

Knife Sharpeners

Find the One That's Right for You

BY ADAM RIED



When it comes to sharpeners, choices abound. We'll help you sort through the options—from simple stones to high-tech electric machines—to find your best match.

As a cook, I like to think my kitchen ducks are in a row. Recipe reviewed? Check. Ingredients prepped? Always. Work space organized and tidy? Of course. Knives sharp? Um... well... OK, I'll confess: Knife sharpening usually falls by the wayside. But I'm not alone. When I was preparing for this article, I borrowed dozens of knives from fellow cooks, and judging from the condition of those blades, it seems that lots of other cooks are lax about sharpening their knives, too.

That's a pity, because the merits of a sharp knife become apparent the moment you swipe through an onion with one. It's pure pleasure. A sharp knife cuts easily and precisely, requiring little more pressure than the knife's own weight to do the job.

By the end of this project, I was used to working with truly sharp knives. From now on, that's how I'll be keeping mine, and I hope to help you put aside your qualms and make knife sharpening part of your routine, too. Of course, that means you'll need a knife sharpener—the question is, which one?

Different sharpeners for different people

Making sense of every available model (there are scores on the market) and explaining all the technicalities about each one would require volumes. But introducing you to many of the types of sharpeners so you know what your options are—well, that much this article can do. From there, you can ask yourself some questions: How much time are you willing to invest in learning to use the tool? And how much time are you willing to spend sharpening? How much money can you spend? Then you can shop around, talk to experts at cutlery or kitchenwares shops, and ultimately find a specific model you like.

To get the lay of the land, I picked the brains of several experts on the subject of knife sharpeners. And then the *Fine Cooking* staff and I spent some time using 14 sharpeners in five general categories.

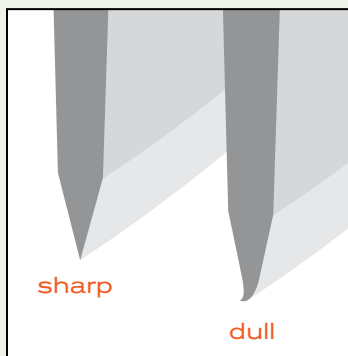
Our lineup included sharpening stones, a variety of manually operated sharpeners in several designs, and electric machines. Some of the devices were costly; others, cheap. Some were surprisingly easy to use; others had a steeper learning curve, requiring dexterity, coordination, or patience. But overall, we were pleasantly surprised to find most of the sharpeners fairly easy to use and effective. By the end of our research, we felt confident that transforming a blade from dull to sharp is much easier than we had imagined.

So rest assured, somewhere among these choices, you'll find a sharpener that's well suited to you. But before you start to explore your options, it's worthwhile to learn a thing or two about knife edges and how sharpeners in general work.

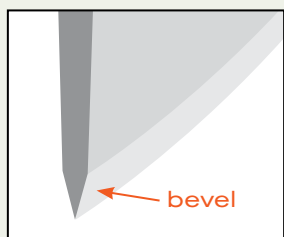
Understanding edges and angles

To form a knife's cutting edge, the metal on one or both sides of the blade is ground at an angle, called a bevel. Some blades have two bevels at slightly different angles; these are called double beveled.

Many popular American and European kitchen knives have roughly 20-degree bevels on both sides of the blade (see illustration at right). Some traditional Asian knives, however, have a different edge design, with a bevel on just one side of the blade, or bevels of a narrower angle, closer to 15 degrees than 20. A knowledgeable retailer should be able to explain the edge geometry of your knife



The blunt truth about dulling. *The cutting edge of a blade is very fine, thin, straight, and therefore, sharp. Contact with hard surfaces, such as bone, or alas, your cutting board, causes that thin edge to roll over, as shown above. This makes a knife feel dull.*



What's a bevel? *The cutting edge of a knife is ground at an angle, or beveled. On most kitchen knives, the angle is about 20 degrees. This is the angle you want to maintain when you're sharpening.*

A steel is not a sharpener

Knife experts may debate the technicalities of sharpening, but there's accord on one point: Regular maintenance of the edge can slow down, though not prevent, dulling. The tool that professionals and home cooks alike use to maintain the edges of their knives is often called, in a confusing misnomer, a "sharpening steel." But a sharpening steel doesn't technically sharpen; rather, it hones, straightening microscopic serrations along the cutting edge of the blade. True sharpening removes metal from the blade to re-create that fine, thin edge. Most steels won't remove much, if any, metal.

