

Knife-maker slices with style, innovation

Corey Milligan's path has taken him not just to the kitchen but beyond it.

Milligan's business, New West Knife Works, helps to bring all of us who value time spent in kitchens some wonderful knives, the most important tools of our trade.

His love of food and cooking came quite early and naturally, directly influenced by his mom.

"Mom always made food from scratch as did my grandmother," Milligan said. "Mom was from the generation that moved toward TV dinners and mixes, but she never did."

When he was 14, Milligan and his mother took a Chinese cooking class. It was formative in several ways: he learned knife skills, the value of cooking fresh foods hot and fast and the mixing of sweet and hot flavors first entered his consciousness. All three of those aspects of cooking Milligan still utilizes in his daily life.

Growing up in Columbus, Ohio, Milligan had deep Buckeye influences. He worked his way through high school and Ohio University cooking in local diners. "It wasn't great food, but it taught me to get hot food out of the kitchen fast," he said. Studying history gave him an awareness that anything can happen, so life might as well be lived to its fullest.

After college Milligan had a burning desire to move to the Rocky Mountains to be a river guide. Two influential college professors from the fields of geography and geology had both said that Jackson Hole was the place to see, so this is where he headed after a course with National Outdoor Leadership School to learn about river rafting. He worked for Mad River for 10 years, the last few as manager for the guides. During the winter seasons he spent his free time snowboarding and his work hours climbing the employment ladder in the Alpenhof kitchen. He moved from washing dishes to prep cook to pantry to cooking dinner on the line. He said his mom has always been proudest of him for being selected as the employee of the month at the Alpenhof. It was after those days that his cooking shifted from a job to cooking for the love of it.

Milligan is married to his college sweetheart, Jessica. As he headed to Jackson after college, Jessica chose to follow her career path to New York City. It took five years for the lure of the mountains and love to bring them together again. They spent three formative years in Ventura, Calif., while Jessica worked for Patagonia. During that time they spent lots of time with her brother, Chris Kidder, who worked at a cutting edge restaurant in Los Angeles.

At that time Milligan was learning the lesson that "Good food is all about fresh, fresh ingredients." Simultaneously, the message from Patagonia was that the quality of doing business and the product itself reflect who we are. These influences conspired to bring out Milligan's entrepreneurial urges. He wanted a business of his own that could allow him to live and raise a family in Jackson, a business that wasn't based directly on the tourist industry. It was also important to him to avoid a business with a competitive nature. His thoughts about knives as a business began at the Alpenhof.

New West Knife Works had its beginnings as



NEWSGUIDE PHOTO / PRICE CHAMBERS

Corey Milligan owns and operates New West Knife Works, a Jackson-based cutlery company with knives made with 30 layers of Damascus steel and a Corian handle, which holds up over many years.

Milligan began making sets of knives and blocks, then partnering with a friend doing art shows as a way of introducing his products to the public. Research led him to find the finest knife smiths in the Japanese city of Seki, where samurai swords have been made for more than 800 years. Creativity led him to knife handles that avoid the age old choice of black or black.

"Why can't knives be bright and colorful and fun?" he said.

Intuition and practice have led him to design blade shapes for what modern Americans want. Last spring commercial production of New West knives moved to Japan to produce fast enough to serve market demands.

Success is finding its way to Milligan's little shop in Wilson. Several cooking and wine magazines have recently featured his knife lines. From the first store, the Kitchen Drawer in Hyde Park, N.Y., to 10 small chains of stores, attention is being drawn to Milligan's knives. The new Winn Hotel in Las Vegas has ordered 500 steak knives.

As we move into the annual shopping season, I thought it appropriate to ask Milligan his opinions on some knife basics.

"Although it is good for me to sell gift sets, I love to give individual knives," he said. "They'll get used so much."

There are three types of knives any cook needs, Milligan said. They are for cutting-board use, for



Chef Notes

Bru

How to Sharpen Knives

1. You cannot buy your way out of sharpening your knives. Superior knives do tend to have superior edge-holding, but that does not mean that they do not need sharpening. Kitchen knives receive more wear on their edge than any other knife. Even the finest knife still needs frequent sharpening. The true quality of a great knife is that it has great edge-holding combined with excellent sharpenability. If you just refuse to sharpen your knives, buy serrated knives as they will cut much longer without maintenance.
2. Keep your knife sharp! It takes much less skill to maintain a knife's edge than it does to resharpen a totally dull knife. As soon as a knife will not cleanly slice a tomato it should be sharpened. This could be once a day for a professional chef who is using the knife all day, or once a month or more in light to moderate use. Using a diamond steel sharpening rod will take 30 seconds to a minute. The time sharpening is more than made up for in the speed and the efficiency gained in using a sharp knife. If your knives are butter knife dull, you might want to take them to a professional to regrind the edge and then keep them maintained after that.
3. Practice makes perfect! You will not do permanent damage to a knife by trying to sharpen it. The more you do it the more proficient you will become.
4. It's all about angle. Sharpening is nothing more than grinding a "V" or angle on the edge of a blade. Holding a consistent angle throughout the sharpening process is what's really important. A good rule of thumb is to visualize placing a matchbook on the steel or stone as an angle guide. The angle should be 15 to 20 degrees for a sharp cutting knife.
5. There is more than one way to skin a cat. Sharpening is a very simple operation. Many different techniques work. Some are faster than others. Some may give you a sharper edge at the end of the day. Using a steel or stone, some draw the knife against the steel or stone toward the knife's edge. Some draw the knife away from the edge. Some go back and forth. Some go in circles. A lot of gadgets work fine. If I'm in a pinch the bottom of a ceramic mug or bowl works nicely.

Courtesy of Corey Milligan

which it's important the user be comfortable with the size of a knife. Professionals might use 8- to 10-inch blades, but mostly that is too large for home use. Hand-held paring is the second important knife utilization. The third type of knife needed has a serrated blade and is used for breads and meats.

Stop by at the Art Association's Christmas Bazaar on Dec. 2 to scrutinize the New West Knife Works selection. It's a great opportunity to buy seconds at a deep discount and contribute directly to the Milligan kids' college fund. Actually, www.newwestknives.com has an array of interesting information, including the "recipe" for sharpening knives that we share here with you.

Bru writes every other week about the valley's many talented chefs.