

KNIFE SKILLS

An Illustrated Kitchen Guide
to Using the Right Knife the Right Way



Bill Collins

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For my wife, Karen, who stayed with me even though the first things I ever cooked for her were kosher hot dogs

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Preface

When my grandmother was 83 years old, I was standing with her in her brother Joe's kitchen. I was a mere 22 years old and was trying to prepare dinner. Uncle Joe's knives were so dull that they would've had a tough time cutting through butter. I remembered that old saying, "The only thing more dangerous than a sharp knife is a dull knife." The implication is that you have to press harder with a dull knife, and that you'll probably slip and end up cutting yourself.

So I turned to my grandmother and was sure I could show off how smart I was. "Gramma," I said, "do you know what's more dangerous than a sharp knife?" She answered right back, "A woman's tongue." I said, "Umm, no, it's a dull knife," and I explained why. I was all set to claim victory when she looked at me and said, "That may be true, but there's nothing more dangerous than a woman's tongue."

The moral of the story? Never try to get cute with a short, sharp-tongued Cockney grandmother. It will always end badly.

Introduction

During the hundreds of classes and cooking demonstrations that I've taught over the years, the topic that I'm asked about more than any other is knives. People have questions about what types of knives to buy, how to use them, how to keep them sharp, and more. And I discovered something along the way: it's people's concerns and questions about their knife skills that prevent them from becoming more confident cooks. I've met many cooks who make terrific food but then tell me how stressed and nervous they are with their knives.

Well, help has arrived and you're reading it right now. This book will give you the confidence to choose and use the knives and other nonelectric sharp tools in your kitchen. It's also a reference book that you can use as you improve your skills and acquire the tools that will make you a better cook!

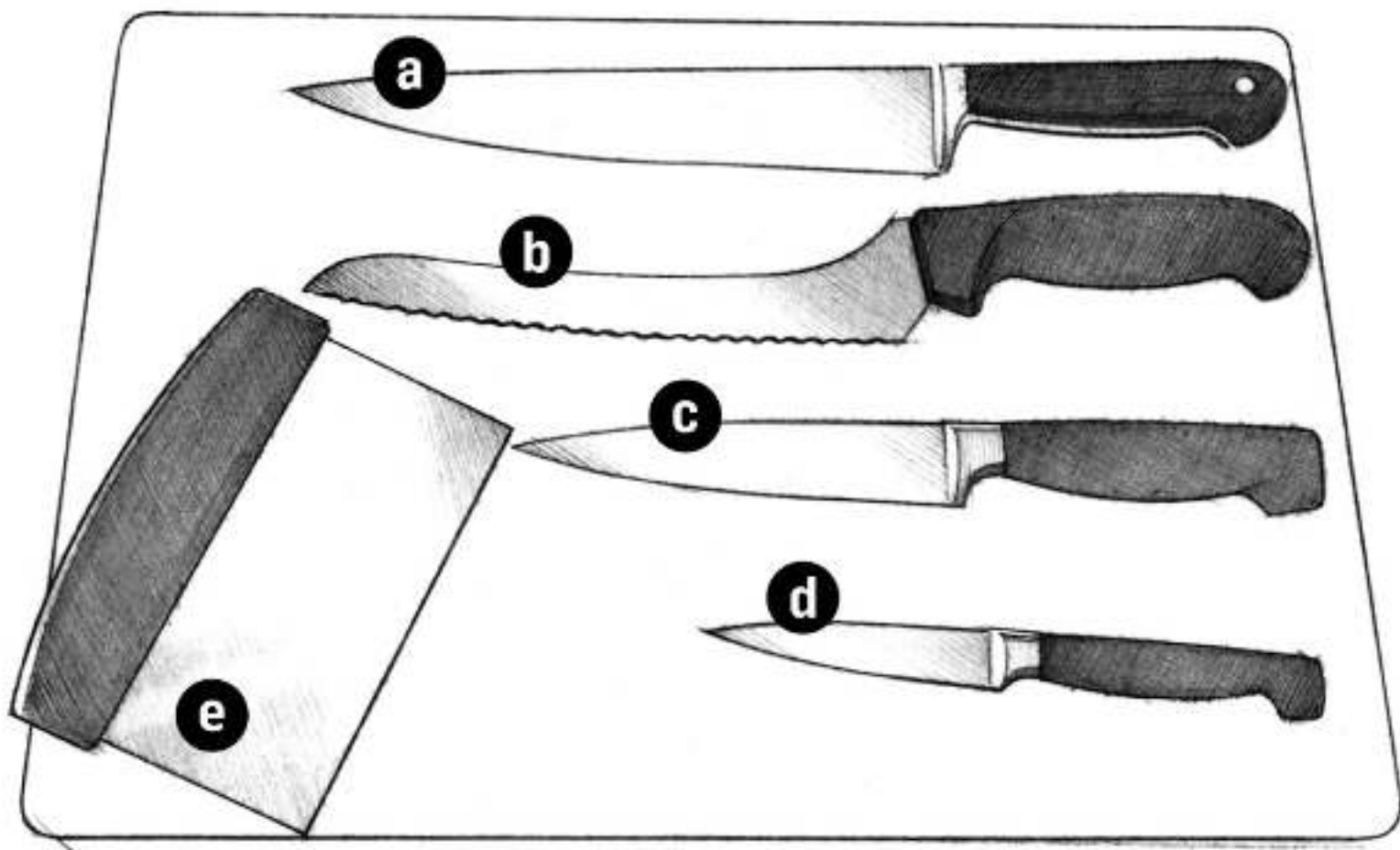
Most kitchens are filled with tools and gadgets that range from the most basic things that you need to cook to frivolous items that you never actually use. How do you decide which tools you need and want? How do you use them? And how do you take care of them so they'll last, in some cases, forever? This book will answer those questions so you won't end up with "it seemed like a good idea" things filling your kitchen drawers. Whether you're a new or experienced cook, I can guide you through the maze of knives and other sharp tools. I can help you become a better, more confident cook by choosing the tools that suit your needs and budget.

How to Choose and Use Your Knives

Knives are the most important tools in your kitchen. Without them, all you can do is eat oatmeal, bananas, and take-out food. Choosing the right knives is crucial. What knives do you absolutely need? And what other knives do you want after you have the basics covered?

At the bare minimum, you need to have two knives: a chef's knife for cutting, chopping, and slicing, and a paring knife for the smaller tasks. The differences between these two knives are reflected in their size and the size of the food you're cutting. A chef's knife is so large that you wouldn't be able to get the fine movements needed to take the top off a strawberry without risking some damage to your fingers. And if you were to try to carve a turkey with a paring knife, you and your guests might have to wait a long time before dinner is served. Together, these two knives meet the minimum requirements for you to be a confident cook.

Essential Knives

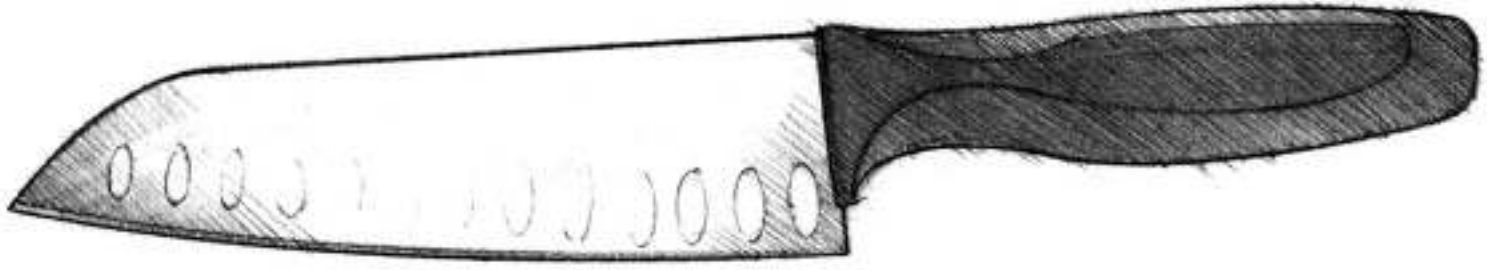


The “four and a half” essential knives, (a) chef's knife, (b) offset handle serrated deli knife, (c) utility knife, (d) paring knife, and (e) bench scraper.

