

The leading edges

Whether you want performance or design, the first thing a good knife has to be is sharp. These days the Japanese are doing it best

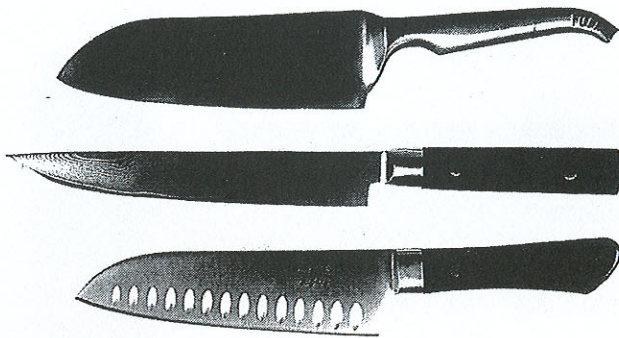
BY CYNTHIA DAVID

When The Cookbook Store in Toronto asked customers recently to list their favourite piece of kitchen equipment, respondents chose a chef's knife "by a landslide."

"People seem to have a real personal attachment to their knives," says owner Alison Fryer, whose Toronto landmark is celebrating its 20th anniversary, "and they all have their preferred brand."

But in the past decade, this essential tool has evolved from dull to cutting edge. Professional knives, once the exclusive domain of chefs, have become the latest fashion accessory for the well-equipped kitchen. And the selection is overwhelming.

Now anyone can own a stunning \$200 Japanese knife handcrafted in a factory that once made Samurai swords. Or choose a \$43 Italian Sanelli with its funky green and red moulded handle like the one wielded on the Food Network by Christine Cushing. Even once-staid German masters Henckels and Wüsthof have sharpened their lines, adding new shapes and elegant stainless steel handles to meet the growing demand for stylish slicers. But the biggest trend in knives



DARRYL JAMES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Eastern philosophy meets Western technology: From top: Furi Pro, \$135; Kasumi, \$184.99; and the Mac, \$150.

has been the marriage of Eastern philosophy and Western technology. "At the trade shows, you see German knifemakers with kimono-clad Japanese in their booths," says Wüsthof national sales manager Derek Marcotte, "while Japanese manufacturers are hiring German forging masters."

The most intriguing result of this East-West pairing is the santoku, a rectangular, snub-nosed Japanese-

style knife with a seven-inch blade that's flying off store shelves.

"Sales of our Oriental cook's knife were up 300 per cent between 2001 and 2002," says Marcotte.

This lightweight, all-purpose knife is ideal for slicing vegetables, fruit, meat and fish paper-thin, a must for sushi.

Marcotte credits the popularity of Pan Pacific food on the West Coast for our interest in Japanese-

inspired knives. "You need the right tools for the job," he says, "and people preparing these dishes need this knife."

Many companies, including Wüsthof, have added a Granton edge to santokus and chef's knives to make food prep even easier. These neat scallops carved into a blade create a cushion of air that allows the knife to glide through food effortlessly without sticking.

Global knives led the Japanese invasion about a decade ago. With their whisper-thin blade and perfect balance, these stainless steel knives were eagerly embraced by North American chefs.

Mac knives, newly arrived in Canada and beloved by American star chefs such as Charlie Trotter, Thomas Keller and Daniel Boulud, aim to cut a similar swath through the Canadian market.

Chef Rob Feenie of Lumière in Vancouver, who discovered Mac knives through Trotter, says he and most of his cooks at Lumière now use the Japanese knives. "I like the feel of something lighter in my hand than the traditional German knives," says Feenie. "I find the Macs solidly built and well balanced with a high quality blade."

When price is no object, consider the breathtaking Kasumi from Seki, Japan, home of Samurai swords.

The blade's wavy pattern is made by repeatedly folding and forging 16 layers of stainless steel on each side. It's then sandblasted and polished. At \$210 for a chef's knife with a black laminated wooden handle, this objet d'art should not be thrown carelessly in a drawer or in the dishwasher.

Other knives vying for shelf space include Australia's hip Furi line. Brisbane engineer and good cook Mark Henry set out in the early 90s to create a superior chef's knife with a truly ergonomic grip. His Furi knives are made from a seamless piece of stainless steel that's easy to clean, and there are no gaps or seams to hide germs. The company's wide East/West knife, another version of the santoku, is currently a huge seller.

With so much choice, how do you choose a good knife? "How comfortable a knife feels in your hand is more important than the brand name or how it looks," says Bryan Steele, a Chef's School instructor and executive chef at the Old Prune in Stratford, Ont. He rarely spends more than \$100 on a knife. "It has to be sharp — a really sharp thin knife will cut paper easily — and you have to be able to keep it sharp."

It's true that no matter how keen a knife promises to be it will need sharpening one day.

On the first day of class, Steel advises his students to buy a \$48 diamond sharpening steel from Le Valley Tools and learn how to use it. "Hold it in one hand and hold the knife at a 10 to 20-degree angle depending on the size and thickness of the blade," he instructs. "Make five or six light strokes with it, nice and slow."

Fortunately, manufacturers are coming to our aid, for a price. Furi's excellent \$125 Diamond Finge sharpener works on most knives while Kasumi has just launched ceramic sharpener.

In the end, choosing a knife is personal decision. You must hold and test its weight and balance your hand. A sharp, comfortable knife makes quick work of any cutting job and is truly a joy to use. At that's the point.