The surface of a steel may be smooth, finely grooved, or covered with super-fine diamond abrasive, but regardless of the finish, steels are meant to do one thing—hone. A steel can also help straighten microscopic curls in the cutting edge, provided they are not too severe. If you have a good sharp knife, steeling it once or twice a week will extend the length of time it stays sharp, but if your knife is already dull, don't expect a steel to sharpen it.



Find a video demonstration of using a steel at finecooking.com

and how to tailor the sharpening process to accommodate it.

How a sharpener restores an edge

Knife sharpeners work by stripping away metal to form new bevels, ideally at an angle that closely matches the original. But you don't need to obsess over getting the angle exactly right. For most kitchen knives, consistency trumps precision, says David Marks, a professional knife sharpener and owner of Stoddard's, a Boston cutlery store and sharpening service: "As long as you keep the same angle throughout the process, it doesn't matter if you're off by a couple of degrees from the original angle." Since consistency is key, many knife sharpeners incorporate some means of setting the angle for you.

To renew a dull edge, sharpeners use abrasives. By running the knife against the abrasive, you can strip away metal and restore the edge. Different sharpeners use different abrasives: diamond, ceramic, tungsten carbide, natural stone, and manufactured stone, to name a few. These abrasives can range from coarse to fine: 220 grit, for example, is coarse, while 1,000 grit is fine. (The higher the grit number, the finer the abrasive.) Coarse abrasives efficiently strip away metal but rough up the cutting edge. To smooth the edge, many sharpeners also include a fine abrasive.

Let's take a look at your options

Our observations about the types of sharpeners on the following pages are based heavily on our experience using them. Why? Because if a sharpener is a pain to use, then it's going to stay in the drawer where it will be of minimal benefit to our knives. We tried the sharpeners with a variety of knives—all stainless steel—including paring, slicing, boning, utility, and chef's knives of various lengths; most were tragically dull when we started. We didn't try serrated, ceramic, or other specialty knives.

For sources for the sharpeners shown here, see *Where to Buy It*, p. 78.

Is it sharp?

If your knife effortlessly glides into a tomato with no pressure or pushing, you know it's sharp.

How often should you hone and sharpen?

Many professional chefs hone or "steel" their knives before every cooking session. In an ideal world, you would do the same. In reality, though, steeling daily or even weekly can help. So hone whenever it crosses your mind—even the casual use of a steel will extend the life of an edge.

Actually sharpening the knife is another story. How often to sharpen depends on how you care for and use your knives. If you cook a lot, steel less often than you should, and really enjoy a sharp knife, you will probably need to sharpen two or three times a year. You'll know it's time to sharpen when honing doesn't restore the edge as it once did. Keep in mind that while you can hone as often as you'd like, you shouldn't sharpen too often. Eventually, sharpening begins to wear away the blade. As you remove metal, you move up the blade toward the spine, and the blade becomes thicker, making it more difficult to get a good edge.

Option #1

Sharpening stones

The stone is arguably the oldest, most venerated sharpening tool. There's a variety to choose among: natural, manufactured, ceramic, and diamond (see sidebar, opposite). And stones come in different grits (often in kits with two or three grits, or as a single reversible stone with different grits on each side); you generally have to use at least two, coarse and then fine, to sharpen properly. Prices depend on size, material, and number of grits in the kit and range from \$5 to more than \$100.

We tried large (8-inch) and small (5-inch) stones, including a ceramic stone used with water, and two diamond stones, one used with water and the other used dry. And we followed the manufacturer's directions for the recommended motion (pushing, pulling, circular stroke, start from the tip, start from the heel). Generally, the directions were easy to follow.

What the experts say David Marks, the expert knife sharpener at Stoddard's, applauds anyone who wants to learn to use a stone. "There's something nice about the ritual," he says, "and you can really customize your edge." Marks also points out that nothing you do with a stone is irreversible. If you're worried that you've done something wrong, just get some help and try again to correct any minor mistakes you may have made.

Chef Deepak Kaul, at the restaurant *Rendezvous* in Central Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, says that sharpening on a stone reinforces the "intimate connection" between him and his knives.

