

Guide to Selecting Kitchen Knives

Choosing knives for your kitchen may seem overwhelming. Not only are there many different types of knives, but manufacturers offer an array of styles, designs, and materials. This guide explores the various factors you'll need to consider when choosing knives—including construction, materials for blades and handles, comfort, safety, storage, care, and maintenance.

Once you understand how to choose a knife, you'll learn the differences between a chef's knife and a santoku knife—helping you decide whether you need one or both in your kitchen. Finally, you'll learn about other types of knives you will need—from the “must have” knives for every kitchen to specialty knives.

Factors To Consider When Choosing Knives

Construction

Knives can be either forged or stamped. Forged knives are made from a single piece of molten steel that is heated and beaten into shape. Stamped knives are stamped out of a sheet of metal. Forged knives are usually more expensive, heavier, thicker, more durable, and less flexible than stamped knives. They typically have a bolster (*e.g.*, a thick junction between the blade and handle)—a feature usually missing from stamped knives. Most experts consider forged knives to be superior.

You also need to consider tang, which refers to how long the blade is in relation to the handle. The best choice is full tang, which means the metal from the blade runs through the entire handle and is secured with rivets. Full tang knives are stronger and more durable.

A final consideration is fit. A well-constructed knife will have an excellent fit, which means there are no visible gaps between the blade and the handle. The two materials should look seamless. If you see a gap between the handle and the blade, chances are that it is an inferior knife.

Blade Materials

Knife blades can be made of high-carbon steel, stainless steel, or stainless steel alloys. However, not all steel is created equal.

- **Carbon steel** holds an edge longer and sharpens easily. However, it also rusts easily, and the blade must be kept dry to avoid stains.

- **Stainless steel** resists stains and corrosion but dulls quicker and is more difficult to sharpen. Stainless steel is the most popular choice in home kitchens.
- **Stainless steel alloys** combine the best qualities of carbon and stainless steel. These alloys are usually found in Japanese blades and are often quite pricey.

Handle Materials

Knife handles are typically made of wood, composites, or stainless steel.

- **Wood handles** look attractive and sophisticated but have some drawbacks. The wood must be kept dry to avoid wood rot, which results in unpleasant odors and split wood. Pakkawood is a hardwood impregnated with resin, which helps the wood resist moisture and rot. If you want wooden handles on your knives, pakkawood is the way to go.
- **Composite handles** can be made of materials such as polypropylene, POM, Fibrox, and Santoprene. Composite handles are more durable and require less care than wooden handles. They often have texture to provide a non-slip grip, which increases safety. However, some people don't like the look of composite handles.
- **Stainless steel handles** are easy to clean but can be slippery if texture isn't added. Some manufacturers add a plastic coating or "dimples" to provide a non-slip grip.

Comfort and Safety

Knives should feel balanced and comfortable in your hand. Avoid knives that are too heavy or feel too big. Look for ergonomic handles and a non-slip grip. You should be able to work with knives without fatigue, discomfort, or slipping.

Storage

You have several options for storing your knives.

- **If you have ample counter space**, wooden storage blocks are attractive and convenient.
- **If counter space is limited**, consider magnetic strips or an in-drawer knife block.
- **If you're going to store knives loose in a drawer**, purchase sheaths for the blades.

Care and Maintenance

Experts recommend washing kitchen knives by hand due to the chemicals in dishwasher detergents. Knives with wooden handles need special attention as the handles cannot get wet. Carbon steel blades should also be dried immediately after use. It is good practice to wash, dry, and put away your knives when you're finished with them—regardless of the materials.

All knives will require professional sharpening at some point. Honing your knives will extend their lives and the time between sharpening. You'll also extend the life of your knives by using wooden cutting boards. Harder cutting board materials (such as plastic, glass, and ceramic) will

dull the blades. However, use a plastic cutting board if working with raw meat so it can be disinfected in the dishwasher afterward.

Chef's Knife or Santoku Knife—Or Both?

If there is a controversy in kitchen knives, it centers on whether to use a chef's knife or a santoku knife as your primary knife. Both are general purpose knives that do similar things. However, the two knives have essential differences in how they are used and constructed. Let's take a look at the features of each.

Chef's Knife

- Originated in Europe
- 8 inches to 10 inches long—most home cooks prefer an 8-inch knife while professional chefs opt for a 10-inch knife
- Used for slicing, dicing, chopping, and mincing
- 20 to 22 degree angle
- Tip is pointed
- Cutting edge is curved
- Thicker blade than santoku knife

Santoku Knife

- Originated in Japan
- 5 to 7 inches long
- Santoku means “three virtues,” which refers to slicing, dicing, and mincing
- 12 to 15 degree angle
- Spine turns down at the tip (called a sheep's edge tip)
- Cutting edge is straight
- Often has dimples on the blade (called a Granton edge) to keep food from sticking
- Thinner blade than a chef's knife

Although both knives perform many of the same functions, the chef's knife is ideal for the “rocking” motion used to cut vegetables, while the santoku knife cuts using a “chop chop” motion. Basically, it comes down to how you prefer to use your knife. Some cooks opt to have both and use them for different tasks. Overall, the santoku knife provides more finesse and thinner slices, while the chef's knife can quickly chop vegetables.

Choosing Other Knives for Your Kitchen

When selecting kitchen knives, consider what types of food you cook. You don't want to purchase knives that you won't use. That being said, the essential knives for most kitchens are a chef's knife (and/or the santoku knife) as well as the following items:

- **Paring Knife:** Paring knives are usually 3 to 4 inches long and are used to pare, core, and peel fruits and vegetables. Other uses include deveining shrimp or cutting garnishes.

- **Serrated Knife:** Usually about 10 inches long, this knife is ideal for cutting bread, cakes, and “squishy” fruits and vegetables like tomatoes. It is often called a bread knife.
- **Honing Steel.** A honing steel tunes up your knife blades. Although it doesn’t sharpen the blades, it “realigns” them and keeps them in good shape. You can hone your knives as frequently as you want.

Depending on the type of food you cook, you might also seek out additional knives. Some options and their uses are listed below.

- **Utility Knife:** lighter than a chef’s knife but longer than a paring knife, a utility knife is used to cut foods that are too big for a paring knife but too small for a chef’s knife.
- **Carving Knife:** a large knife (usually 8- to 15-inches long) used to slice thin cuts of meat.
- **Boning Knife:** with a sharp point and narrow blade, this knife is used to remove bones from meat.
- **Cleaver:** looks like a rectangular hatchet and is used to chop through bones and meat and hard fruits and vegetables like pumpkins and squash.
- **Fillet Knife:** has a long and flexible blade and is used to filet and prepare fish.
- **Steak Knives:** sharp table knives used to cut meat.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this article has made the process of selecting knives for your kitchen less overwhelming and confusing. When choosing your knives, remember the following points.

The most important factor is what feels good to you. How comfortable is the knife? Is it too heavy or too light? Can you get a good grip? There is no substitute for holding a knife in your hands to get a feel for it.

Next, consider the care requirements. If you’re someone who is going to toss your knives in the kitchen sink after using them, then don’t choose carbon steel knives with wood handles!

Your budget will also play a factor. A high-quality Japanese knife can cost upward of \$80 per knife. However, you can find a wide variety of lower priced knives that are of good quality.

Finally, the types of knives you choose will depend on how you cook. Most home cooks only need a chef’s knife (and/or a santoku knife), a paring knife, a serrated bread knife, and a honing steel. If you add in a pair of good quality kitchen shears, you’ll be ready to prepare almost any type of dish. Bon appetit!