

Complete Guide to Kitchen Knife Skills

Master the Foundation of All Cooking
From Basic Cuts to Professional Techniques

By Chef Maria Santos, Culinary Institute of America

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Disclaimer: This guide is for educational purposes only. Always follow food safety guidelines. Individual dietary needs vary - consult a nutritionist for personalized advice.

Table of Contents

1. Why Knife Skills Matter
2. Choosing the Right Knife
3. How to Hold a Knife
4. The 10 Essential Cuts
5. Vegetable Cutting Techniques
6. Meat and Fish Preparation
7. Knife Safety Rules
8. Knife Maintenance
9. Practice Exercises
10. Common Mistakes to Avoid
11. Quick Reference Chart
12. Glossary of Culinary Terms

1. Why Knife Skills Matter

Knife skills are the single most important foundation of cooking. Professional chefs spend years perfecting their cuts because consistent, proper cutting directly affects cook times, flavor development, presentation, and safety. According to the Culinary Institute of America, mastering basic knife skills can reduce meal prep time by up to 50%.

50%

reduction in prep time with proper knife skills (CIA, 2024)

When vegetables are cut to uniform sizes, they cook evenly. When aromatics are properly minced, they release maximum flavor. When proteins are portioned correctly, they cook to the perfect temperature. Everything in cooking starts with the knife.

PRO TIP:

Invest in one good chef knife and learn to use it well before buying any other kitchen tool.

2. Choosing the Right Knife

The Essential 3

You only need three knives to cook anything:

- Chef Knife (8-10 inch) - Your workhorse for 90% of cutting tasks. Choose one that feels balanced in YOUR hand.
- Paring Knife (3-4 inch) - For small, precise work: peeling, trimming, deveining shrimp, hulling strawberries.
- Serrated/Bread Knife (8-10 inch) - For bread, tomatoes, and anything with a tough exterior and soft interior.

What to Look For

- Weight: Should feel balanced, not tip-heavy or handle-heavy
- Handle: Comfortable grip that does not tire your hand
- Steel: High-carbon stainless steel is the best all-around choice
- Edge: German knives (Wusthof, Henckels) are heavier; Japanese knives (Shun, Global) are lighter and sharper

Budget Recommendations

Beginner: Victorinox Fibrox Pro (\$30-40) - best value chef knife. Intermediate: Wusthof Pro (\$50-80) or Tojiro DP (\$50-70). Advanced: Wusthof Classic (\$100-150) or Shun Classic (\$120-170).

PRO TIP:

A \$35 sharp knife is better than a \$200 dull knife. Sharpness matters more than brand.

3. How to Hold a Knife

The Pinch Grip (Correct Method)

Pinch the blade right where it meets the handle between your thumb and index finger. Wrap your remaining three fingers around the handle. This gives you maximum control and reduces fatigue. It feels awkward at first but becomes natural within a week.

The Guide Hand (Claw Grip)

Your non-knife hand holds the food using the claw grip: curl your fingertips under, with your knuckles forward. The flat side of the knife blade rests against your knuckles, which guide the knife. Your fingertips NEVER extend past your knuckles.

95%

of kitchen cuts happen when the guide hand is not in claw position

4. The 10 Essential Cuts

1. Rough Chop

Irregular pieces, roughly the same size. Used for stocks, soups, mirepoix. Size: 3/4 to 1 inch pieces.

2. Dice (Large, Medium, Small)

Uniform cubes. Large dice: 3/4 inch. Medium dice: 1/2 inch. Small dice: 1/4 inch. Used in salsas, soups, stir-fries.

3. Brunoise

Very fine dice: 1/8 inch cubes. Used in fine sauces, garnishes, vinaigrettes. Start by cutting julienne, then cross-cut.

4. Julienne (Matchstick)

Long thin strips: 1/8 x 1/8 x 2 inches. Used in salads, stir-fries, garnishes. Cut vegetables into planks, then into strips.

5. Chiffonade

Thin ribbons of leafy herbs or greens. Stack leaves, roll tightly, then slice crosswise into thin ribbons. Used for basil, mint, spinach garnishes.

6. Mince

Very finely chopped, almost a paste. Used for garlic, ginger, shallots, herbs. Rock the knife back and forth, gathering and re-mincing.

7. Batonnet

Thick sticks: 1/4 x 1/4 x 2-3 inches. Think French fries. Used for crudites, fries, vegetable sides.

8. Oblique/Roll Cut

Angled cuts on cylindrical vegetables. Roll the vegetable 90 degrees between each cut. Used for carrots, parsnips,

zucchini. Creates more surface area for roasting.

9. Bias Cut

Diagonal slices on elongated vegetables. Creates larger surface area and looks professional. Used for green onions, celery, Asian stir-fries.

10. Supreme (Segment)

Membrane-free citrus segments. Cut off top and bottom, follow the curve to remove peel and pith, then cut along membranes to release segments. Used in salads and plating.