Our experience A stone requires patience, concentration, and time. At first, we found stones challenging, but with practice we started getting good results. The hardest part is judging and maintaining the angle. (We worked without angle guides, but some stones come with them, or you can purchase guides separately.) Some of our testers also found it difficult to switch the blade from side to side and to sharpen evenly along the length of the blade. Most of us found larger stones easier to use than smaller ones.



That said, if you stick with the process, you may eventually find yourself in the “stone zone”—when the motion feels natural and your hands almost effortlessly set the blade at an acceptable angle.

Pros You can get precise control over the sharpening angle; appeals to the artisan in us; shape and size allow for easy storage.

Cons Requires practice to do well; initially challenging to set and maintain angle (though you can buy angle guides); time consuming; water and especially oil stones can be messy.

Is it right for you?

If you're hurried or harried, this probably isn't the choice for you. But if you're a knife enthusiast or have a bit of the artisan in your soul, using a stone can be a satisfying tactile and mental experience.

Stone materials

There are numerous specific types of sharpening stones, but most fall under two broad categories: natural or manufactured. **Natural stones** are usually quarried and can be quite expensive. **Manufactured stones** are constructed from a variety of materials. Some common options are India stones, ceramic stones, and diamond stones.

Whether natural or manufactured, all stones come in various grades, densities, and grits, and they therefore remove metal at different rates. A knowledgeable retailer can help you choose one that's right for you.

Wet or dry?

Sharpening stones can be used wet or dry. When you sharpen a knife, it sheds particles of metal. The advantage of wetting a stone with oil or water during use is that the lubricant will remove the particles, which otherwise might clog the stone's surface and reduce its effectiveness and longevity. The disadvantage is that it's messier than using the stone dry.

[Find](#) a video demonstration of using a sharpening stone at finecooking.com

Option #2

Pull-over sharpeners

These inexpensive, basic sharpeners have a tungsten-carbide abrasive set into a plastic handgrip. To use, hold the knife steady on a work surface with the blade facing up and, holding the sharpener in your other hand, run it along the length of the blade. Easy.

What the experts say These are easy to use, but Bob Kufahl, of Lansky Sharpeners, says tungsten carbide is an aggressive abrasive that can leave the cutting edge more “ragged” than he likes; to smooth the edge, he recommends following up with a fine-grit sharpener.

Our experience We looked at several models with very similar designs and tried the \$9 unit shown below. It got the job done, but some of us worried that we might slip and cut ourselves on the upward-facing blade. That said, no one got hurt, so perhaps we worried needlessly.

Pros The sharpening angle is set so you don't have to worry about it when you sharpen; very quick; very simple; very cheap; pretty effective.

Cons Feels dangerous to some; doesn't create a polished edge.

Is it right for you?

If you're looking for a super-simple, super-quick sharpening option, and you don't mind the finish being a bit rough, this could be the ticket. You can't beat the price.



Option #3

Pull-through sharpeners

Most sharpeners in this category have guides to set the sharpening angle. To use them, you hold the sharpener steady on a work surface while you draw the blade through the slots.

Some are single-stage sharpeners, with one kind of abrasive; others have multiple stages so you can aggressively sharpen and then refine the edge. The types of abrasives vary widely, as do the prices, from about \$10 to \$90. We tried five models, priced in the low to middle range.

What the experts say In terms of design, these sharpeners vary wildly, so most experts were reluctant to discuss them as a general category. One knife retailer did mention, however, that he finds these devices better suited to maintaining a reasonably sharp edge than to restoring a very dull one, since they are generally less aggressive than an electric sharpener and don't let you adjust the angle the way a stone does.

Our experience “Is that all there is to it?” was the common sentiment; however, many testers did say that they needed to concentrate on the pressure and position of the blade in the angle guides. With some exceptions, testers were more impressed with the ease of use than with the results.

Pros Fast and easy to use; small and easy to store; some models include a fine-grit stage to “finish” the edge, which can also be used for edge maintenance in place of a steel.

