

# the Cutting Edge, German-Style

Ask chefs to name the cooking utensils on which they rely most, and inevitably the answers will resound: knives. The fact that these kitchen workhorses aren't basking in neoculinary spotlights in the way that their flashier neighbors—sous vide thermal circulators, for example—



doesn't mean that they're any less innovative. German manufacturers are using insights provided by their chef customers. Coupled with the increased availability of technologically sophisticated materials, today's knives made by the two leading German companies, Zwilling J.A. Henckels and Wüsthof, surpass previous incarnations in both comfort and usefulness.

For Chef Mary Sue Milliken, who along with Chef Susan Feniger owns Border Grill Santa Monica, Border Grill Las Vegas, and Ciudad

in Los Angeles, admits that comfort is her number-one consideration when choosing a knife. "It's like buying a pair of shoes, and I'm not the type to wear high heels," she confesses.

## Bolstering Comfort

Jeffrey Elliot, manager of culinary relations at Zwilling J. A. Henckels, attributes much of the comfort—or discomfort—that a knife provides to the bolster design. For the company's latest release, a five-piece set dubbed the Twin 1731, designers noted that chefs often grab a knife not entirely by the handle but with their thumb and forefinger on the blade itself. The bolsters on the Twin 1731 knives, therefore, are configured to support this common technique more comfortably. "It's all about the sensation of touch," Elliot explains. Plus, a shortened bolster enables easier sharpening.

For Allen Susser, chef/owner of Miami's Chef Allen's, more comfort translates into ease of wrist action and added usefulness, especially when it comes to fish. Commenting on the knives, Susser says, "I found that the knives in this set worked really well for filleting fish, and that's one thing we do a lot of here."

Todd Myers, vice president of sales at Wüsthof, heard similar requests from chef customers. He says that the Wüsthof family spent years reconfiguring its product line and consulting chefs from around the world before deciding on its latest design, the 20-piece Classic Ikon 2008 collection. "Chefs wanted the bolster to stop short from the blade so they could fully use the knife edge and completely sharpen the edge," he explains. To compensate for the smaller forward bolster in the middle of the knife, a second bolster was added to the heel for additional heft. Chef David Burke (David Burke & Donatella, among others) notes that when he's looking for a new knife, he wants "dependability and something that is very comfortable in my hand. It's like owning a car. You always go back to the same one—how it looks, how it's engineered, and how it feels."

## Taking Up Space

Design and comfort are not the only developments in the knife industry. Elliot describes how Henckels ventured outside the culinary world for the materials used to make the 1731, noting that the knives are "innovative, yet at the same time tradition-bound, so they have one foot in the past and one in the future." Henckels used Cronidur 30, a high-performance steel that was specially developed for aviation and space technology and that boasts both strength and lightweight characteristics.

Milliken appreciates the space-age materials, saying that the Twin 1731 knife "is quite solidly on par with any Japanese knife I've used as far as holding an edge," adding that it also offers ease in her hand.

Wüsthof designers chose classic materials (a single piece of high-carbon, rust-resistant steel) and concentrated on the ergonomics, the contour, and the comfort provided by their new knife series. The difference between Henckels' knives and Wüsthof's may be apparent most immediately on the price tags. The space-age Henckels set ranges from \$350 to \$450, while Wüsthof's is priced between \$60 and \$140. Milliken admits that the pricier knives "aren't for everyone" but adds that if you take care of them, they will "last probably longer than you will."

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