

THE SECRETS OF EASY KNIFE SHARPENING

Introduction

As a follow on to my last email on blunt knives I thought I'd tell you a little about how to keep your knives in good condition, but before I do so there are a couple of things I want to say which are not universally accepted truths.

Knives that need no sharpening?

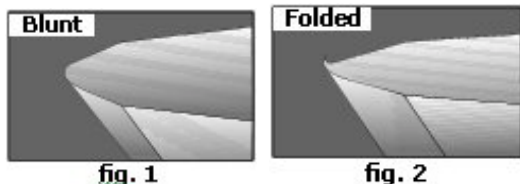
There really is no such thing as a knife that never needs sharpening. If there are some makers out there that claim their knives don't need sharpening, what they really mean is 'not for a long time' and in my experience, all the knives that claim this are made in such a way as to prevent you from sharpening them when the need eventually arises. My recommendation to you is, stay clear of these!

A knife should be sharpened every time you use it?

Yes it's true, but I can only name two people of my acquaintance who actually do that.

For the rest of us, we get by with doing it rather less. And it's because of this 'getting by' that when we come to sharpen our knives they do take quite a bit of sharpening.

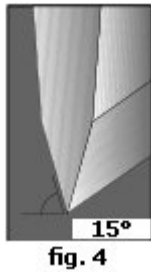
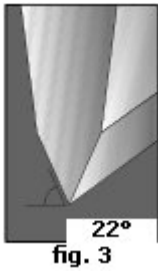
So what does a blunt knife look like?



At a glance, sharp or blunt, it doesn't look very different. However if you look closer along the cutting edge you will see that a blunt knife looks either like the bows of an oil tanker (rather blunt, almost rounded off) figure 1, or if you've been chopping on hard surfaces then it may well have folded the edge over figure 2

So what does a sharp knife look like?

It should look like figure 3 or 4 which is a simple V shape. The reason we've drawn two is because the European knife manufacturers sharpen their blades at 22.5° and the Japanese between 12 - 15° (giving a sharper angle, and with it the potential for finer slicing). The Japanese also do knives that are mainly



sharpened on one side only and these allow for even finer slicing still, but more of these specialist knives another time.

Successful sharpening is bringing back the V shape. The blunter the knife, the longer it will take because more metal will need to be taken off.

How does one know when it is the right time to sharpen a knife?

A bit of a difficult one this! Eventually Babette came up with a pretty good description. When you have just acquired a new knife, or just had it re-honed (by us?), you go home and when you use it you get that "WOW" feeling... However as you use your knife, whether for 1 month, for 1 week, for 1 day, or even for just 1 hour (if you have done some very heavy cutting), at some point, the "WOW feeling" is gone, your knife still cuts very nicely, but no "WOW". Then THIS is the time to sharpen it. At this stage, the V shape will only have started to round up, and the job of getting it back will be minimal.

OK, so how do you do this?

I'll now run through three ways you can sharpen your knives, two ways which require skill and practice, and a third which doesn't.

The Purists: Whetstones and steels

Whetstones: If you know how to use them, these produce the finest, sharpest edge possible. If you don't know what you are doing, then they won't! The other downside, is that you have to soak them for quite a while before use. I use one regularly in the cellar for sharpening tools, but for me, life in the kitchen should be spent with a wine glass in hand, not a whetstone.

Steels: There are Steels and Steels

There are at least three different types of Steel, but all require you to use the correct angle, (either 22.5° or 12 - 15°), and this requires skill. If you are local to one of our shops we would be pleased to show you how to do it, but it still requires a lot of practice to be as good as your butcher.

Which Steel to use?

Conventional Steels: I'm not fond of them principally because they are very slow. This is because a conventional steel removes very very little metal even when new. They tend to be used long after their sell by date, sometimes it's by a year, sometimes by years and sometimes I suspect by several generations. And unless you sharpen your knife every time you use it then the conventional steel is going to be a long hard slog.

