

# Basic Knife Skills

- Discover the correct ways to hold and guide a knife.
- Precision Cuts: Learn the basic and advanced cuts used every day in the professional kitchen.

## BASIC KNIFE SKILLS

*'It is indeed a poor workman who blames his tools'*

Knife skills include basic and advanced cuts that are used every day to prepare vegetables and other ingredients. A thorough mastery of knife skills includes the ability to prepare ingredients properly for cutting, to use a variety of cutting tools, and to make cuts that are uniform and precise.

Another important factor is the ability to select the right tool for the job, and to keep that tool in proper working condition. A steel should be on hand whenever you are cutting any food to periodically hone the knife's blade as you work.

## HOLDING THE KNIFE

It is important to be comfortable with your knife as you work. There are several different ways a knife can be held. The way you hold the knife will be determined in part by the way your knife and your hand fit one another.

The grip you choose will also be determined according to the task at hand. Delicate cutting or shaping techniques will call for greater control, involving fingertips more than the fist.

Coarser chopping and cutting tasks require a firmer grip and more leverage. The four basic grips used with a chef's knife are as follows:



Grip the handle with all four fingers and hold the thumb gently but firmly against the blade's spine.



Grip the handle with all four fingers and hold the thumb gently but firmly against the side of the blade.



Grip the handle with three fingers, rest the index finger flat against the blade on one side, and hold the thumb on the opposite side to give additional stability and control.



Grip the handle overhand, with the knife held vertically – this grip is used with a boning knife for meat fabrication tasks

## THE GUIDING HAND

Your grip on the knife is determined as much by your personal preference and comfort as it is by the cutting tasks at hand. The same is true for your guiding hand, the hand responsible for controlling the food you are cutting.

The guiding hand, the hand not holding the knife, is used to hold the object being cut. This is done to prevent food from slipping as you cut it. It also makes it easier to control the size of the cut or slice you are making.



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**

One of the classic positions for the guiding hand is illustrated in Figure 1. The fingertips are tucked under slightly and hold the object, with the thumb held back from the fingertips. The knife blade then rests against the knuckles, preventing the fingers from being cut.

When you peel or trim foods, cut them into tournées, or flute them, you may find yourself holding the food in the air, above the cutting surface. In that case, the guiding hand holds and turns the food against the blade to make the work more efficient as illustrated in Figure 2. Be sure that the food, your hands, and your knife handle are very dry.

Certain cutting techniques, such as butter flying meats or slicing a bagel in half, call for the guiding hand to be placed on top of the food to keep it from slipping, while the cut is made into the food parallel or at an angle to the work surface. Holding your hand flat on the upper surface of the food with a little pressure makes these cuts safe to perform. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

The guiding hand is also used to hold a carving or kitchen fork when disjointing or carving cooked meats and poultry in front of customers. The tines of the fork can be laid flat on the surface of the food or inserted directly into the item to hold it in place as it is carved.

## **PRECISION CUTS**

The basic and advanced cuts used in the professional kitchen include chopping and mincing, shredding (chiffonade), julienne and bâtonnet, dice, paysanne or fermière, lozenge, rondelle, oblique or roll cuts and tourné.

The aim should always be to cut the food into pieces of uniform shape and size. Evenly cut items look more attractive, but more important, they cook evenly so your dishes have the best possible flavour, colour, and texture. Unevenly cut items give an impression of carelessness that can spoil the dish's look.



The flavour, texture, and appearance of the dish suffer if its components are unevenly cut. Most foods require some preliminary trimming, peeling, or squaring off to make subsequent cuts easier to perform.

Trimming tasks include removing root and stem ends from fruits, herbs, and vegetables. Peeling tasks can be done using a rotary peeler if the skin is not too thick; carrot, potato, and similar skins are easy to remove with a peeler. Remember that these peelers work in both directions.

Pairing knives can also be used to trim many fruits and vegetables.

A chef's knife is required for vegetables, fruits and other foods with thick rinds or skins, such as hard-skinned squashes and pineapples.

Exterior fat, gristle, and sinew can be removed from meats and poultry with a boning knife. Foods that are naturally round can be difficult to control as you cut them. A slice can be removed from the bottom or side of a round food to make it sit flat on the cutting board.

## **BASIC & ADVANCED KNIFE CUTS**

It is very important that the chef be completely familiar with these cuts and able to execute them properly.

### **CHOP**

Coarse chopping is generally used for mirepoix or similar flavouring ingredients that are to be strained out of the dish and discarded. It is also appropriate when cutting vegetables that will be puréed.