But to help make cooking easier and more efficient, I think every cook needs “four and a half” knives. Along with the chef’s knife and paring knife, these include a 6-inch utility knife, an offset handle serrated deli knife, and a bench scraper (which is what I refer to as half a knife). Any knives beyond these are task specific and will help you as your skills and collection of recipes grow.

But wait.

Some people would put one more knife into this must-have category: a Japanese Santoku knife. Many people use this knife instead of a chef’s knife. Its shape and thin blade are ideal for slicing fruit and vegetables.



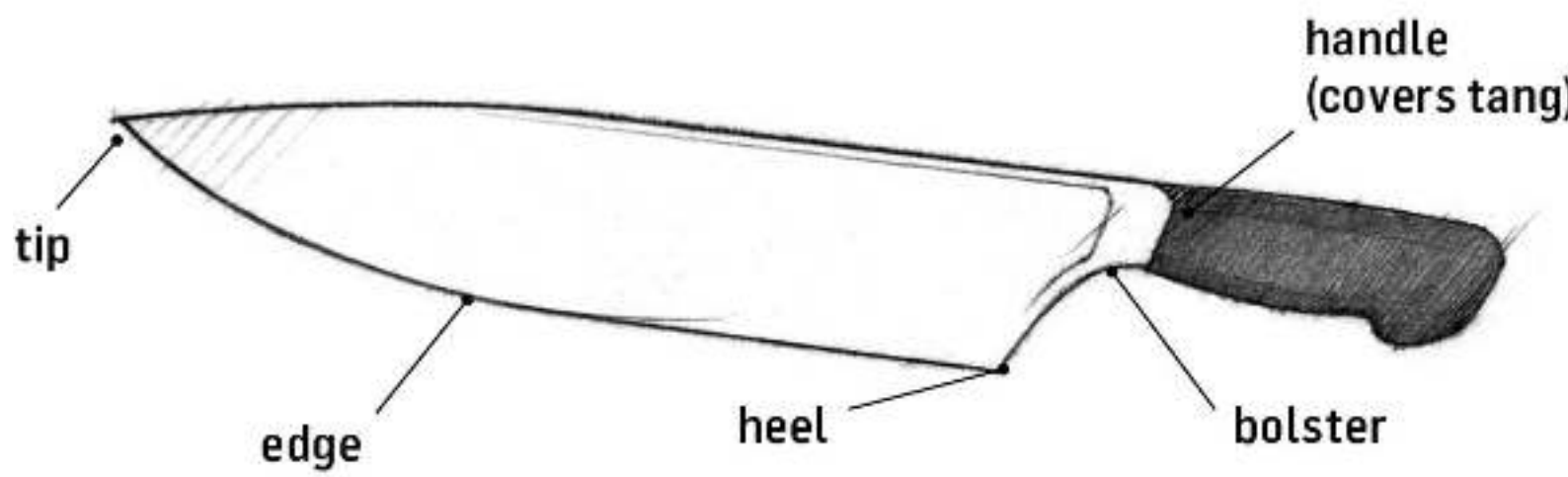
Japanese Santoku knife

Chef’s Knife

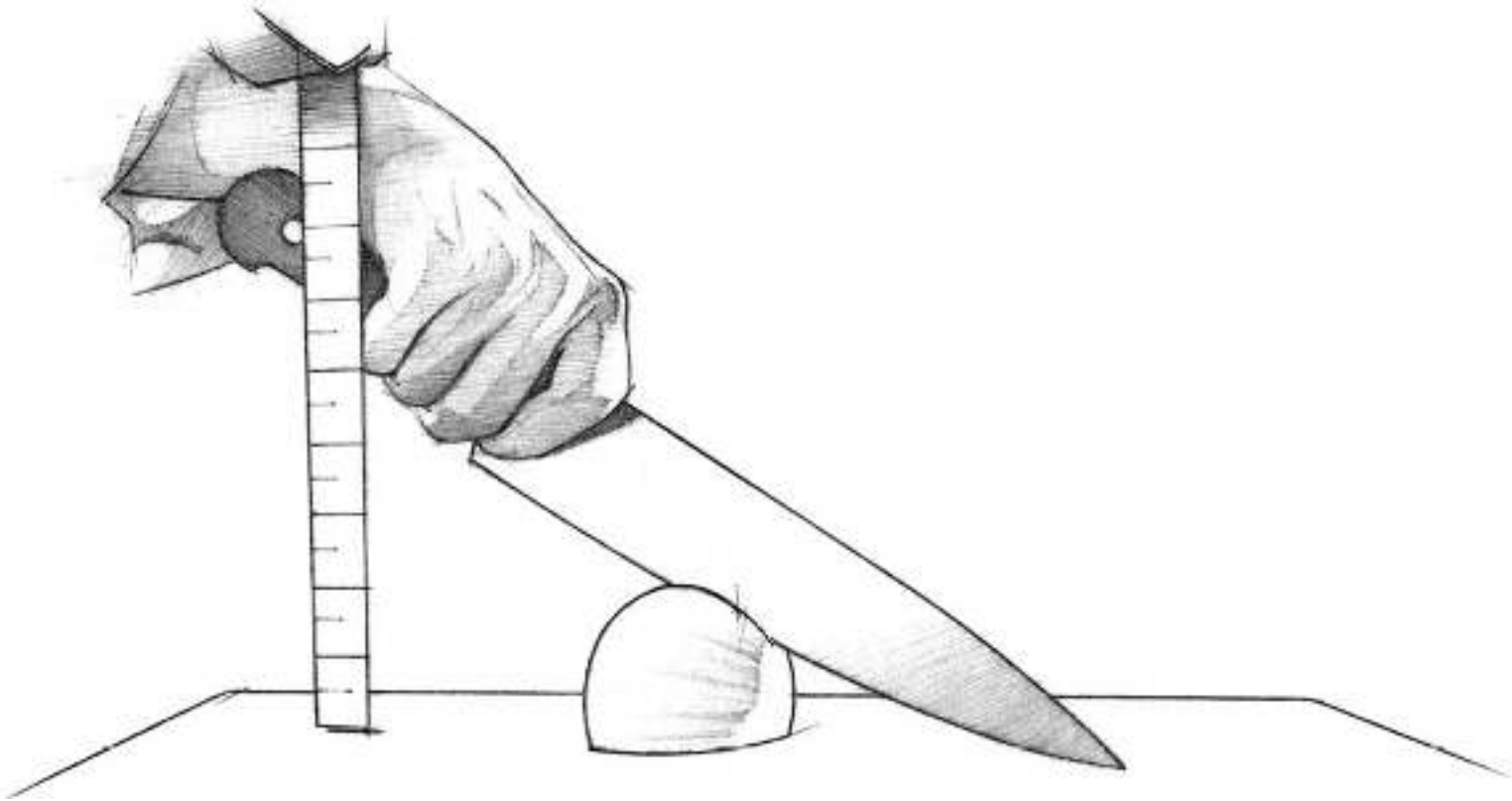
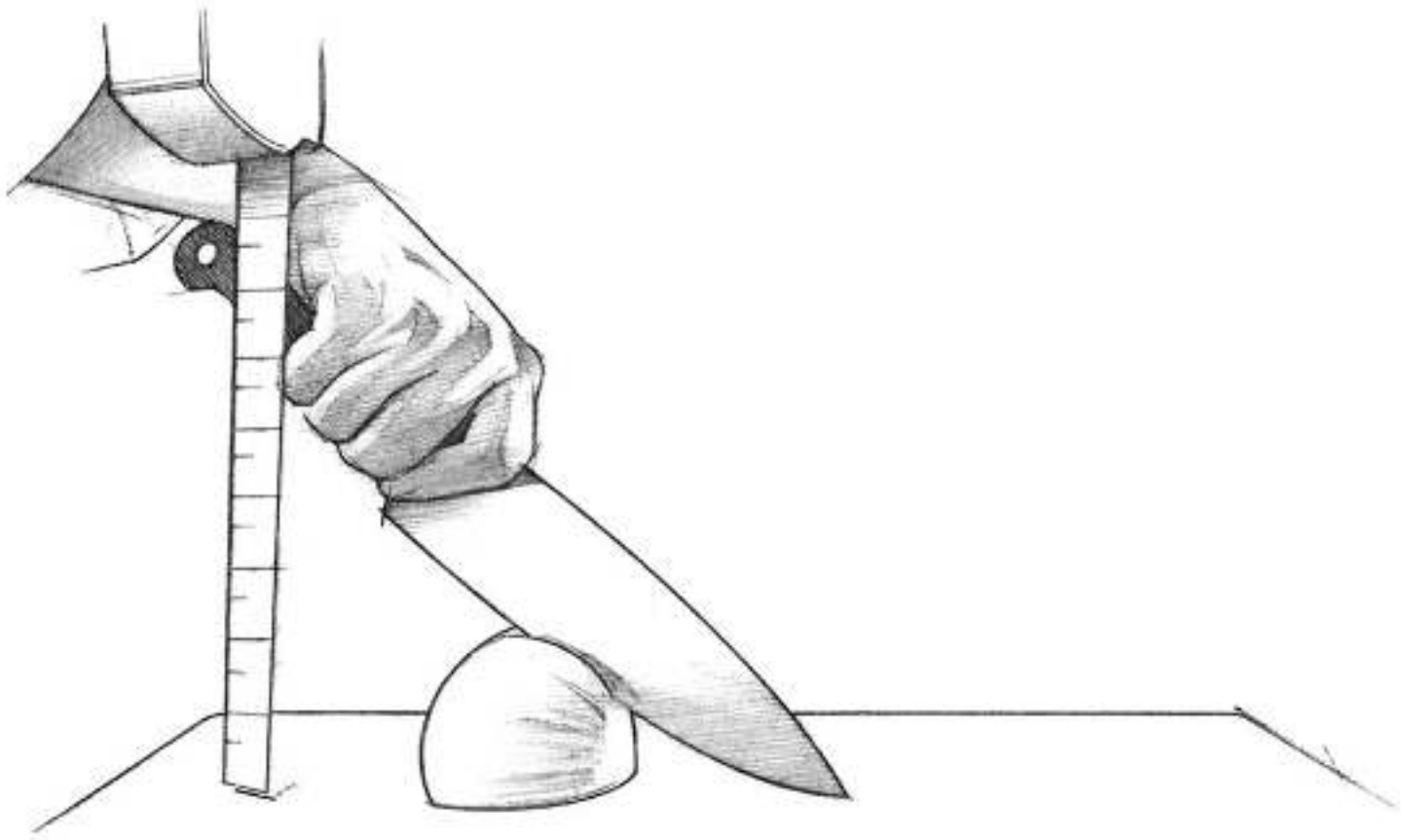
The chef’s knife will be your go-to knife for the vast majority of your cutting, chopping, slicing, and dicing. With it you can carve meat and poultry, chop onions, slice tomatoes, and mince cilantro and parsley. Plus a whole lot more.

