (i.e. Japanese meat/vegetable/fish knives)

1.3. What to look for when knife shopping

- a) There are good knives at all price points, from \$20 to “luxury sports car”
 - Victorinox (the Swiss army knife company) makes inexpensive, plastic handle, stamped-blade knives that regularly top review lists: many food-service knives use similar construction. My boning knife is a Victorinox.
 - My personal chef’s knife is a Calphalon forged knife - \$40 when I bought it almost 20 years ago – Calphalon is a solid “value for dollar” general cookware brand. It’s comfortable for me and the thicker, heavier blade is useful for tasks that benefit from that heft.
 - My paring knife is a Shun - \$100+ 20 years ago, forged with techniques similar to those used for Japanese swords (but still mass produced).
 - You can get gorgeous, completely handmade knives for hundreds of dollars each...and there are such people making replicas of period knives! I have drooled over them but I’m not ready to drop half a paycheck on one...yet.
- b) Forged blades: sturdier, heavier. Stamped blades: lighter, cheaper, narrower edge, flexible blades. Both have value.
- c) Edge angle: Personal preference, but you should be aware of yours
 - Most western-style forged knives are sharpened to 22-degrees
 - Most eastern-style and many stamped knives can be as thin as 15 degrees
 - Narrower edges are sharper but can lose sharpness faster (unless it’s a really great blade).
 - When you sharpen or hone blades, you need to know what angle you’re starting with.
- d) *The best-made knife in the world is a bad knife for you if you’re not comfortable using it.*

1.4. Cutting Boards

- a) Wood/bamboo or plastic ONLY.
 - NEVER cut on glass, stone or counter-top surfaces (except for butcher blocks)
- b) Big enough to fit the knife and the stuff you’re cutting
 - Small cutting boards are handy for cutting a snack for yourself, not for chopping piles of veggies for dinner, much less a feast

2. Knife care and cleaning

2.1. Storage and Transport

a) Knife Racks and Drawers

- Don't store knives loose in drawers without blade protection, i.e. plastic sheaths.
- Knife blocks/racks should be easy to clean...wood knife block slots, for example, are not.

b) Knives on the go

- If you travel with your knives a lot, buy/make a knife roll or zipper case (leather, waxed canvas or sturdy synthetic material).
 - (If you have good knives and you're cooking in an unfamiliar kitchen, bring your own knives! Not every group has good (or any) spares.)
- If you don't have a case, wrap them well in bubble wrap or towels and stick the blades in something stiff like a cardboard paper tower tube. (I've gotten knives through the mail and checked airline baggage this way.)
- Cooks can be touchy about other people using their knives – for good reason.
 - Don't use another person's personal knives without their permission.
 - Don't give other people permission to use yours unless you've vetted that they know what they're doing or are willing to teach them.

c) Sharpening and honing

- **Dull Knives are Dangerous.**
 - Sharp knives cut more easily; if you slip, they'll leave clean cuts
 - Dull knives require more force, are more likely to slip, and leave jagged cuts.
- Sharpening is beyond the scope of this class; many pro cooks pay pro sharpeners
 - There are some decent home sharpening gadgets and many terrible ones. Check reliable equipment reviews (America's Test Kitchen, Serious Eats, Consumer Reports...)
 - Whetstone sharpening is an art I have not begun to master.
- Honing is different from sharpening!
 - Sharpening removes metal to remake a dull edge
 - Honing coaxes a bent edge back into line.

- Honing should ideally be done before every work session and as often as needed during.
- (Demo of using a honing steel)

2.2. Cleaning

a) Knives are hand wash only (especially if they have wood handles)

- Never leave knives sitting loose at the bottom of the sink of soapy water where you can't see them – risk of both banging up the blade and banging the blade into your hand
- Brace the blade flat against the sink/counter while scrubbing
- Don't run your hand/the sponge along the sharp edge.

b) Cutting boards may need to be sanitized

- Plastic: with hot water + bleach, can be put in the dishwasher
- Wood: hand wash only, scrub with coarse salt and vinegar/lemon juice, then hot soapy water

c) Work clean: Move cut items into work bowls, wipe up juicy messes.

d) Avoid cross contamination: Wash knives and cutting boards whenever...

- Switching between cutting raw meat/fish and anything else (ideally, use separate cutting boards)
- Switching between foods that are common/known allergy risks (fish, nuts, gluten, nightshades...)
- Ideally, plan your cutting order to minimize the amount of washing you need.

e) Periodically treat wood with a food-safe wood conditioner (mineral oil, tung oil, beeswax...)

3. Let's Cut Stuff!

3.1. Set up your space

a) Knife stays **on the board** when not in use

b) Board should be stable and non-slippery – put a towel or skid-resistant material under it if you need to

c) Stand comfortably with enough space around you to not elbow other people

d) Set up space for the food you're cutting that doesn't take up your cutting board space

- e) Have a garbage bowl or trash can in easy reach

3.2. Using a knife safely

- a) Everything you learned in kindergarden still applies – don't run with knives, wave them around, point them at people, etc.
- b) Hold food to keep your fingers out of the path of the knife
- c) Move the food into the knife, not the knife into the food (whenever possible)

3.3. The basic maneuvers (with demos and gazpacho)

- a) Slicing
- b) Chopping/Dicing big stuff
- c) Dicing/mincing small stuff
- d) Paring/peeling (and using boiling water + ice bath to peel tomatoes and similar fruits)
- e) Chiffonade of herbs

More Resources

- I borrowed a lot of this class from Alton Brown, and in particular the show *Good Eats*, season 11, Episode 11, “American Slicer”. Streaming availability varies, but you can generally find it somewhere on the major services. If you care at all about the “why” and not just the “how” of cooking (an important thing when deciphering period recipes), go watch Good Eats.
- Cook's Illustrated (the magazine) and America's Test Kitchen (the TV show) and their associated website, is one of the few resources I will happily pay a subscription for. They share the ethos of experimenting and finding the “why” of cooking and also do some of the best equipment reviews out there.