

Big Kid



Ski Camps pg 140

big life

MOUNTAIN LIFE AT ITS BEST



DREAMERS

DOING THE IMPOSSIBLE
ALL OVER THE WORLD

100

*Lynsey Dyer,
pro skier, on
chasing her dreams*

102

ART IN ASPEN

170

*sneaking up on
you since 2005...*

122

THE SCIENCE OF SPORT:
HOW TO TRAIN AN OLYMPIAN

114

THE ART OF KNIFE MAKING

WE LOVE WHITEFISH, MT

56



POWDER 8s • RESCUE DOGS • CRUSH LIST • FOOD • MAKER SPACES • HOPE



words by JENNIFER WALTON

BEHOLD THE BLADE

KNIFE MAKERS OF THE WEST



PHOTOGRAPHY: CAMRIN DENGEL

THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT A KNIFE. THE WAY IT FEELS IN YOUR HAND—ITS GRIP, SPINE, AND TIP, AND THE SOUNDS IT MAKES AS IT SLICES, CHOPS, AND PEELS. WHETHER YOU'RE A SOLDIER OR SURVIVALIST, HUNTER OR HIKER, CHEF OR COLLECTOR, IT'S ALL ABOUT THE BLADE—FIXED OR FOLDING, CARBON OR STAINLESS, ANGLED, HOOKED, OR SERRATED. THE POWER OF THE BLADE HAS FORGED OUR LOVE FOR HUMANITY'S FIRST TOOL, WITH A HISTORY THAT DATES BACK OVER TWO AND HALF MILLION YEARS AND IS DEFINED BY ITS INDISPENSABILITY. FROM THE COVETED I. WILSON KNIFE OF THE SHEFFIELD CUTLERS GUILD IN ENGLAND (WHOSE KNIVES WERE GIFTED BY MOUNTAIN MEN LEWIS AND CLARK) TO THE NAVY SEAL KA-BAR, FROM THE FUSION OF ART AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE JAPANESE AND GERMAN MARVELS TO THE BUCK BURIED IN YOUR GLOVE COMPARTMENT, A KNIFE CAN START A FIRE, SLICE BREAD, CARVE WOOD, SHAVE A BEARD, AND SAVE A LIFE.

“If you know what you’re doing, you can make a meal happen with any kitchen knife. But using a top-quality knife versus a low-quality one is the difference between driving a Jaguar and a VW Jetta across the country. They’ll both get you there. But the Jaguar will give you a much smoother ride.”

—Charlie Trotter, legendary chef

PHOTOGRAPHY: CAMRIN DENDEL

The art of the knife has been perfected and passed down for generations. The knife makers of today are both artists and technicians producing in small, personal workshops around the Mountain West, or as part of a larger manufacturing company. Here, we introduce you to two masters of their craft—a few who inspire us in the wild, on the hunt, in the kitchen, and with our everyday chores to commit to the cut and savor a long-lasting relationship—with our well-made knives.

NEW WEST KNIFE WORKS JACKSON HOLE, WY

Rows of New West Knife Works' sharp knives line the walls and fill the cases at the Mountain Man Toy Shop off of Jackson's Town Square. It's the place to throw a tomahawk or gift your father, son, or yourself with a handmade blade, or claim a set of ravishing kitchen knives. Founder Corey Milligan explains that his shop is rich with "dangerous toys for big boys." Currently, Milligan's commitments alternate between his flagship store and his workshop of highly functioning designers, forgers, and manufacturers in Idaho Falls, Idaho.

A former river guide and chef, Milligan began knife making 20 years ago. He says, "When I started making knives, the choice was a white handle or a black handle!" Nothing inspired him and no blades impressed him. A doer rather than a complainer, Milligan began designing his blades for manufacture in Japan.

In these early stages of his knife making career, Milligan traveled throughout the country displaying his work at art shows, surrounded by glass blowers, sculptors, and jewelry makers. He developed a respect for craftsmanship at its highest level. But, he says, the blade shows were what blew his mind. "The bladesmiths were artists with multiple skills in metallurgy, woodworking, and lapidary. It's all these things that have to come together with precision. It takes time, practice,

and experience to produce custom knives."