Chef’s knives generally come in three sizes: 8, 10, and 12 inches. The most popular size is the 8-inch knife. Many people feel a larger knife is too big, and that it will be less safe and effective to use. But if you hold your knife correctly and follow the chef’s knife techniques, you’ll find that a 10-inch chef’s knife is more efficient, less tiring, and safer to use than an 8-inch one.

The Parts of a Chef’s Knife



This might seem contradictory, as it seems like you will need more effort to control a longer knife. But, if you're slicing an onion, or almost any food, your arm and wrist will have to lift higher with a shorter blade. That's because chef's knives have an area that's used most effectively for slicing and chopping. It's like the "sweet spot" on a tennis racquet, golf club, or a baseball or cricket bat. On the chef's knife, this is toward the back half of the blade. This is where the weight of the knife, combined with your effort, gives you the most effective cutting area. A shorter knife has a smaller sweet spot, and it must be lifted higher for that area to cut the food. As a result, the area that actually cuts the food is smaller. This puts more strain on your wrist, arm, and shoulder. For the same cutting results, with an 8-inch chef's knife, you have to work harder. And for a longer period of time too.



An 8-inch knife (above) versus a 10-inch knife (left). Note the extra height that's needed to lift the shorter knife.

How to Hold a Chef's Knife

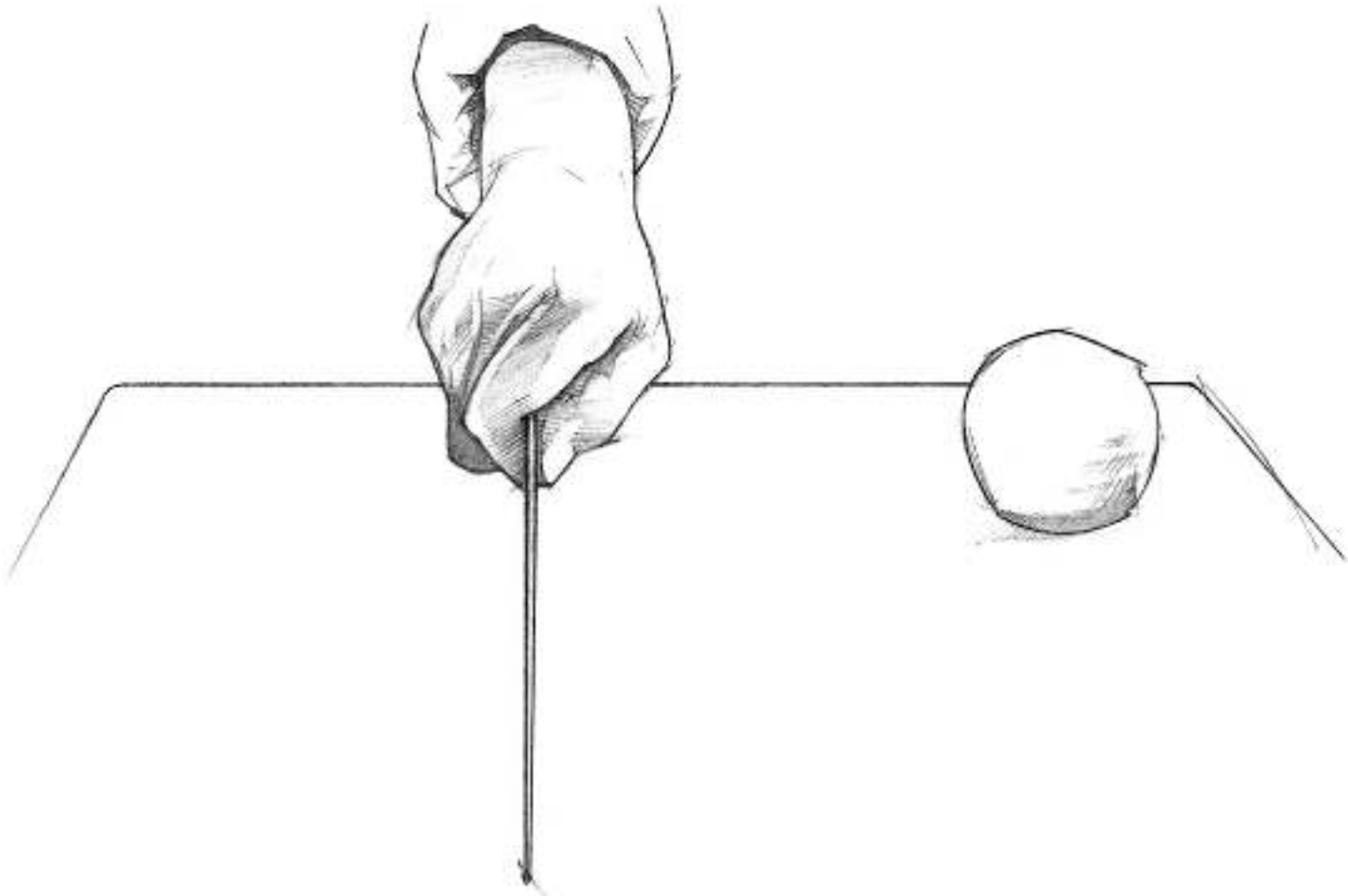
While it's important to be able to cut your food as you want, it's even more important to do it safely

