



Slice & Dice

A chef instructor at Orlando's Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts cuts through the confusion of knife buying

Purchasing a knife collection for your home kitchen can be intimidating, even for the most diehard wannabe chef and Food Network fan. While sturdiness, efficiency and sharpness are critical, there are other important decisions. Santoku or chef's knife? An 8-inch blade or longer?

Finding the right knife for you — whether for basic prep work or to help take the chore out of your next dinner party — is a personal quest, according to Jennifer M. Denlinger, chef instructor and resident knife expert at Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Orlando. Personal preference, says Denlinger, isn't limited to a particular brand, it also relates to size, weight, length and blade. All of these should be included in your decision.

**Story by Susan Friedman
Photography by Manuela Davies**

Professional chefs, like Denlinger, tend to use commercial-caliber 8-inch and 10-inch knives. But for the home cook, she suggests high-carbon, stain-resistant stainless steel, and she is partial to two comparable longstanding German knife makers: Wüsthof-Trident of America and Zwilling J.A. Henckels.

According to Denlinger you should ask yourself two important questions when knife shopping: Does it feel natural? Am I comfortable holding it?

"You'll know it's a good fit when you put your hand comfortably at the bolster of the knife, where the blade turns into the handle," she says. And yet, a chef's knife

that feels comfortable in your hand, could feel awkward to someone else.

Some of Denlinger's colleagues, for example, prefer a 10-inch knife because they have more strength in their forearm. "Length is a hard decision for most people," she says. "It's like driving a sports car compared to an extended SUV." When in doubt, Denlinger says people resort to using a 6-inch paring knife. But that's not the optimal choice. "Paring knives aren't capable of doing everything and are used mainly for fine detail work, such as garnishes and trimming tops off carrots or strawberries," she points out.

And while some knives, such as those designed for sushi making are intentionally light to make the task easier, the girth of a knife is also critical. "For me, it has to be

THE PRICE IS RIGHT

If you're thinking of acquiring an all-purpose knife for your kitchen, an 8-inch chef's knife is a good starting investment. But not every knife purchase has to break the bank. The Mercer brand, for example, is budget-friendly and available through chef-supply outlets. The Mercer chef's knife runs around \$30 and offers a solid feel with nice balance and a heavy handle. Its taper-ground edge adds stability.

A bit pricier, the Zwilling J.A. Henckels Twin Pro-S chef's knife is nearly \$100 bucks more than the Mercer. This longstanding German household name offers a chef's knife that is fully forged from one chunk of steel and is also nicely balanced with heft.

The curved handle of Wüsthof-Trident of America's Classic Ikon 7-inch santoku knife is an appealing feature because of its size and design. With its Japanese-style blade, this particular tool is priced at approximately \$150.

Paring knives from commercial kitchen-supply retailers range from \$5 to \$15-plus. The latter's easy-on-the-wallet price tag is for a 3-inch knife made of high-carbon, stain-free Japanese steel.

No matter the cost, if it isn't a comfortable fit in your hand, then it's not the right knife for you.

—SF

just heavy enough," she says, adding, "You need the weight for chopping, so that the knife can easily get through whatever you're working with."

THE MUST-HAVE KNIVES

No matter your budget, knives should always be a planned purchase. Every home cook should own these four knives.

The paring knife is best for light chopping tasks, peeling, coring and garnishing.

The santoku knife, the beveled Asian-style blade, is designed for slicing, dicing and mincing. Its distinguishing feature is the indentations along the edge of the blade that allow for air pockets between the knife and the food that is being sliced.

The chef's knife is the tool you will reach for the most. It's the workhorse, capable of doing just about anything.

And last is the thin and narrow boning knife, which has a sharp blade that is used for separating meat from the bone.

SHARPEN, CLEAN & STORE

Denlinger admits that some of her most precious possessions are her knives, some of which have been collected over a lifetime. Her grandfather's butcher knives and cleavers are among her prized family heirlooms.

As such, she is emphatic about how personal knives are to their owners. Her no-nonsense tone underscores her insistence that you should "never touch another chef's knife." And perhaps even more importantly, never sharpen another chef's knife.



"In the act of sharpening, you hold the knife at an angle that you are accustomed to. When you use a honing steel to keep your knife in good working order, you do so at an angle that works for you. If you hone someone else's knife, you will likely alter the blade," she explains. When sharpening your knife, she recommends an 18- to 22-degree angle.

The importance of maintaining your knife's cutting edge is common sense. A dull knife is not only harder to use, but is unsafe. "Sharp knives do what they should do," says Denlinger, adding that if you exert pressure in the wrong way with a dull knife, it can ruin the food you're trying to cut and you could also cut yourself.

Her guidelines for knife longevity and how to avoid wear and tear are clear-cut. "Never put your knives in the dishwasher," she advises. "Instead, hand-wash individually in hot soapy water and air dry. Knives not only get banged around in the dishwasher, but high heat and detergent can damage the blade," she says.

Denlinger recommends storing knives dry, not wet, and in a manner that doesn't ding the blade. When you first purchase your knife, it often comes wrapped in a soft thin plastic sheath. "It's best for long-term drawer storage to use a hard plastic knife protector or blade guard," she says. **S**

Knife Shopping

You can find Wüsthof-Trident of America and Zwilling J.A.

Henckels knives at your local Williams-Sonoma stores in Winter Park and at the Mall at Millenia. williams-sonoma.com

Specialty and commercial-caliber knives can be purchased at the restaurant-supply store Chef & More Equipment & Supplies, with two locations in Orlando. chef-more.com

If giving a knife as a gift ever crossed your mind, Damian Olivera of Cutlery Gifts has a collection of handsome knives with high-carbon steel blades and oak wood handles. He can engrave the "chef's" name or a logo on the blade or handle. 321-890-8955, [cutlerygifts](http://cutlerygifts.com)



Chef Denlinger's Working Knives

The bolster is where the blade turns into the handle, like on this chef's knife.

The indentations in the santoku knife allow for air pockets when slicing.

Chef Denlinger says people often resort to using paring knives for many jobs because of their size, but they are best for light chopping, peeling and coring.

Size, weight, length and blade are important when selecting a knife.

The tourne knife is a culinary student's nightmare. It is used to shape vegetables into seven-sided ovals.

Chef Denlinger's cleavers are prized family heirlooms.

Cheese knives also have holes, which help prevent crumbling as you slice.

Seafood lovers may be familiar with the clam and oyster (right) knives that make shucking easier.