Trim the root and stem ends and peel the vegetables if necessary. Slice or cut through the vegetables at nearly regular intervals until the cuts are relatively uniform. This need not be a perfectly neat cut, but all the pieces should be roughly the same size.

### **MINCING**

Mincing is a very fine cut that is suitable for many vegetables and herbs. When mincing herbs, rinse and dry well, and strip the leaves from the stems.

Gather the leaves in a pile on a cutting board. Use your guiding hand to hold them in place and position the knife so that it can slice through the pile; coarsely chop.

Once the herbs are coarsely chopped, use the fingertips of your guiding hand to hold the tip of the chef's knife in contact with the cutting board. Keeping the tip of the blade against the cutting board, lower the knife firmly and rapidly, repeatedly cutting through the herbs. Continue cutting until the desired fineness is attained.



### **CHIFFONADE**

The chiffonade cut is done by hand to cut herbs, leafy greens, and other ingredients into very fine shreds. Chiffonade is distinct from shredding, however, in that the cuts are much finer and uniform. This cut is typically used for delicate leafy vegetables and herbs.

For greens with large, loose leaves, roll individual leaves into tight cylinders before cutting. Stack several smaller leaves before cutting. Use a chef's knife to make very fine, parallel cuts to produce fine shreds.

### **SHREDDING OR GRATING**

Shredded or grated items can be coarse or fine, depending upon the intended use. Foods can be shredded with a chef's knife, a slicer, shredding tools and attachments, a mandolin or box grater.

When cutting tight heads of greens, such as Belgian endive and head cabbage, cut the head into halves, quarters, or smaller wedges and remove the core before cutting shreds with a chef's knife.

The tip of the knife either remains in contact with the board as you cut or comes in contact with the board as you make a smooth downward slicing stroke. The blade's edge rocks onto and off of the cutting surface with each stroke. To shred or grate larger quantities, use a box grater or a food processor fitted with grating disks. An electric slicer can be used to shred cabbages and head lettuce.

### **JULIENNE & BÂTONNET**

Julienne and bâtonnet are long, rectangular cuts. Related cuts are the standard pommes frites and pommes pont neuf cuts (both are names for French fries) and the allumette (or matchstick) cut. The difference between these cuts is the final size.

Julienne cuts are 1/8 inch in thickness and 1-2 inches long. Bâtonnet cuts are ¼ inch in thickness and 2-2 ½ inches long.

These dimensions may be modified slightly to suit a specific need. The key point to keep in mind is that each cut should be nearly identical in dimension to all others for even cooking and the best appearance. Trim and square off the vegetable by cutting a slice to make four straight sides. Cut both ends to even the block off. These initial slices make it easier to produce even cuts.

The trimmings can be used for stocks, soups, purées, or any preparation where shape is not important. Slice the vegetable lengthwise, using parallel cuts of the desired thickness. Stack the slices, aligning the edges, and make parallel cuts of the same thickness through the stack.



## DICE CUTS

Dicing is a cutting technique that produces a cube-shaped product. Different preparations require different sizes of dice - fine (*brunoise*), small, medium, and large dice.

The term *brunoise* is derived from the French verb, *brunoir* (to brown), and reflects the common practice of sautéing these finely diced vegetables. Trim and peel the vegetables as needed.

Cut the slices to the thickness that you wish the finished dice to be. Stack the slices on top of one another and make even parallel cuts to the appropriate thickness. Gather the sticks together; using your guiding hand to hold them in place, and make crosswise parallel cuts through the sticks. To produce perfectly even, neat dice, these cuts should be the same thickness as the initial slices.

## PAYSANNE & FERMIÈRE CUTS

Cuts produced in the paysanne (peasant) and fermière (farmer) style is generally used in dishes intended to have a rustic or home-style appeal. When used for traditional regional specialties, they may be cut in such a way that the shape of the vegetable's curved or uneven edges are still apparent in the finished cut. However, it is important to cut them all to the same thickness so that they will cook evenly.

For a more rustic presentation, cut the vegetable into halves, quarters, or eighths, depending on its size. The pieces should be roughly similar in dimension to a batonnet. Make even, thin crosswise cuts at roughly 1/8-in/4-mm intervals.

In order to feature paysanne or fermière cuts as an ingredient in a classical dish or for a more upscale setting, square off the vegetable first and make large batonnet, 3/4 in/20 mm thick. Cut the batonnet crosswise at 1/8-in/4-mm intervals.