so you'll end up with as many fingers and thumbs as when you started the day. Remember, you want to cut your food, not your fingers.

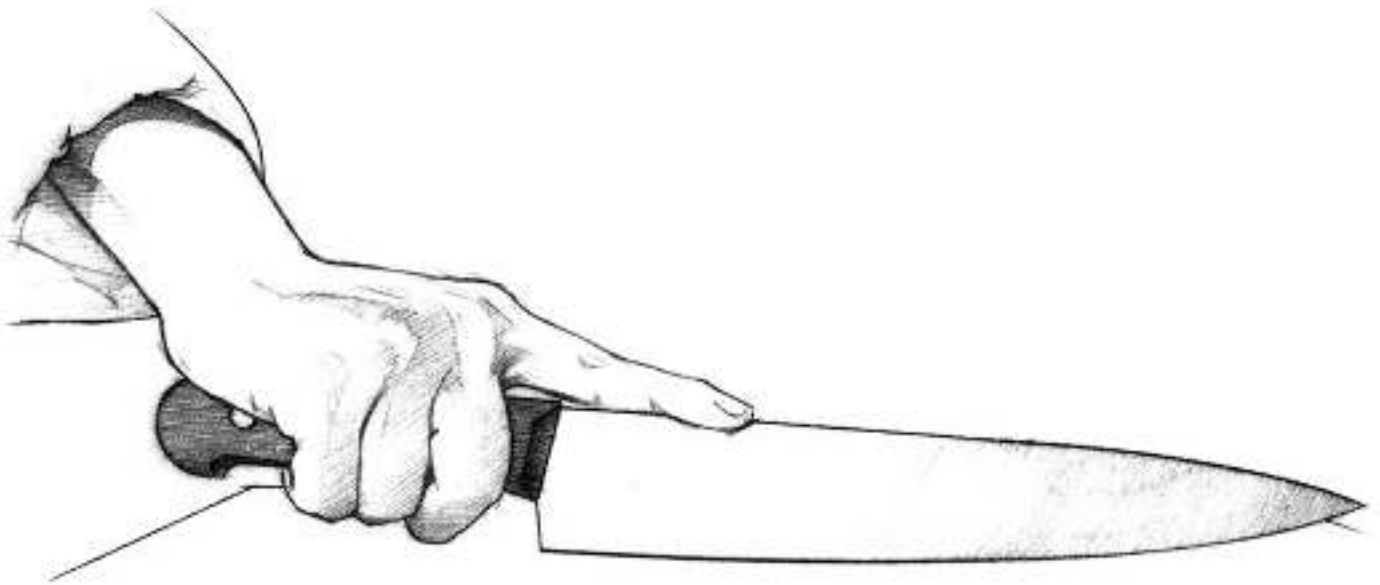
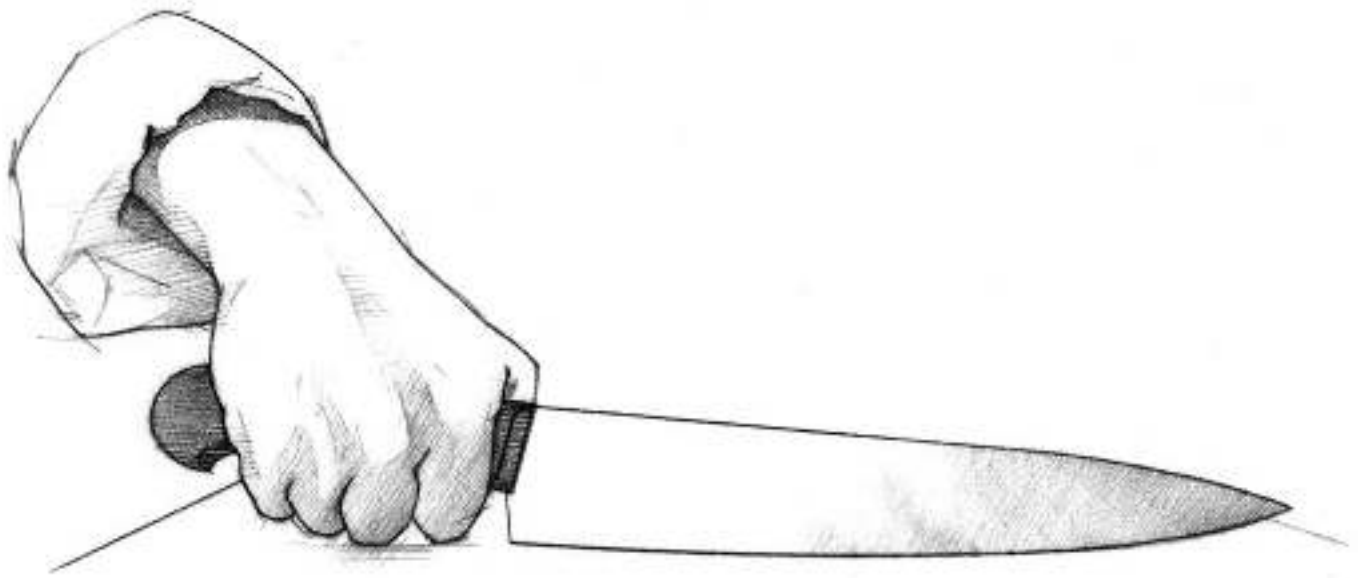
Let's start with the knife hand. The first illustration on the next page shows the correct method; the next two illustrations show comfortable but unsafe ways to hold a knife.

The illustration showing knuckles under the handle highlights two problems. With the knife held this way, your knuckles will hit against the cutting board. This gets painful after a while. The second problem is that holding your knife like this means that you don't have full lateral control of your knife. This will cause your knife to wiggle from side to side. In the illustration with the index finger extended, you probably won't hit your knuckles on the board but you'll still have poor lateral control of the knife. If you are cutting something hard, like a carrot, the knife will probably slip a little. Or a lot.

The illustration with the thumb and forefinger held at the beginning of the blade, almost pinching it, shows how to have complete control of the knife, including lateral control. Not only will this reduce your chances of cutting yourself, but it will also actually require less effort for you to cut the food. That's because the knife is going exactly where you want it to go while being held firmly, without slipping, in your hand.



The correct way to hold a knife with the thumb and forefinger alongside the bolster.