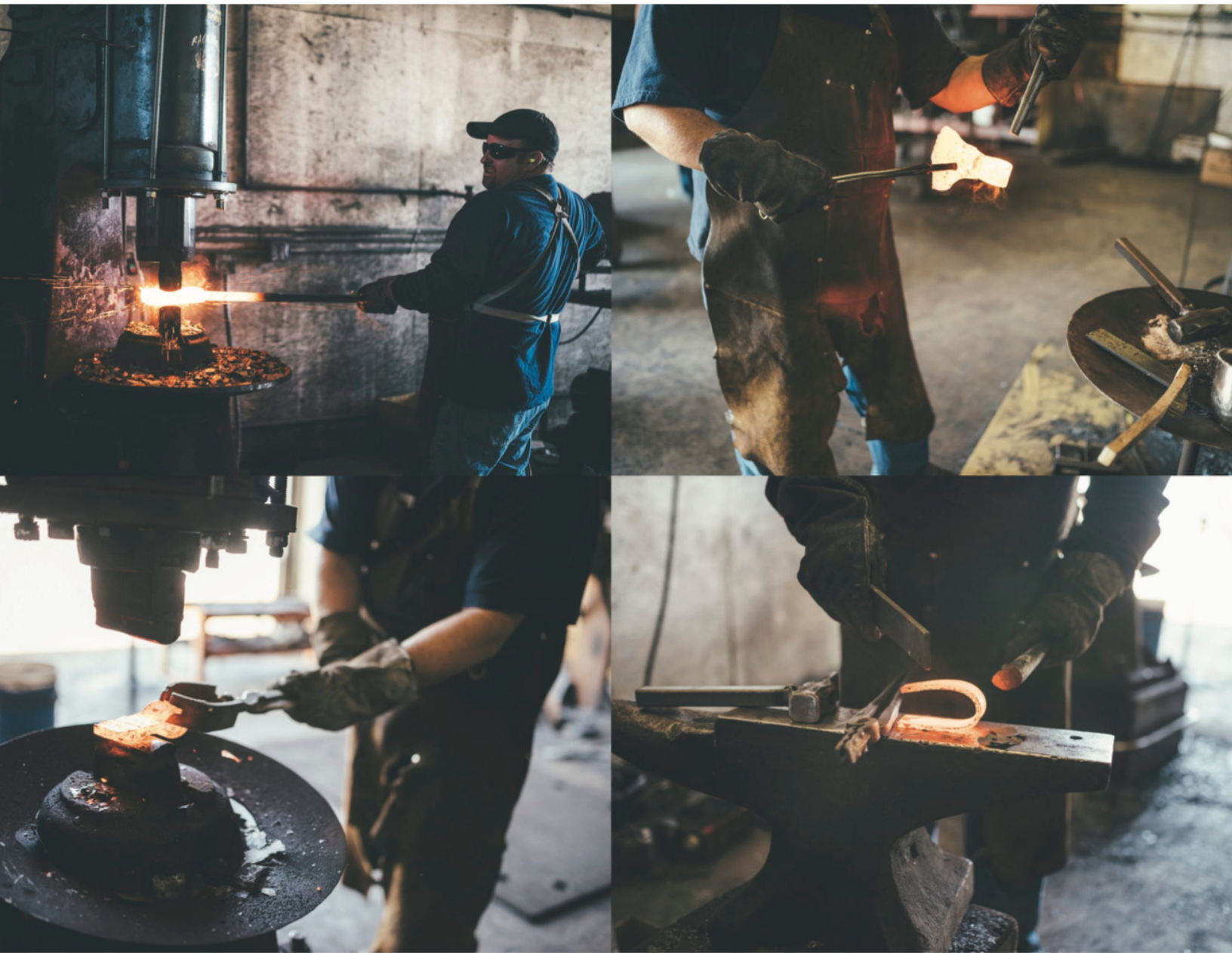
To go into business, Milligan identified a gap in the field—cutlery as haute cuisine. He knew chefs wanted a blade worthy of a warrior with an exceptional appetite for strength and sharpness. He recognized that knives share a dual image of status and service, and he craved pretty and powerful.

During the 10 years Milligan manufactured in Japan, he fantasized about utilizing Damascus steel (a unique steel made by welding multiple layers and repeating the process, which produces a stunning pattern and extreme strength) in a kitchen knife. But experts claimed that it couldn't be done. Then, Shun Knives debuted an ultra-sharp knife produced with Damascus steel. Milligan explains that he was initially disappointed. He also had significant pressure to "keep up with the Japanese." But, he says, "I kept doing my thing and staying in my lane." That focus paid off when he found the ultimate partner in aeronautic steel known as CPM-S35VN.

This "powder metal steel," made by Crucible Industries in collaboration with renowned knife maker Chris Reeve, decoded a list of issues knife makers had tirelessly attempted to solve, such as how to keep a knife very sharp without it chipping, staining, or breaking. Fact: the higher the carbon content, the harder the knife is.



ABOVE (top to bottom): Milligan at work; the New West Knife Works Santoku (in Peacock) is the 'do-it-all' Japanese-style knife for home or professional use. With dimpled grinds, you'll slice without tearing up your meat or veggies. OPPOSITE: Corey Milligan in his New West Knife Works workshop in Idaho Falls, Idaho, takes a moment before the sparks fly.



Milligan added to his line of chef knives by laying down some serious choices for all who visit his brick-and-mortar shop and website. His G-Fusion line includes Santoku, chef, fillet, paring, utility, chopper, bread, deli, cleaver, hunter/forager, and that custom Damascus. His new Santoku (with a Teton silhouette replacing grind lines) debuted this fall.

Sure, *Saveur* might have picked Milligan's knives as one of their favorites, but as every man knows, when your product is chosen by *Playboy Magazine* as the first of "60 Things That Every Man Should Own, Know, or Do," you have arrived.


After perfecting his heirloom kitchen knives, Milligan had an urge to demonstrate his mountain man skills with a bigger

blade. The tomahawk.

Dennis Moon, VP of Forging at NWKW workshop in Idaho Falls, hand forges more tomahawks in one week than most companies forge in a year. And, because this traditional axe is one of the "dangerous toys for big boys" at Milligan's Mountain Man Toy Shop, there's no rest for Moon. "Everyone loves throwing a tomahawk," Milligan

states. "It's a very simple tool, but incredibly challenging to make. It's all done by eye." And, Moon's eyes focus like lasers on technique. Word to the adventurous out there: if you visit Milligan's shop, there's an alley there where they will indulge your tomahawk-throwing urge.

ABOVE (clockwise from top left): King of the Tomahawk, Dennis Moon, draws out, twists, folds, and stacks a 30-stack billet in temps ranging from 1500° to 1900° before folding it around a mandrel to retain its shape (the eye is set later with a 'drift' that resembles the handle) and setting it in a 50-ton power hammer, and then forge welding it at 2300°, before the last two steps are repeated to reveal a flare-shaped blade (at right), which has a variance of less than 0.001" (1/1000"). That's why Milligan calls him, "a human CNC machine."



PHOTOGRAPHY: CAMRIN DENGEL

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— Corey Milligan