## DIAMOND/LOZENGE CUTS

The diamond, or lozenge, cut is similar to the paysanne and is most often used to prepare a vegetable garnish. Instead of cutting batonnet, thinly slice the vegetable, and then cut into strips of the appropriate width.

Trim and thinly slice the vegetable. Cut the slices into strips of the desired width. Make an initial bias cut to begin. This will leave some trim (reserve the trim for use in preparations that do not require a neat, decorative cut). Continue to make bias cuts, parallel to the first one.



### RONDELLES

Rounds, or rondelles, are simple to cut. The shape is the result of cutting a cylindrical vegetable, such as a carrot, crosswise. The basic round shape can be varied by cutting the vegetable on the bias to produce an elongated or oval disk or by slicing it in half for half-moons.

If the vegetable is scored with a channel knife, flower shapes are produced. Trim and peel the vegetable if necessary. Make parallel slicing cuts through the vegetable at even intervals using a chef's knife, slicer, utility knife, electric slicer, or mandoline.

### DIAGONAL AND BIAS CUTS

This cut is often used to prepare vegetables for stir-fries and other Asian-style dishes because it exposes a greater surface area and shortens cooking time. Place the peeled or trimmed vegetable on the work surface.

Hold the blade so that it is cutting through the food on an angle; the wider the angle, the more elongated the cut surface will be. Continue making parallel cuts, adjusting the angle of the blade so that all the pieces are approximately the same size.

### OBLIQUE OR ROLL CUTS

Oblique, as it refers to a vegetable cut, reflects the fact that the cut sides are neither parallel nor perpendicular. The effect is achieved by rolling the vegetables after each cut. This cut is used for long, cylindrical vegetables such as parsnips, carrots, and celery.

Place the peeled or trimmed vegetable on the work surface. Make a diagonal cut to remove the stem end. Hold the knife in the same position and roll the vegetable a quarter-turn (approximately 90 degrees)

Slice through it on the same diagonal, forming a piece with two angled edges. Repeat until the entire vegetable has been cut.

## TOURNÉ

Turning vegetables (*tourner* in French) requires a series of cuts that simultaneously trim and shape the vegetable. The shape may be similar to a barrel or a football. This cut is one of the most demanding, time-consuming, and exacting cuts. Peel the vegetable, if desired or necessary. If the trimmings can be used with the peel still intact, or if there is no appropriate use for the trimmings, you do not need to peel the vegetable.

Cut the vegetable into pieces of manageable size. Hold the vegetable in your guiding hand. Using a paring knife or tourné knife, carve the pieces into barrel or football shapes. To produce classic tournés, you should cut the vegetable so that it has seven even sides.

The faces should be smooth, evenly spaced, and tapered so that both ends are narrower than the centre.

### Images of the various cuts we have described:



#### **FINE JULIENNE**

1/16 x 1/16 x 1 to 2 inches  
(2 x 2 x 25 to 50 millimeters)



#### **JULIENNE / ALLUMETTE**

1/8 x 1/8 x 1 to 2 inches  
(4 x 4 x 25 to 50 millimeters)



**BATONNET**

1/4 x 1/4 x 2 to 2 1/2 inches  
(6 x 6 x 50 to 60 millimeters)



**BRUNOISE**

1/8 x 1/8 x 1/8 inch  
(4 x 4 x 4 millimeters)



**SMALL DICE**

1/4 x 1/4 x 1/4 inch  
(6 x 6 x 6 millimeters)



**MEDIUM DICE**

1/2 x 1/2 x 1/2 inch  
(12 x 12 x 12 millimeters)



**LARGE DICE**

3/4 x 3/4 x 3/4 inch  
(20 x 20 x 20 millimeters)



**PAYSANNE**

1/2 x 1/2 x 1/8 inch  
(12 x 12 x 4 millimeters)



**FERMIÈRE**

Cut to desired thickness, 1/8 to 1/2 inch  
(4 to 12 millimeters)



**LOZENGE**

Diamond shape, 1/2 x 1/2 x 1/8 inch  
(12 x 12 x 4 millimeters)



**RONDELLE**

Cut to desired thickness, 1/8 to 1/2 inch  
(4 to 12 millimeters)



**TOURNÉ**

Approximately 2 inches (50 millimeters) long  
with seven faces

**Please note:** the dimensions indicated are guidelines and may be modified as necessary. Determine the size of the cut by the requirements of the recipe or menu item, the nature of the vegetable being cut, the desired cooking time, and appearance.