

At Home



Slice of Life

Store-bought knives just aren't cutting it? Improve your skills - and add some style to your kitchen - with these handmade blades.

■ BY CELESTE SEPESSY ■ PHOTOS BY ART HOLEMAN

"Because Lee knows his way around a kitchen, he's taken things into consideration that most people take for granted."

— JANE REDDIN, OWNER
OF PRACTICAL ART, PHOENIX

IN 2004, LEE ZIERTEN ORDERED A KNIFE-MAKING KIT FROM A magazine to make a simple hunting knife for himself. "I thought, 'Well, that might be fun to do,'" the Phoenix resident says. Zierten, 68, has always been a crafty fellow. While living in Chicago, he built all of his home's shelving by hand. In his north Phoenix house, he remodeled his kitchen to be more cook-friendly.

So when Zierten retired from a marketing position in the printing industry, he found himself bored with the newfound free time and decided to devote himself to cutlery.

Today, Zierten has produced hundreds of artisan knives - ranging from delicately elaborate Da-

mascus hunting knives to ergonomic everyday cutlery for the kitchen.

The transition to knifemaker was natural for the soft-spoken handyman. "There was a time when people did things with their hands," he says. "I like

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to create things that are utilitarian.”

And his pieces truly are practical. In fact, Zi-erten, a cook himself, has been using the same set of handmade knives for

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— LEE ZIERTEN, CUSTOM KNIFEMAKER

more than three years. All of Zi-erten's knives can be made to order, and he hopes his customers can get the same use out of them.

A Zi-erten knife costs between \$60 and \$125.

Jane Reddin, owner of Practical Art in Phoenix, says she knew Zi-erten's knives would be an instant hit the first time she held one.

“Because Lee knows his way around a kitchen, he's taken things into consideration that most people take for granted,” she says. “Each of Lee's knives is a testament to balance, weight, grip and cutting angle.”

Practical Art is the only shop in the Valley that sells the knives, which range in price from approximately \$60 to \$125 each. Customers can find blades of all styles: steak, par-

ing, filet, sandwich, chopping and santoku.

But perhaps most impressive, Reddin explains, is Lee's craftsmanship and style, pulling from a variety of materials used to match any kitchen.

“Personally, I have a mid-century modern style kitchen, and the ivory-colored Micarta knives with a subtle red inlay are a perfect compliment,” Reddin says.

Zi-erten's workshop stands at the top of

his hilly property, past a drained hot tub and through a white metal gate. He unlocks the shop's door and opens this 192-square-foot gift from his wife.

Inside is a well-rounded collection of woodworking tools: saws, sanders, grinders and clamps, along with an elaborate ventilation system.

In one corner sits a metal cabinet stocked with all of Zi-erten's knife-making materials. As he reaches inside, squared rods of wood fall over each other like a child's Lincoln Log set. He pulls out chunks that span the wooden rainbow. From two-toned olive-wood to pure black ebony, Zi-erten makes use of every type of wood he can get his hands on. But he doesn't limit himself to this natural resource.



Zi-erten makes kitchen knives (pictured) from scratch or with repurposed materials.



“You have to be careful with this,” he says, holding up a curving piece of ivory. “If people think you’re buying the new stuff, you can be arrested.”

Ziarten also makes use of plenty of commercial materials like diamondwood, which is made from layers of wood sandwiched together with resin. He also regularly uses Micarta, a high-pressure industrial laminate that compresses linen, fiberglass, paper or carbon fiber using epoxy.

With these materials, Ziarten begins a five-step process that can take between two to five hours per knife, depending on the complexity. First, he cuts the handle material to fit the already shaped blades, which he buys from knife supply stores. Then he polishes the blade and glues the handle to it with epoxy. This step is especially crucial, he notes.

“In older knives, the wood is simply riveted to the handle,” he says. After time, the materials will separate from each other, creating “a nice breeding ground for germs.”

Lee Ziarten at work in his shop located behind his home in north Phoenix

On one of his workbenches, three knives are clamped as the epoxy dries. One of them features a particularly festive design – alternating red, white and green slices of diamondwood he calls his “fiesta knife.”

Next, Ziarten drills holes in the handle and inserts either brass or knifemaker’s silver into the openings with epoxy. He takes the form and shapes the handle using sanders and grinders.

Finally, he hand sands the knives and gives the blades a final polish before electronically etching his logo – an elephant with a “Z” on its torso – onto them.

Recently, Ziarten has been experimenting with second-hand knives from Goodwill. The knifemaker is able to transform throwaway Chicago Cutlery into handcrafted masterpieces.

This practice is becoming more fun for Ziarten, as he says he has more freedom to

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shape the knife (when he creates a new blade, it already comes in a predetermined shape) and make something out of nothing.

“Good knives aren’t always expensive,” he says.

In fact, he challenges the notion that people need

to invest in a pricey knife set since, he says, “You probably wouldn’t use most of those more than once a year.”

Instead, he suggests people invest in three crucial knives: a good chopping knife (like a santoku or small chef’s knife), a paring knife and a serrated knife.

Once you have your go-to set, there are two factors critical to keeping your knives in tip-top shape. First, Ziarten encourages buying wood or soft plastic cutting boards. Using glass or hard plastic will shorten a knife’s lifespan by dulling it. Next, Ziarten says absolutely never put knives in the dishwasher.

“The heat will soften the edge of the

blade,” he says. Instead, use soapy water and a sponge or brush to clean them after each use.

Ziarten says his knives will last a lifetime if taken care of properly. He even gives a lifetime warranty on them but is quick to note the lifetime is his, not the customer’s.

— Celeste Sepessy can be reached at phxmag@citieswestpub.com.

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Resources

Lee Ziarten Knives

Practical Art

5070 N. Central Ave., Phoenix

602-264-1414

practical-art.com

On Sunday, January 17, Ziarten will hold a free workshop at Practical Art from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. During the event, he will demonstrate the process of making a knife, along with how to identify a quality knife and how to properly care for it. Practical Art encourages guests to bring their own knives to the demo.