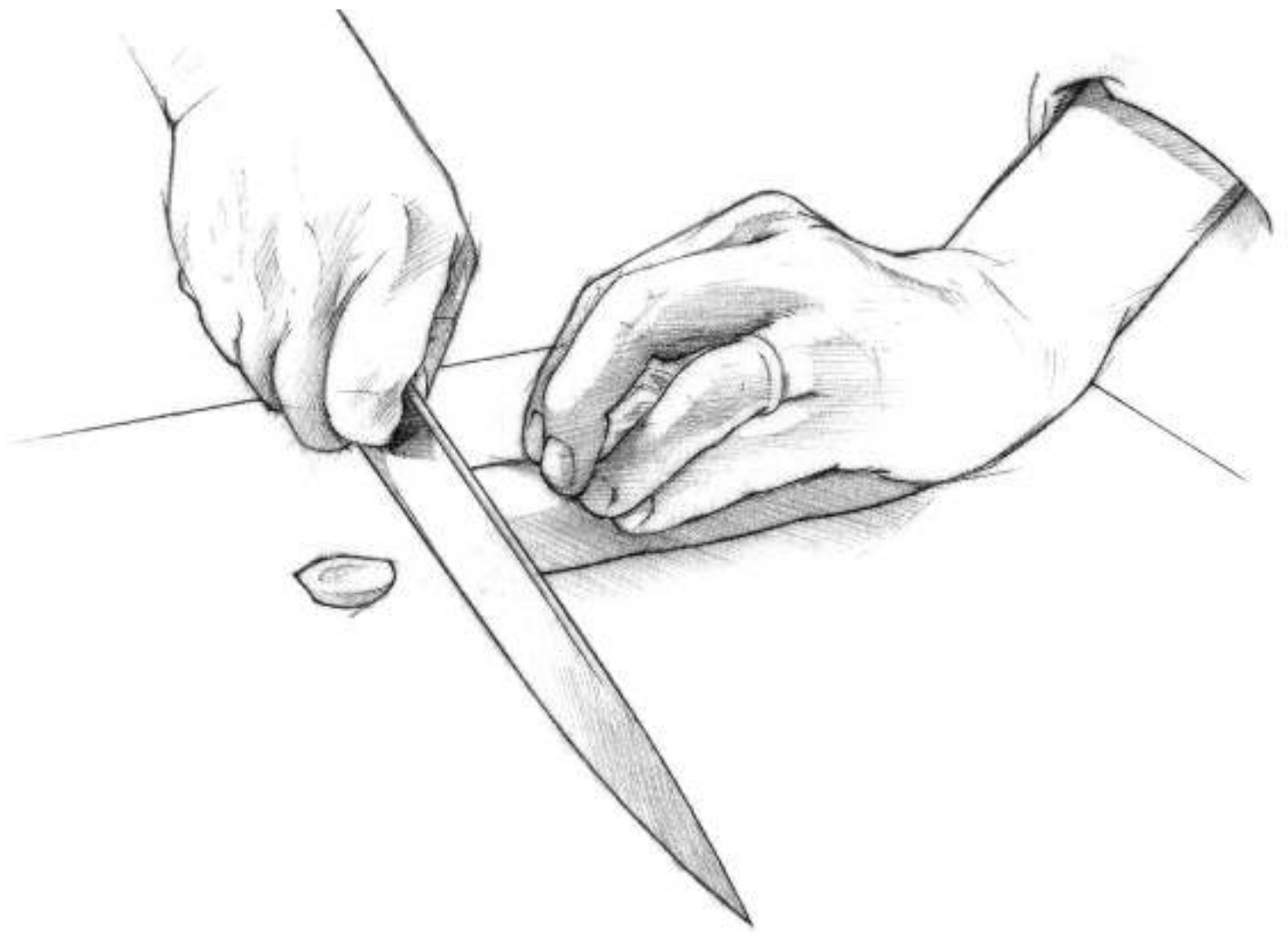


Two incorrect ways to hold a knife: knuckles under handle, and index finger extended.

On the Other Hand

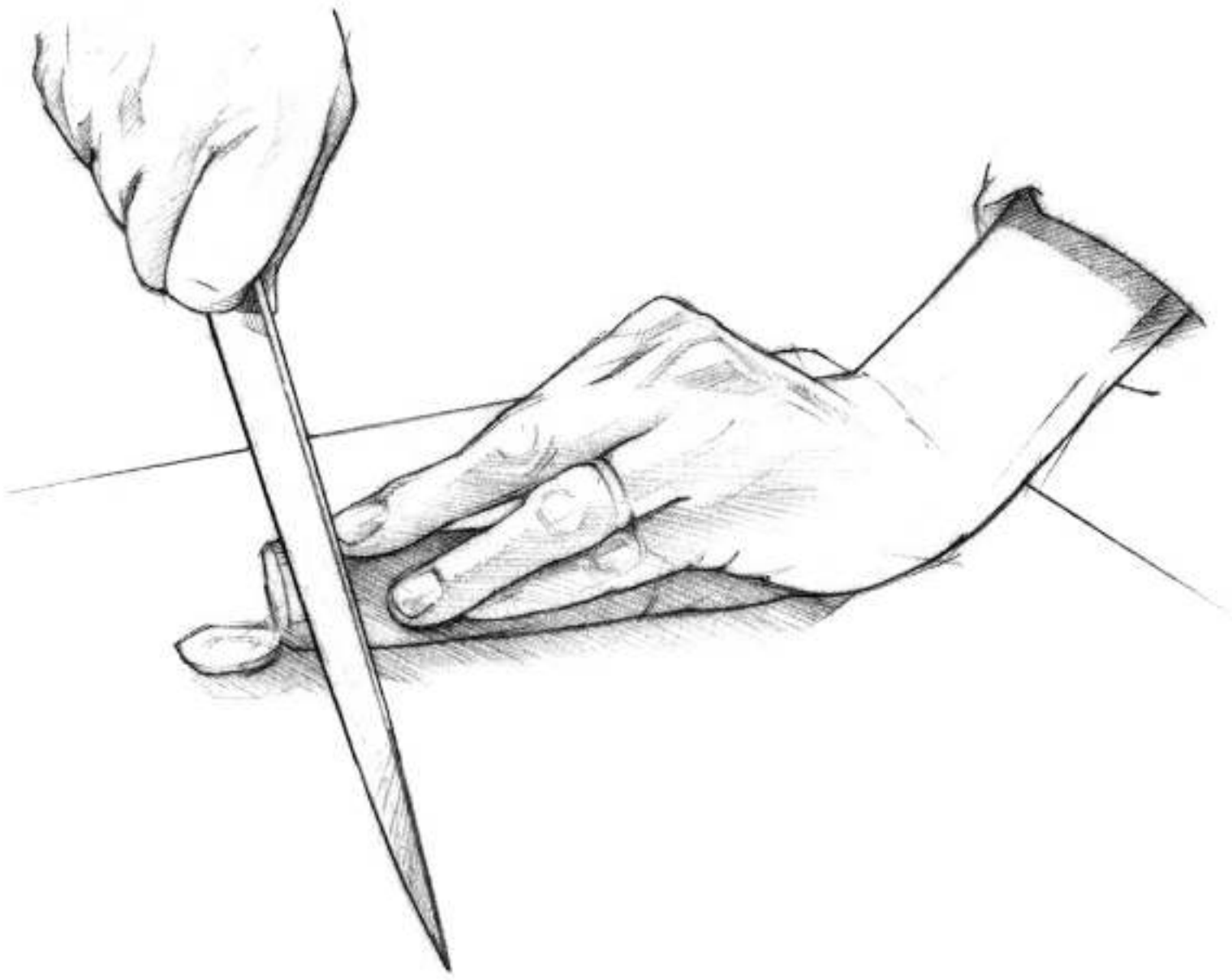
Both hands play a role in how to use a chef's knife, as well as all other knives. The hand not holding the knife, called the guide hand, is very important because it's holding and guiding the food being cut.

