



Veteran deck ape, fish cutter and writer Zach Harvey says only the steel keeps a count of the dead.



On the Edge

ODE TO A WORKHORSE BONING KNIFE THAT IS A NATURAL EXTENSION OF MUSCLE AND BONE

The unmistakable *shing* of high-carbon steel — that's what a fish knife should sound like, not the dull, war-club clank of stainless, the music alloyed and tempered clean out of the metal at Faustian temperatures. Ask any cutter with salt in his socks.

My workhorse blade is a boning knife — a 7-inch, hickory-handled, flat, soft-steel Dexter-Russell, the industry standard in fish towns worth knowing. If you said Dexter 1377 — or 1375 or 1376 or 1378 — to five deckhands and more than three were mystified, you'd want to try the next town over.

My latest 77 arrived a blank slate from Wilcox Marine Supply in Galilee, Rhode Island, before a sagging commercial fishery and its questionable small-town credit sent the family operation into mothballs. The blade carries, I like to think, a final faint residue of the last bright days in the fishery. Wish I'd bought the box.

When I'm cutting a lot, I think about Samurai tradition: cold steel rendered hard as industrial diamonds through systematic, meditative heating, stretching, folding, hammering, shaping,

cooling — years of this in the production of one blade, a weapon of love and humility, a sword imbued with a monk's soul.

If my factory-issue blade cost anyone a week, he became unemployed on the eighth day. But over seven years in my right hand — separating the living striped bass, bluefish, tuna and tautog from the most readily edible portions of their mortal coil — it has undergone a comparable metamorphosis. Only the steel has kept a count of the dead, the wood handle warping off its rivets, seized in revolt to the rust end of its burnished steel spine with 23 turns of tarred whipping twine.

Between trips and between fish, it has yielded to the small, incremental persuasion of 100,000 glancing strokes against steel of all sorts, a diamond honing steel first, then (and ever since) the reciprocal edge of a second knife. It has seen a block stone twice — once to wipe off its factory edge and remove some material to thin it, a second time to remove more material and shape my own rough edge. Contrary to knife lore, most stones are brutal instruments with a blunt-force application. You'll



*After years of cutting fish on charter and headboats,
wood and steel become natural extensions of muscle, bone and memory.*

spend big-shot dollars on real, precision whetstones, the best of which — to no one's surprise — come from the same culture that brought you the samurai sword and hara-kiri.

Like all good tools, my 77 has ripened with time and the religious maintenance high-carbon fish knives demand. Repeated blood-staining, oxidation, polishing, oiling, tuning, dulling through heaps of fish have rendered its steel a dusky brown-gray — *patina* would be the right word if I wore a leotard in place of oilskins.

The first generations of my 1377s withered years ahead of their predicted life, victims of serial dullness and my relentless, ham-fisted sharpening act. My wrists were headed for an untimely demise then, too. To cut fast with no discernible edge — which I did for several years — transfers strain from blade to wrists, elbows, shoulders. You work toward carpal tunnel, tennis elbow, bursitis and every other known repeated-motion ailment until that fateful day you do something right with stone or steel by mistake and wind up with a fish knife like a straight razor. A month later you're still trying to replicate the error; either way, your cutting arm is in remission, and you'll do anything to stay ahead of dull.

Like all motions of toil on a pitching deck, time and repetition streamline the swipes that nick away minute coils — the burrs, chips or flat spots blades accrue in repeated contact with bone and scale — to the smallest effective number that brings your edge back.

So went the cuts: The first three sawing passes that cleave the quarter-size scales layered like cedar shingles across the base of

a broad bass tail. The angling of the edge forward in one fluid motion, steel laid against the flow of comb bones on a diagonal set for the first authoritative stroke — right-left, tail-toward-head — along the striper's starboard flank in a rhythmic clacking, steel-over-bone, all the way to the collar. A second, gentler pass back down the same line aft extends the fissure to the top right quadrant of backbone.

Three feathering swipes with the knife point just behind pectorals — meat held away from the center bone — separate flesh from rib cage in a maneuver borrowed from codfish guys when I still handled enough of that species to learn from it. Two more quick passes, head to tail, disconnect the fillet from side one. The side-two sequence — different process, same result — goes off with practiced ease, force tightly controlled, blade angles reflexive. After years, wood and steel become natural extensions of muscle and bone.

The frame never lies: Where edible flesh remains, so, too, does room for mastery. When frames are stripped bare, you'll usually — 2,000 fish later — duplicate results in three strokes less.

What a cutter learns is the 1-to-5,000-scale meditation of the swordmaker in feudal Japan: the art of perfection concealed in the smallest number of necessary movements. Simplicity — real and apparent — the standard unit of artistic merit.

No flourish or Zorroesque wrist gymnastics. Showmanship, you realize somewhere along the line, is an embarrassing notion when you deal in a currency of living things. 🐟



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