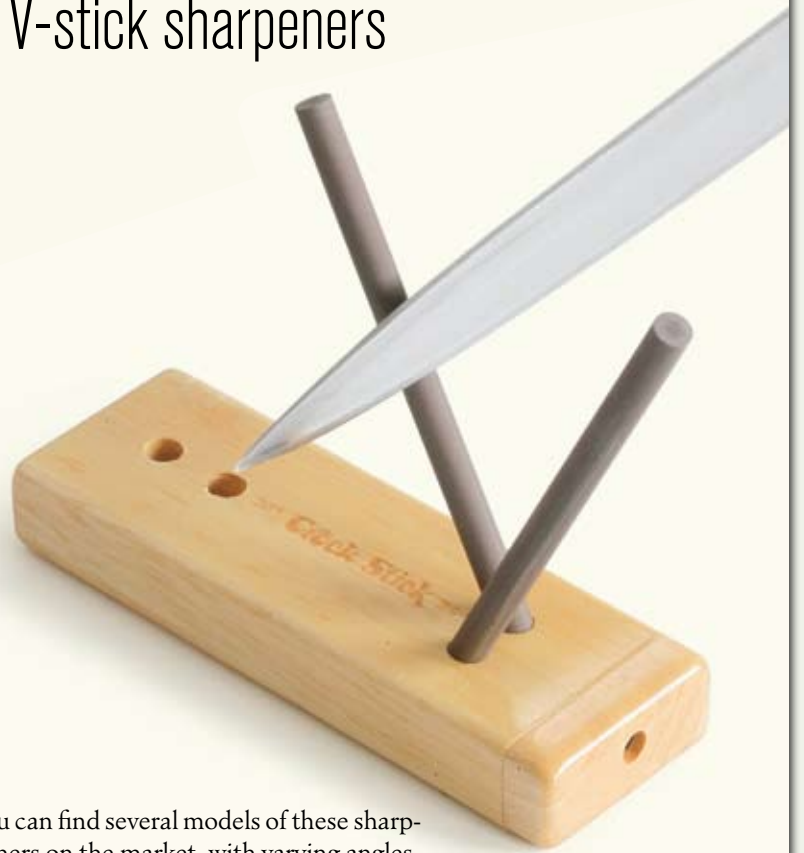
Cons Some testers found the blades' motion through the slots to be rough and unpleasant; effectiveness varied widely among models.

Is it right for you?

If you want a quick sharpening solution or maintenance device, consider a pull-through sharpener. Design and effectiveness vary widely, so consult a trusted retailer for advice.

Option #4

V-stick sharpeners



You can find several models of these sharpeners on the market, with varying angles, number of sticks, abrasives, and prices (from about \$10 to \$50). To use, set the sticks into the base at the desired angles, hold the blade perpendicular to the work surface, and draw the blade down the length of the stick while pulling from the heel to the tip. Alternate sticks to cover both sides of the blade. We tried a \$12 version with ceramic rods (above), as well as a \$30 version with diamond-coated rods (shown on p. 64).

What the experts say Howard Korn, cutlery expert and owner of KnifeCenter.com, likes these systems because they're compact, simple to use, and the clever design lets you vary the sharpening angle.

Our experience We were impressed by how effectively these sharpened. And one tester was very enthusiastic, exclaiming, "I would use this all the time." Some testers noted that it took concentration to control the knife movement.

Pros Compact and easy to store; low tech; very effective; design helps you set your knife at the correct angle yet leaves you in control.

Cons Requires concentration to maintain correct knife position through the entire stroke.

Is it right for you?

If you'd like to get involved in the sharpening process but don't want to devote the time that stones require, here's your sharpener. As one user put it, "There's a Zen quality to the motion and the sound. I like that."

Option #5

Electric sharpeners

Electric sharpeners are similar to some pull-throughs—you pull the knife through several stages of abrasives, ranging from coarse to fine—but they add a motor to the equation for more aggressive metal removal. The angle is set for you, and in each stage there are two slots, one for sharpening each side of the cutting edge. The abrasives are generally diamond or ceramic. Prices range from about \$40 to \$400. We worked with a mid-priced, three-stage model with diamond abrasives that cost about \$130.

What the experts say Electric sharpeners have their fans and their detractors. Everyone we consulted said that the machines are simple to use and effective—KnifeCenter.com's Howard Korn describes them as “easy and straightforward”—yet nearly every expert shared a couple of concerns:

- The coarser stages can be aggressive, so you run the risk of wearing down your knives prematurely if you overuse the coarse stage, apply too much pressure, or use too many strokes. The machines can be fine when used carefully, but their high-speed motors can remove a lot of steel. So be careful with timing as you draw the knife through the slot to make sure all areas of the blade get even contact.
- The machines can present a problem for knives with bolsters (the wider portion of the blade just before the handle) that are too thick to fit through the slots. After repeated use, a notch can develop near the heel of the blade, where grinding stops because the bolster won't fit.