The first illustration on [here](#) shows the correct and safe way to hold the food, with your fingers almost standing up. This forms a shield, or barrier, when you're cutting the food. Plus, it removes your fingertips from being anywhere near the knife's blade. Since there's rarely a time when you need to pick your knife tip up from the cutting board, your knife will not be rising above your bent fingers. Which means you won't cut them. The one problem with doing it this way is that it feels awkward and unnatural until you've practiced it for a while.



The correct way to hold food.

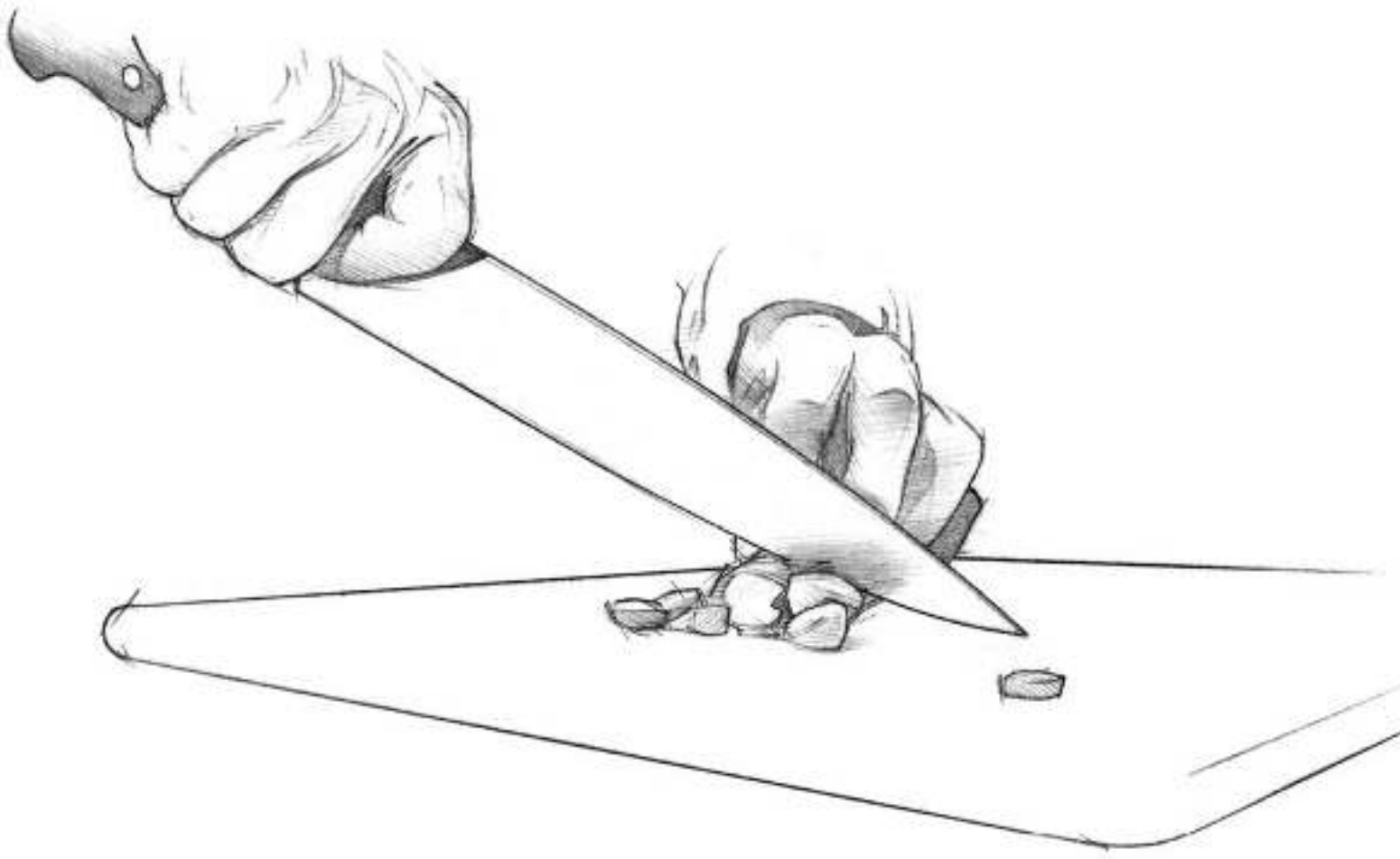
The second illustration shows the wrong way to hold the food being cut, with the hand resting in a natural position. Most people hold their food like this for two reasons: it's more comfortable, and they've been doing it this way forever. The problem with this technique is that it exposes all of your fingers to being cut when the knife slips. Not *if* the knife slips. *When* the knife slips.



The wrong way to hold food.

Basic Chef's Knife Techniques

Sliding and chopping are the two basic chef's knife techniques. The sliding technique is used to cut and slice food such as onions, scallions, and carrots. The knife slides forward while cutting, and is pulled back, above or away from the food, to slice again. Note how the tip of the knife stays on the cutting board.



Slicing carrots using the sliding knife technique.

The second technique is used to chop herbs or mince food that's already been cut, such as onions or garlic. One hand holds the knife as the other hand rests on top of the knife near the end of the blade.

Picture the face of a clock. The knife then pivots while chopping, going from approximately 4:00 to 5:00 (maybe 3:30 to 5:30), and back again, to continuously chop the food smaller and smaller. A large mound of parsley sprigs will be reduced to small bits of minced parsley in less than a minute by using this technique.



Mincing cilantro using the chopping technique.

Both techniques have one thing in common: the tip of the chef's knife does not leave the cutting board while you're cutting, slicing, or chopping. This is important because many people are under the impression that lifting the knife in the air while cutting and chopping is faster, more efficient, and cool looking. It's none of these. Every time you lift your knife off the board, you are losing some control over it. Keeping the tip on the board allows you to begin your motion where you want it to be. If you start, or continue, to have the knife in the air before cutting into the food, then the knife won't go exactly where you want it to go. It might go there. But not every time. And not safely.

Santoku Knives . . . the Other Chef's Knife?

The Santoku knife ([here](#)) has gained popularity in recent years and many home cooks use it, rather than a chef's knife, for most of their everyday tasks. But while a Santoku knife has many great attributes, especially as a slicer, it lacks the versatility of a chef's knife. When you safely use a chef's knife, you rarely have to lift it from the cutting board. It's easier on the arm and shoulder, with the board taking much of the impact and weight of the work. Because the Santoku is much shorter than a chef's knife, it cannot be used with the same comfort and efficiency. You'd have to constantly lift the knife off the cutting board because it is too short to slide back and forth like a chef's knife. The difference in length also means that you cannot slice and chop in the same volume as a chef's knife without increased fatigue and a decrease in accuracy. Plus, more of the effort of your work will go from the knife to your arm and shoulder.

I do like the Santoku knife. But I think of it as a hybrid between the 6-inch utility knife and a chef's knife rather than a replacement. There are enough differences and similarities between chef's knives and Santoku knives to make the Santoku a valuable addition to your collection of regularly used cutlery. The biggest difference, which makes the Santoku so valuable, is its stability and effectiveness as a slicer for so many foods including carrots, onions, tomatoes, and raw chicken breast.