5. Vegetable Cutting Techniques

Onions

1. Cut in half through the root. 2. Peel. 3. Make horizontal cuts toward the root (do not cut through). 4. Make vertical cuts toward the root. 5. Slice across to create uniform dice. Keep the root intact to hold everything together.

Garlic

Crush with the flat of your knife to remove the skin. Then mince: rock the knife back and forth, scraping into a pile and repeating until fine.

Tomatoes

Use a serrated knife or very sharp chef knife. For concasse: score, blanch, shock, peel, seed, dice.

Bell Peppers

Cut off top and bottom. Stand on end, slice down to remove sides in panels. Lay flat, remove ribs and seeds. Julienne or dice from the panels.

Herbs

Stack leaves, chiffonade for basil. For parsley/cilantro: bunch tightly, rock-chop. Chop once - do not re-chop or they bruise and turn black.

PRO TIP:

Sharp knives bruise vegetables less, preserving flavor, color, and nutrients.

6. Meat and Fish Preparation

Chicken

Breaking down a whole chicken: Remove legs at the joint. Separate thigh from drumstick. Remove wings. Split the breast along the keel bone. 8 pieces from 1 bird.

Fish

Filleting: Use a flexible fillet knife. Cut behind the head at an angle. Follow the backbone with long, smooth strokes. Feel the bones with the blade, do not cut through them.

Beef

Always slice against the grain for tenderness. Identify the direction of muscle fibers and cut perpendicular to them. This is the single most important rule for tender meat.

PRO TIP:

Partially freezing meat (15-20 minutes) makes it much easier to slice thinly and evenly.

7. Knife Safety Rules

The 10 rules every cook must follow:

- A sharp knife is a safe knife. Dull knives require more force and slip more.
- Always use the claw grip on your guide hand.
- Never catch a falling knife. Step back and let it fall.
- Never put knives in a sink full of water.
- Walk with a knife at your side, blade facing behind you.
- Announce when you are walking with a knife (say 'behind' or 'sharp').
- Cut on a stable cutting board. Use a damp towel under the board to prevent sliding.
- Never use a knife on glass, marble, or metal surfaces.
- Hand-wash knives immediately. Never put in the dishwasher.
- Store knives in a block, magnetic strip, or blade guard. Never loose in a drawer.

8. Knife Maintenance

Honing vs. Sharpening

Honing (steel rod): Realigns the edge. Do this every time you cook. Hold steel vertically, draw knife down at 15-20 degrees, alternating sides, 5-10 strokes per side.

Sharpening (whetstone or professional service): Removes metal to create a new edge. Do this every 3-6 months, or when honing no longer restores sharpness.

The Paper Test

Hold a sheet of paper vertically. A sharp knife should slice through it cleanly with light pressure. If it tears or catches, it needs sharpening.

The Tomato Test

A sharp knife should cut through a ripe tomato skin with zero pressure. Just the weight of the knife. If you have to push, sharpen it.

9. Practice Exercises

Week 1: Dice 5 onions per day until you can dice one in under 30 seconds with uniform pieces.

Week 2: Julienne 5 carrots per day. Practice making uniform matchsticks.

Week 3: Mince 10 cloves of garlic per day. Goal: fine, even mince in under 30 seconds.

Week 4: Break down a whole chicken (buy 2-3 per week for practice).

Practice these with the MidRecipes app for guided lessons: midrecipes.com

10. Common Mistakes

- Using the wrong knife for the job (do not use a chef knife to peel; use a paring knife)
- Gripping the handle like a hammer (use the pinch grip)
- Lifting the knife completely off the board (keep the tip down, use a rocking motion)
- Cutting with the tip instead of the belly of the blade
- Not drying vegetables before cutting (wet = slippery = dangerous)
- Using a dull knife (number one cause of kitchen injuries)

Quick Reference Chart

CUT	SIZE	BEST FOR
Rough Chop	3/4 - 1 inch	Stocks, soups
Large Dice	3/4 inch cubes	Stews, roasting
Medium Dice	1/2 inch cubes	Soups, salsas
Small Dice	1/4 inch cubes	Sauces, fillings
Brunoise	1/8 inch cubes	Garnishes, vinaigrettes
Julienne	1/8 x 1/8 x 2 in	Salads, stir-fries
Batonnet	1/4 x 1/4 x 2 in	Fries, crudites
Chiffonade	Thin ribbons	Herb garnishes
Mince	Very fine	Garlic, ginger, herbs

Learn all these cuts interactively at midrecipes.com

Glossary

Brunoise: 1/8 inch dice. Chiffonade: Thin ribbons of leaves. Concasse: Peeled, seeded, diced tomato. Julienne: Matchstick cuts. Mirepoix: 2 parts onion, 1 part carrot, 1 part celery. Supreme: Citrus segments without membrane.