Now why is this? Well, the Steel is the tool of the butcher (and a few other dedicated souls) but remember, he starts with a very sharp knife in the first place which he sharpens several times daily!! So his knife requires the merest wipe on a steel to restore its edge. Furthermore, he knows exactly the correct angle to put on the blade and even more important, he's utterly consistent with the angle. Vary this angle and instead of sharpening the knife, you blunt it. Most of us have neither the skill, nor the time for such antics.

Then there are alternatives called 'Steels' because of their shape and look and which require the same skill as a conventional one! But the working surface isn't steel.

Diamond-coated Steels: (an industrial diamond-coated steel rod) are very very fast in putting the edge back on your knife and they're superb. They do wear out quicker than other types of steel and in professional kitchens can last only months, but in the domestic kitchen it varies from a year or two to several years. It depends very much on the frequency and type of use. Like all steels you must be consistent with the angle and generally know what you are doing.

Ceramic Steels the closest thing to sharpening your knife the old fashioned way, on the back door step. These are 80% as effective as the diamond steels, but have a very long life. The downside is that if you drop one on the floor, they can break. Again, you need to know your stuff with this type as well.

The Pragmatist: handheld models

Then we come to the pragmatist of knife sharpeners: the handheld knife sharpener... If you don't like the ritual involved with the two previous methods, then these will appeal to you. They come in a variety of guises, but the important thing with these is the actual sharpening agent itself.



The Minosharp is a personal favourite of mine, and our best selling sharpener. You put a little water in it, and then run the blade through the ceramic wheel to do the job. They're very easy to use and put a very good edge back on a knife. Full instructions are on the box. This one comes highly recommended by everyone who uses it.

The Chef Choice is used dry and arguably doesn't produce quite such a fine edge, but equally needs even less effort (no water to fill!). This one also has a lot for serrated knives, which will give an edge back to many serrated knives (does not work on very finely serrated ones), check with one of us if you're unsure.

Either of these types will suit you if sharpening your knife is purely a means to an end as I must say it tends to be in my household.

And lastly there is the Chantry knife sharpener that has two rotating steels set at just the right angle to do the job. A bit too slow for me, but there are lots of people around who swear by them (though I tend to think that they do so only when they have used inferior sharpeners before, and certainly it does not compare with either of the above for speed).

Other sharpeners, just slow or dangerous to knives?

Those with miniature crossed steels are OK for a short time, but wear out very quickly as all the wear goes on one tiny spot!!

AVOID at all costs the ones that have overlapping metal discs about the size of a one pence piece (these tend to tear the blade and if pushed too hard actually take small chunks out of it). The more you treasure your knives, the more you should avoid them!

Sharpening service in our shops.

Lastly, we do a blade resetting service in both shops. £5 for a knife in OK condition, and a bit more if it's very very neglected. Why do you need such a service with all these wonderful ways of sharpening that I've been extolling? Well, with the exception of the whetstone, all the other types of

sharpeners need a knife in good-ish condition from which to start. So if you think your knife has been neglected too long or, you have a good sharpener but it doesn't seem able to make an impression on a persistently dull blade, then use this service to set yourself up and then your steel or handheld will happily cope with maintaining the edge for a long time. Then depending on use, have the blade reset from time to time.

So to summarise

- If you're an enthusiastic sharpener of knives and skilled in the use of the steel then I'd recommend the diamond coated or ceramic steels (unless you have a new-ish conventional steel AND you sharpen your knife every time you use it).
- Equally, if you enjoy using a water stone and have the skill then this method gets the very best results.
- If you are short on time and / or skill, go for one of the handheld models I recommend.

And as always, if you try one of my recommendations and don't like it, then I will take it back and give you a full refund.

Well, having proof-read this, I have realised what a very long email this is, so if you've got this far, thank you for sticking at it and I hope you will find it useful.

Kind regards
Andrew

PS. You will find all the products I've talked about in either of our two shops or on the website. I've included the link to the relevant page on our website - [Link to Sharpeners](#)

