

PASSION PLAY

ON THE SHARP SIDE

Culinary veteran Christopher Mark got his hands on his first knife by chance at an early age. Decades later, he continues to collect exquisite blades from around the world as he expands the restaurant empire with his team.

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Ask any chef what their single most important tool in the kitchen, and be prepared for a lengthy elaboration on the critical role that knives play in the gastronomy world. In many ways, a steadfast and reliable knife to a chef is just as important as a quality paintbrush to an artist, or a pen for a writer. Much more than a tool, a trusted blade allows any chef to flex their muscles in the kitchen at ease and master fine culinary techniques.

For most chefs, the relationship with knives begins and ends in the kitchen. But for Christopher Mark, co-founder of Black Sheep Restaurants and a seasoned chef, his love for these fine blades are deeply intertwined with family traditions, personal milestones and stories.

Born and raised in a family of restaurateurs, Mark's deep-rooted connection with knives began at a young age. "My grandfather was a restaurateur, and when he died, he left me his pocketknife. It reminds me of him because he carried it everywhere. Among other uses, he always pulled it out after dinner to carve apples to snack on. It is the object I most associate with him," recalls Mark.

Intriguingly, the key individual who introduced Mark into the world of knives is his Japanese babysitter, who gifted him with a small Japanese jackknife with a horn handle. Known for their razor-sharp edges and elegance, Japanese knives are recognised as some of the best in the world, thanks to the centuries-old craftsmanship of skilled artisans. In fact, the Canadian chef celebrated Black Sheep's debut in 2012 with one. "I went big and bought a sleek Japanese carbon steel blade from Tsukiji market. I lived next to the market for years and became friendly with many local knife-smiths. I had my eye on this piece by a specific guy for a while."

As the restaurant group unveiled their latest Japanese restaurant in Central in May, it was only natural for the chef to invest in more premium Japanese knives. "At Fukuro, our new izakaya, we have a large emphasis on sashimi. The only tool used in sashimi is a knife, so we invested in top-quality Japanese [kitchen] tools. They have a swirly hammered surface and single-edged, 15 degree-angled blade that ensures a clean cut without damaging the texture of the fish. The knives are also lighter due to a thinner blade and softer steel, and allow you to cut by slicing the food toward you as opposed to a downward motion, which is a less stressful movement," Mark points out.

Mark is always on the lookout for new pieces to add to his expanding collection, especially during trips abroad. "I am drawn to knives that have a sense of place



01

"AS A CHEF, YOUR KNIFE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT TOOL, SO I WANTED TO START THINGS OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT."

— Christopher Mark



02

and heritage," underlines Mark. "Whenever I travel to places with a knife-making tradition, I make time to explore family-run shops that have been making the same style for generations. I also visit military shops, antique stores and markets for rare finds."

During his recent trip to Nepal, a quality kukri at a military knife store caught his eye. "It's the basic utility knife for Nepalese, used both as a tool and a weapon. It is also the standard blade in Gurkha

01 Mark's personal knife along with his daughter Parisa's knife.
02 Damascus steel knife with real animal horn.

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regiments throughout the world. Mine is a hefty but well-balanced curved blade with a notch at the base and a rosewood handle,” he says.

Luckily for Mark, who conveniently combines passion with business, there’s always reason to invest in new blades, especially upon restaurant openings. With 16 restaurants in his group, one of his tasks is to ensure different outlets are equipped with knives that pay tribute to the restaurant’s cultural heritage and gastronomic flair.

“We opened New Punjab Club this past fall, and I knew I wanted Damascus steel, so I sourced these incredible knives that showcase the metal’s wavy pattern from the village where Bin Laden was captured.” For the group’s Parisian steakhouse, La

03-04 Carbon-steel knives sourced personally by Mark from Japan.



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Vache!, the chef stocked up French horse butchering blades which serve as an excellent butchery tool and eating knife at the same time.

It would be easy to assume a collector who has been stocking up on quality blades since a young age would naturally want to hold onto all of his keepsakes. But his approach to collecting has changed as his career evolved. “I’ve gotten really into giving teammates and ex-coworkers knives,” points out Mark. “Actually, today I am going to mail a knife to a friend in Japan. We worked together for 12 years and he asked for this blade because he said he had his eye on it the entire time we worked together in the early 2000s in Tokyo. It’s carbon steel made in the Tsukiji market,” says Mark.

On maintenance tips, Mark highlights polishing and oiling as the key to extending a blade’s lifespan. “I have a whetstone for sharpening, but I don’t geek out over sharpness. If your knife is too sharp, you get an unstable edge. And if you sharpen it too thin, the longevity is shortened.”

For those who want to take a peek into the restaurateur’s personal collection, head over to Buenos Aires Polo Club, the group’s Argentine steakhouse in Central, where diners are offered a selection of his knives to enjoy their steaks. “People get excited when picking through my switchblades, antler-handled hunting knives, French steak blades and rare finds,” Mark says. If you hang around in the steakhouse enough, you may just be lucky enough to make it onto their list of favourite guests, and enjoy their juicy grass-fed beef with an engraved knife of your choice.

With the restaurant group’s first venture outside of Hong Kong due to unveil this year along with a few other ideas beginning to take shape, there’s more reason for Mark to expand his knife collection vastly as he and his team eat their way around the world for culinary inspirations. ㊦