

The sharp knife

I APPROACHED this subject with trepidation, because I sensed there might be legions of expert sharpeners out there ready to pour scorn on my humbly offered thoughts, and those who sell knives and sharpeners might also feel aggrieved. In any case, I can say that my filleting knives will slice pages off this magazine without missing a beat. Can yours? I have also sharpened an allegedly impossible-to-sharpen knife for the managing director of New Zealand Fishing Coast to Coast. She was most impressed.

(MD:- What can I say – I acknowledge the master knife sharpener!

I was about to biff the 'custom-made', totally useless knife that would not sharpen though 'experts' had tried. I sniggered and made derogatory comments about the knife as I couriered it off to Mark. I was stunned when it was returned a super sharp, lethal weapon)

My interest in sharpening knives started back in 1973. It was the Christmas break from university and I was heading into my final year of vet school at Massey. I was required to complete two weeks of practical work with the meat inspection service which I did at the now closed Tomoana freezing works in Hastings.

At Tomoana, knives were sharpened on large rotating water stones that looked like they dated back to the 1920s. They probably did. Columns in the building showed cracks from the 1931 Napier earthquake.

The meat inspectors carried steels that had been sanded so that they were absolutely smooth. I'd never seen such steels. It was explained to me that water stones were used to create an edge on a knife and the steel was only to straighten it. This straightening was achieved with gentle strokes of the knife down the smooth surface of the steel—only one stroke with each side of the knife.

The steel we had at home (and in every other home I knew of at the time) was a coarse file by comparison. And no gentle stroking either. Whack, whack, whack was how kitchen knives were dealt to in those days and I'm sure it's still the same in many households.

I needed a knife at Tomoana and took one from home. It was stainless steel. No amount of sharpening on the water stones would produce a good edge on this knife. The meat inspectors had carbon steel knives and told me that stainless wasn't good enough for their type of work.

Steel technology has moved on since the early 1970s. The new high-carbon, stain-free steels contain various amounts of carbon,

chromium, vanadium and molybdenum. They are stain resistant rather than completely stain free. They can be sharpened and will hold an edge; however, they are still quite difficult to sharpen.

In recent years I have tried to sharpen knives with pull-through gadgets and oil stones. The last pull-through I owned gave my cheap knives a wavy and not very sharp edge and left metal filings on the bench. Then it lost its own cutting ability. They don't last for ever, apparently. I have also paid people to sharpen my knives, but they did not produce a good result either.

I decided on an Internet search. Enter 'knife sharpening' into Google and it will list over one million sites. I narrowed my search and learned that one of the better sharpening machines was made by Edge Pro in Oregon, USA. The price of their home-use Apex machine with all the options including instructional DVD was US\$190 + freight. That gave me pause for thought. How important were sharp knives in my life?

Some hunters and anglers indulge themselves with custom-made knives forged from quality hard steel. The downside of such hardness is that they are difficult to sharpen and therefore often blunt. Following some dodgy and

expedient rationalisation, I decided I should invest my dollars on the sharpening aspect and deprive myself of custom-made knives. I'd only leave one of those on a beach anyway. My new toy, the Edge Pro Apex, duly arrived and the charge on my VISA was NZ\$366. The machines are claimed to last for a very long time. Another compelling reason to buy.

The essential feature of the Edge Pro machines is that they remove metal from the knife on a constant angle. The device is fitted with aluminium oxide water stones ranging from coarse to ultra fine. A coarse stone removes metal quickly and is suitable for cutting a new bevel on badly shaped knife. The finer stones polish and sharpen the edge.

The Edge Pro Apex certainly produces a very sharp and durable edge in my hands. What also impresses me is the support provided by the owner of the business. If I e-mail a query to Ben Dale in Oregon, a detailed response comes back within 24 hours. Knife sharpening isn't just a business for Ben, it's his calling.

Why water stones? Water stones cut faster than oilstones although, because they are softer they wear more quickly. This wearing is, however, a necessary dynamic. Water stones are less inclined to gum up with debris and can be straightened easily. Straightening in this context means keeping the stone flat, so it will cut a knife edge evenly.



The Edge Pro instructions explain how to do this with sand and a piece of flat concrete. I found the procedure quite easy. I was reassured to learn, after another Internet search, that Japanese cooking knives, sushi knives and Samurai swords have traditionally been sharpened with water stones. They still are. The Japanese hand sharpen with three grades of water stone: rough grain (arato) and medium grain (nakato) to shape the bevel, and super fine (shiage to) to produce the final edge. As you can imagine, proficiency with these stones does not come easily. By contrast, the Edge Pro system does not require a high level of skill. Any reasonably dexterous person can produce a good result.

Why not a diamond stone? Some sharpening machines are made with diamond stones, and these produce a quick result. However, the result will be a ragged edge that will cut aggressively at first and soon dull. Because diamond stones remove a lot of metal, and because they require you to sharpen more often, your knives will not last so

well. There is another problem. Steel, especially softer steel, will pull the diamonds from the surface of the stone. Its sharpening ability will be progressively and sometimes rapidly reduced. So all sharpening stones have a finite life, but you can see the wear as it occurs on a water stone. You can straighten the stone and be sure it will perform consistently until it finally disappears. By contrast, the continuing usefulness of a diamond stone is difficult to gauge. I've already indicated that the conventional steels gracing many a New Zealand kitchen have limited usefulness. One with a coarse pattern will remove metal and create an edge, but that edge will be ragged, uneven, not particularly sharp and won't last very long. If you are serious about knife sharpening, drop your rough steel in the rubbish bin. A ceramic hone does have a role, but it's important to know what that is. It cannot remove sufficient metal to cut the primary bevel, nor is it a replacement for the rough steel that went out with the rubbish. Edge Pro supply a 1200 grit ceramic hone. The finest water stone on the machine is a 600 grit, although finer mounted tapes can be purchased if desired. A 600 grit stone will polish and refine the edge on a filleting or kitchen knife very well, but the ceramic hone will take it to the next level. More importantly, it can restore it to that level several times over.

An 18° bevel is about right for a filleting knife. If that is what you have cut, you can lightly stroke it on a ceramic hone at an angle slightly above 18°. One stroke either side of the bevel will suffice. The ceramic hone used this way will remove a minute amount of metal on the very edge, including any bent or broken pieces. It creates a micro bevel and any remaining burr left by the water stone is removed. The resulting edge will be sharper and stronger. According to Ben Dale, a ceramic hone can restore an edge this way up to fifteen times.

You will be wondering by now what you can do to sharpen a knife properly, short of importing your own Edge Pro from the USA. If there is a cheap and simple alternative that's just as good, I don't know of it. I would tell you if I did. And assuming such a thing existed, kitchens throughout the land would be equipped with wonderfully sharp knives, and we all know that is not the case. There is a perception that if a knife costs less than one hundred dollars, as most do, sharpening the thing should cost ten dollars at most and preferably nothing at all, and the edge so produced should survive several months of hacking up chickens and cutting pizzas on crockery plates. If you want a sharp knife at all times, you (or is it your partner?) might have to move beyond that mindset.



PHOTO ABOVE: These are inexpensive knives made from stamped steel. All cost less than fifty dollars and do the job. I recommend that any saltwater angler considers a small boning knife as shown. I rarely scale or gut fish—they get buried whole in ice for a club weigh-in—so I want a knife that is easy to control as I make the cuts around the fillet. The blade of this knife is still long enough to separate the fillet from the body of a kahawai, gumard or shoalie snapper. It's also a brilliant knife to dissect a smoothhound and remove its spinal cord. The longer knives are better for skinning, and because they are sharp, they will also carve the Sunday roast.



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