Paring Knife

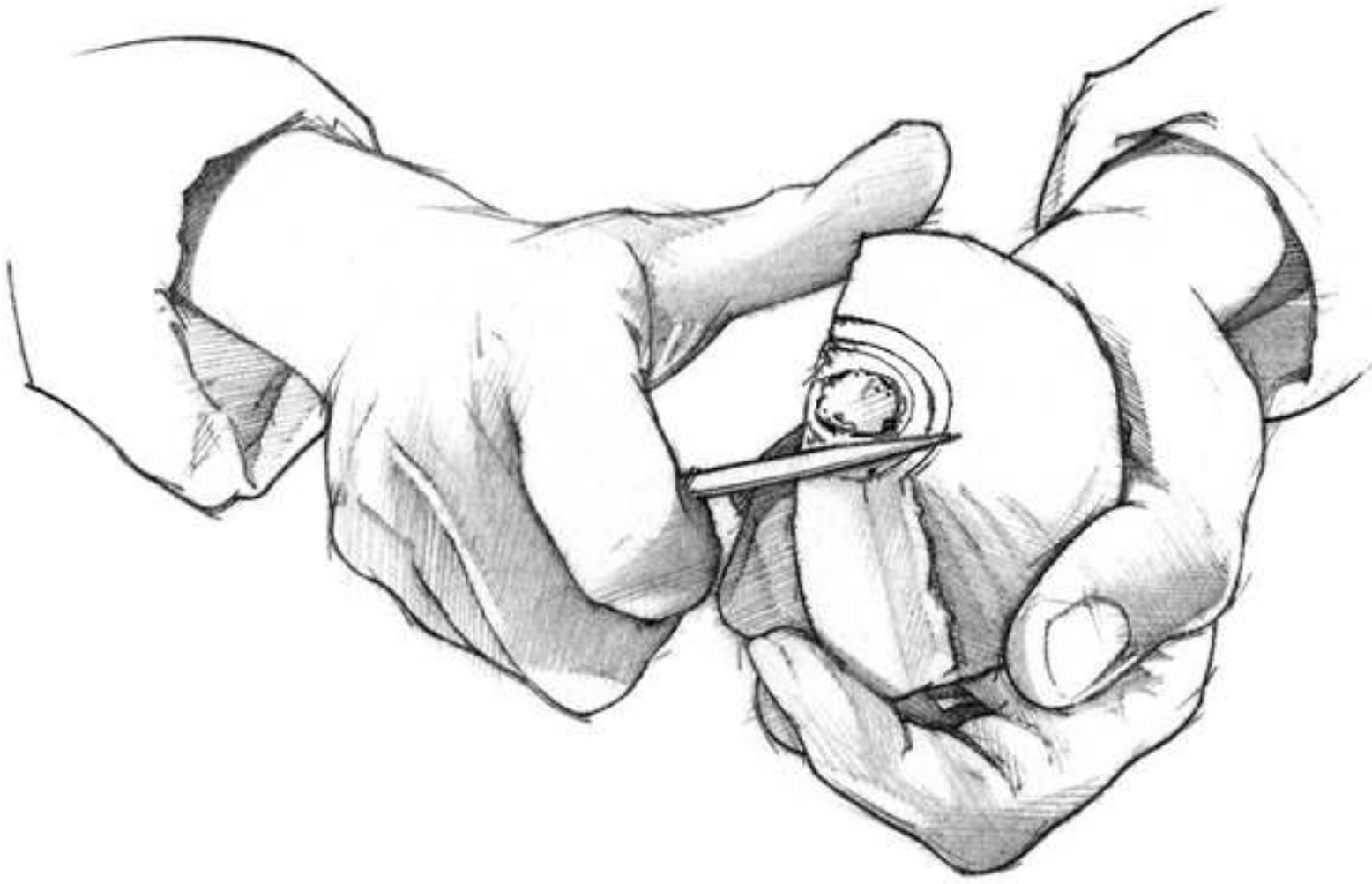
The paring knife ([here](#)) is the second most important knife to have, if for no other reason than it can do the small tasks for which the chef's knife is too big. Why would a chef's knife be too big for a job? Take an onion, for example. While a chef's knife is pointy and sharp enough to take the root end out of an onion, your hand will be so far away that you really won't have the control to make the small, fine cuts as you would with the paring knife. You'd be more likely to cut your hand than the onion.

What tasks does the paring knife do best? Paring is defined as the act of cutting away an edge or a surface. While this would imply a vegetable peeler, it's more than that. With a sharp paring knife you can easily peel an apple, tomato, or orange. You can use it to hull strawberries, remove the core from tomatoes and onions, and slice the segments out of a piece of citrus with a supreme cut (see Preparing Fruit, [here](#)). It's also a perfect knife for slicing salamis and many cheeses. You can even peel a grape with a paring knife.

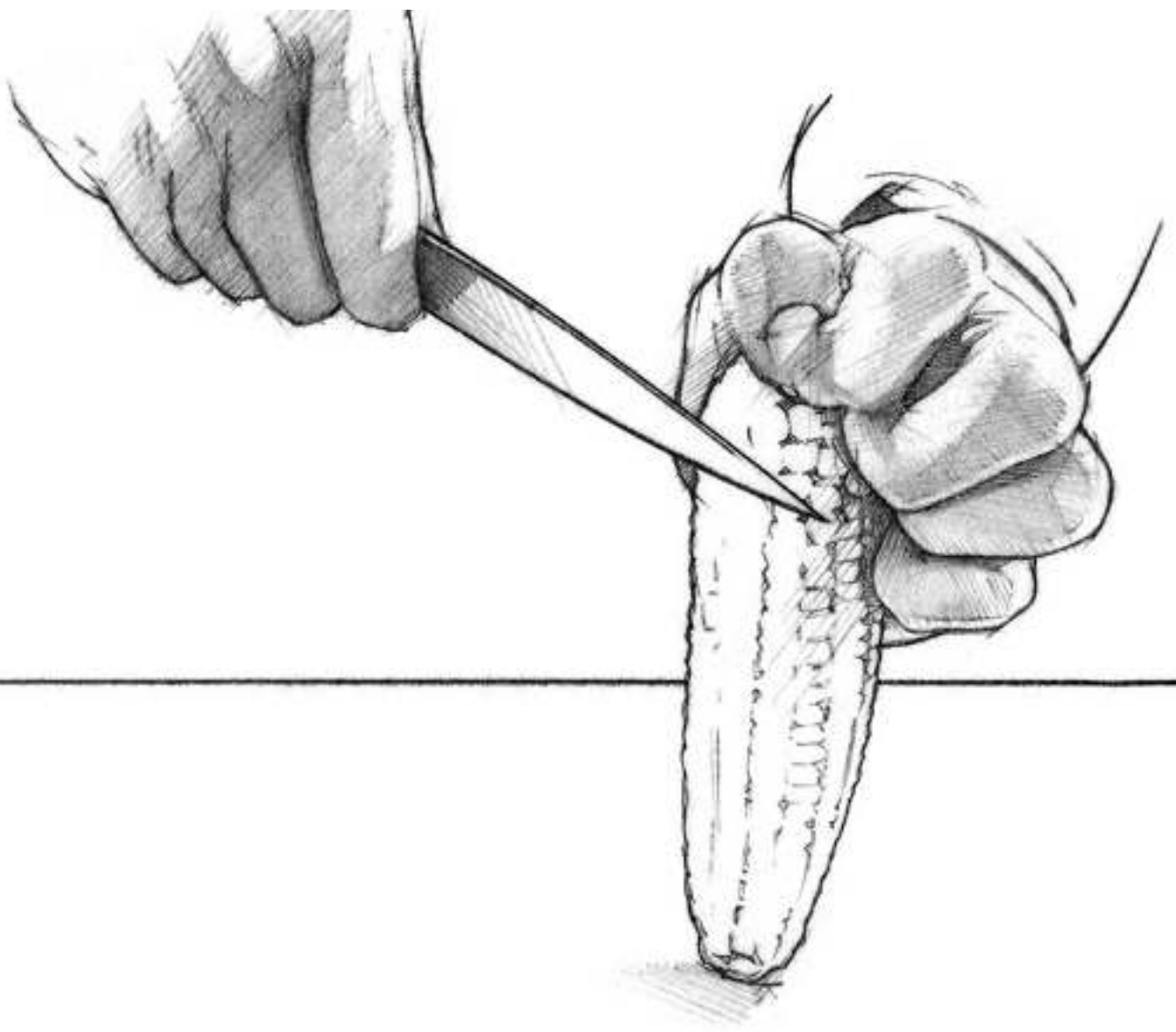
Three Different Ways to Hold a Paring Knife



Cutting a peach in half around the pit



Trimming the stem out of a halved onion



Cutting corn kernels off the cob

Not all paring knives look the same. Their blades can be between 2 and 4 inches long, and some blades are curvier than others. And unlike other types of knives, you don't always have to use a cutting board when using a paring knife. The tasks are often too small, and too close, to be accurate and efficient on a cutting board. As long as you take your time and don't direct the knife toward you, you can safely and comfortably hold and turn the food in your guide hand. Depending on the task, you may hold the paring knife in one hand while keeping the thumb of your knife hand on the food. It's more about the comfort level with the task, which you do slowly, rather than the method used, as with the chef's knife.