Our experience Our testers' reactions ran the gamut from “fantastic!” to “easy to use, but the grinding sound really freaks me out.” Everyone agreed that the machine noticeably improved even the duller blades. Because the machine seemed so self-explanatory, some testers dove right in without consulting the directions, and therefore timed their strokes incorrectly or used the most aggressive stage needlessly; both can cause the edge to wear down unevenly over time.



Is it right for you?

If you want very sharp knives at all times and don't want to work too hard at getting them that way, an electric sharpener is your tool, indisputably quicker and easier than stones and many manual systems, and more convenient than sending knives off to a professional sharpening service. If you choose an electric sharpener, don't just dive in—invest time up front and learn how to use the machine properly.

Pros Fast; clean; very simple; effective when used carefully; removes all the angle guesswork by setting and maintaining it for you; let's you hone blades (by using the fine-grit stage) or truly sharpen them (by using the coarse stage).

Cons Loud, high-pitched grinding noise during use; could be too aggressive if used without reading the directions; with extended use, might damage knives with thick bolsters; expensive.

Option #6

Professional sharpening services

Consult the yellow pages or the Internet to find a professional sharpening service in your area. You might also inquire at cookware and cutlery shops or at good hardware stores. Or if you're willing to pack up your knives, you can send them off to be sharpened. Many professional services charge about \$1 per inch of blade, while others may have set prices, such as \$3 for paring knives, or \$8 for 8- to 10-inch chef's knives; serrated blades or very badly damaged knives may cost extra.

What the experts say Before you entrust a sharpener with your knives, ask questions and start developing a relationship. Look for a reputable, experienced knife sharpener who will inform you about his equipment and methods (see "Finding a pro," at right).

Our experience What's not to love? Once you know and trust your sharpener, simply drop off a dull knife, wait a couple of days, and pick up a sharp one. The most exertion you'll experience is pulling out your wallet.

Pros As easy and fully hands-off a sharpening method as you can come by; minimizes the chances of premature blade wear if done properly.

Cons You have to spend a couple of days without your knives while they are out being sharpened; can be costly over time.

Is it right for you?

If you're a hands-off type who would rather call a professional than attempt a project yourself, wrap up those knives and send them out.

Knife care 101

When it comes to knife use, care, and storage, a modicum of TLC can help prevent damage and preserve sharpness.

1 Avoid outright abuse such as hacking through bones or frozen foods.

2 Choose a relatively soft cutting board, like wood—preferably end-grain butcher block—or polyethylene plastic.

3 Store knives on a magnetic strip or in a block. Avoid knocking the cutting edge against other surfaces.

4 Use a bench scraper, not your knife, to scoop up chopped foods from the cutting board.

5 Wash knives by hand.

Finding a pro

It's not a good idea to turn over your knives to just anyone who offers sharpening services. Ask around for recommendations: your friends, a cook at your favorite restaurant, or a local cutlery retailer. Or post an inquiry for "reputable knife sharpener" on your favorite cooking-related blog, Web site, or e-group.

When you find a likely candidate, ask a few questions:

1) Do they use stones or machines to sharpen? The use of a stone suggests the person might be a real knife enthusiast.

2) If they use a machine, is it fully automated, or does it require a human attendant? The latter may be preferable, because knives can easily be oversharpened on a sharpening wheel.

3) Do they sharpen all knives the same way, or can they adjust their methods for different blades?

4) Can they duplicate the factory edge? Sharpen serrated or specialty knives? Correct damaged blades without removing too much metal?

5) Will they show you a knife they have sharpened? If so, take a careful look. Does the edge appear to be evenly sharp from the heel to the tip? For knives with bolsters, the cutting edge and the bottom edge of the bolster should be flush. There should be no evidence of a notch near the bolster.

Last, take a look around. You'll be better off at a store that sells quality cutlery than at a place that sharpens lawnmower blades.

Adam Ried is a freelance food writer with 10 years of equipment-testing experience under his belt and the proud owner of a collection of newly sharp knives (which he intends to keep that way). ♦