



# How to choose the right cutting board



Wood cutting boards are popular with chefs. (Digital Vision)

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**H**ome cooks spend time and sometimes considerable money on buying a kitchen knife, but they may give little thought to the cutting board they use as a base to chop food.

In the kitchen, knives and cutting boards are as essential as salt and pepper, so cooks need to understand how the cutting surface affects their knives and how to care for the board.

Cutting boards come in myriad surfaces — wood, bamboo, plastic, composite and glass — to name a few, but not every surface treats knives the same.

"Knives dull because the blade starts to curl over on itself. It's the cutting surface that dulls the knife, not the food. The harder the surface, the faster a knife will lose its edge," said Sam Weiner, president of EdgeCraft Corp., which makes knife sharpeners.

**No glass boards.** The worst cutting boards that home cooks can use are glass cutting boards. Lisa McManus, executive tasting and testing editor for America's Test Kitchen, minced no words when it came to glass cutting boards: Throw them out.

"In our tests, they dulled brand new knives within 10 strokes. They're popular because they're pretty, but they're really better as cheese trays or for presentation," McManus said.

Other hard cutting-board materials are ceramic, granite, marble and composite. Composite cutting boards are made of resins and a combination of wood fibers. These cutting boards are popular because they're less likely to get gouges from use and will last longer. However, they are unforgiving to a knife, Weiner said.

**The better options are wood or plastic.** Even within this category, however, there are different types of materials, particularly when it comes to plastic boards.

McManus said to avoid slick plastic boards, which can cause knives to slip. Weiner said acrylic plastic cutting boards act much as glass boards do when it comes to knives. In EdgeCraft's tests, cutting boards made of polyethylene or polypropylene were the kindest to a knife.

The top plastic cutting-board pick in America's Test Kitchen review was the Oxo Carving & Cutting Board (\$24.99), McManus said.

For most foods, wood cutting boards remain the preferred choice for Daniel Holzman, chef/owner of the New York City-based restaurant The Meatball Shop, and a self-professed "cutting board dork."

He uses wood cutting boards at home and at the restaurant for meat and vegetables but prefers a plastic board for fish, saying the fish oils can sometimes leave a smell in wood cutting boards.

Plastic boards can be as simple as the flexible mats that are put over wood cutting boards for cushioning, he said. For people who want to invest in a plastic cutting board, he likes the Japanese rubberized versions, similar to what are found in sushi restaurants, but he warned that they are delicate.

"You can't use them for everything. You can't use a serrated bread knife on it. You can't use a cleaver on it. You use it for a specific activity," Holzman said.

Traditional wood cutting boards can be made of different types of wood, including oak, beech, maple, chestnut, cherry and black walnut. Teak is also becoming a popular choice for cutting boards, and McManus said the Proteak Edge Grain Teak Cutting Board, \$92.59, from Amazon, won the tests.

"They're nice; they have the edge grain. They seem to show scratches less, and they soak up less liquid because there's a natural oil in the wood," she said.

Holzman said he uses a chestnut board from John Boos at home. "Boos boards are expensive, but they're beautiful. I leave mine out all the time," he said.

Bamboo cutting boards are becoming popular because the grass grows quickly and is considered a sustainable choice. McManus said cooks who want to buy a bamboo board should choose an edge-grain board over an end-grain board, that is a bamboo board made to look like butcher block. In tests, the end-grain boards split too readily.

**Use and care tips.** McManus and Holzman said it's fine to use the same cutting board for meat and vegetables, as long as cooks wash the board in hot, soapy water. McManus said America's Test Kitchen lab-tested wood and plastic boards for bacteria to see if germs lingered after washing, and both came out clean.

"There's a belief that you can't use wood because it harbors bacteria, but that's not true. If your plastic board is gouged, it can be harder to scrub and bacteria can linger," she said.

Holzman agreed. As long as boards are cleaned and sanitized in between, it's OK to use the same board for meat and vegetables.

When buying a cutting board, avoid those with feet on the bottom so both sides can be used, they said, and get a bigger cutting board.

"We recommend 15 by 20 inches. That seems big, but once you have that, you can better control it, and it's more comfortable because you have more room," McManus said.

Wooden cutting boards need a little TLC, and Holzman and McManus recommend oiling them with food-grade mineral oil in the beginning and then about once a month to keep them in good condition.

For wood boards that get nicks and scratches from use, Holzman said owners can buy a cutting board refinisher to take off the top level of wood and get a smooth surface again. "You'll get a new board then," he said.

*Debbie Carlson is a freelance writer.*