Utility Knife

The utility knife ([here](#)) is used less often than the paring knife, but it plays the role of the in-between knife. It does those odd tasks that are too small for the chef's knife and too big for the paring knife, like taking the core out of a cabbage (or a cauliflower). To do so, pierce the cabbage and carefully move the knife slowly alongside the core. After each downward slice — with your guide hand on the cabbage above the knife, out of the path of the blade — stop, rotate the cabbage a quarter turn, and

slice again. Repeat. This is a slow process, as the core can be quite dense. If you try to do this quickly then your knife will probably slip and the tip can break off.

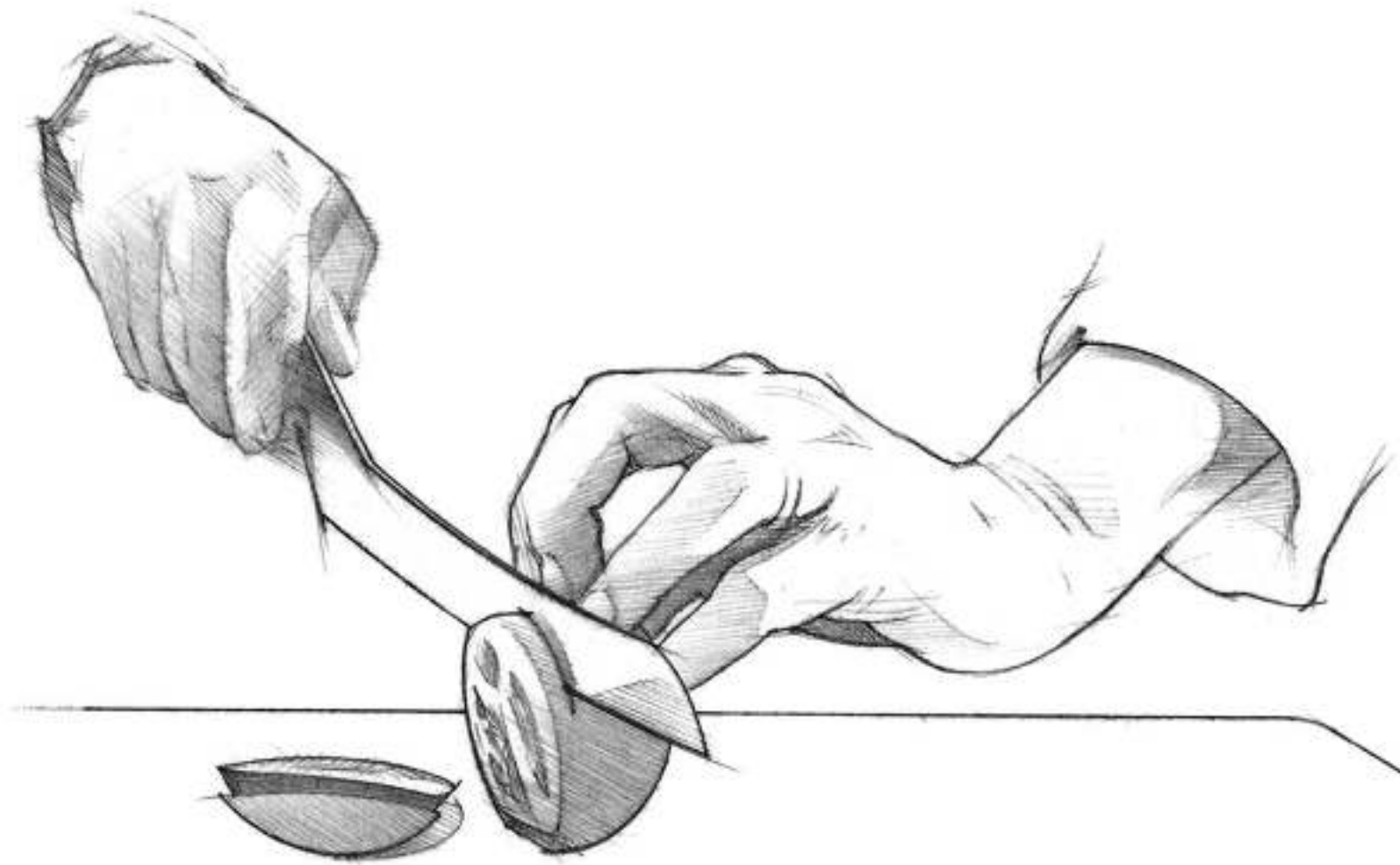


Coring a cabbage with a utility knife.

Other uses for a utility knife include carving roasted poultry or cutting the ends off onions, then peeling them. Or, it might be the knife closest at hand, and you want to slice a tomato or cut the peel and pith (the white inner layer) off an orange. It's also very good for slicing small blocks of cheese.

Offset Handle Serrated Deli Knife

The offset handle serrated deli knife ([here](#)) is the least known of all these knives. It's also the most versatile. The benefits of this knife come from both the blade and the handle. Serrated knives have more pronounced teeth on their blades than most other knives. The large teeth allow the knife to literally get a grip on the food before cutting it while other knives start sliding immediately. This allows you to cut foods with odd-textured crusts and skins that often seem to fight back with regular knives. Ideal tasks include slicing crusty breads, cutting the outer skin off melons and other large fruit, slicing tomatoes, and cutting sandwiches and bagels.



Slicing a tomato with a deli knife.

As the blade cuts right through these irregular surfaces, the offset handle allows your knuckles to avoid hitting either the cutting board or the counter. I never used an offset handle serrated knife until after I graduated from cooking school. I'm not sure I'd even seen one. I had used regular handle serrated knives before on bread and tomatoes. I still have two or three of them stashed away in a cabinet. As I mentioned earlier, if you're not comfortable with a knife, then you won't use it. That idea hadn't dawned on me until I realized that I wasn't using my serrated knives at all.

So how can an oddly shaped handle change a knife from being discarded to being so valuable? It's my knuckles. And your knuckles too. As with a badly held chef's knife, the regular handle serrated knife with its narrow handle and blade, doesn't allow room for your knuckles to clear the cutting board while slicing tomatoes and bread.

The offset handle serrated deli knife isn't perfect. Because its teeth are so large, it's very difficult to sharpen this knife. Most home sharpening tools cannot sharpen a serrated blade, and many sharpening professionals can't do it either. Although it doesn't need to be sharpened as often as other knives, you shouldn't overspend when buying this knife. When it gets too dull after a few years, or more, of use, then buy a new one. It's a small price to pay for such a versatile knife.

Bench Scraper

When I suggested that you needed four and a half knives, it's the bench scraper that I consider to be

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