

How To Use Chinese Cleavers

by Maryellen Driscoll

A Chinese cleaver can seem like a frighteningly large and treacherous knife. But with practice and proper technique, you'll find it as safe as and even more versatile than the chef's knife. A cleaver chops, slices, and minces. It also smashes, mashes, scrapes, and scoops.

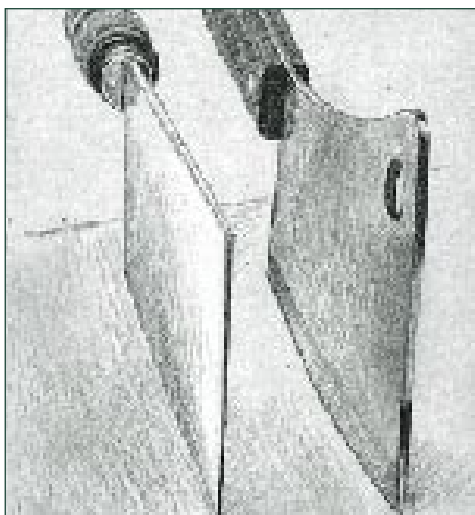
There are two basic Chinese cleavers: the heavyweight meat cleaver and the delicate vegetable cleaver (also known as a Chinese chef's knife).

The meat cleaver is a rugged, blunt knife meant solely for hacking through bones—though not all bones. It works great on chicken and fish. We found that making a clean cut through large bones, such as beef bones, is best left to a hacksaw or your butcher.

Unlike the meat cleaver, the vegetable cleaver has a delicate, sharp edge, like a chef's knife. It is used to cut vegetables and boneless meats; we found it also juliennes more finely than the chef's knife.

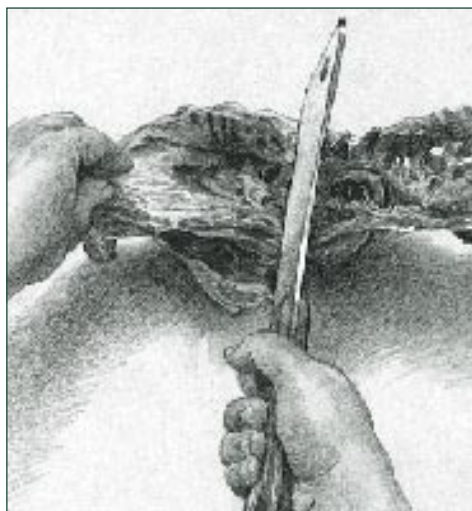
The best cleavers are made of high-carbon stainless steel because they will not corrode and can hold an edge well. Never run a cleaver through the dishwasher or soak it in water, particularly if it has a wooden handle. Immediately clean and wipe it dry after each use.

The Two Cleavers



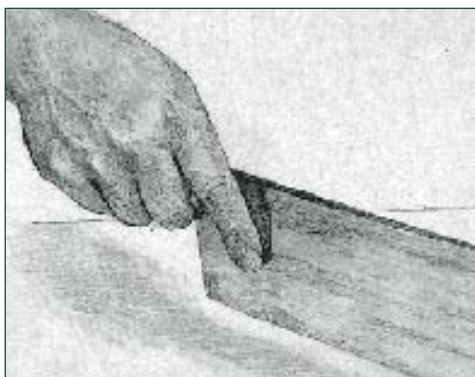
The top edge of both vegetable and meat cleavers measures about 3 millimeters thick. However, the blade of the vegetable cleaver (left) tapers gently to a slender cutting edge while the meat cleaver is more like a wedge, tapering within the last 2 centimeters. The hole at the top corner is for hanging.

Chopping Through Bone with a Meat Cleaver



To hack through bone, place your hand near the far end of the meat cleaver's handle, curling your fingers securely around like a fist. Handle the meat cleaver like you would a hammer, with the motion in the arm rather than the wrist, and the weight of the blade's front tip leading the force of the chop. If you cannot chop the bone in one strike, place the cleaver in the groove of the first chop, then strike the blade's blunt edge with a rubber mallet.

Slicing with a Vegetable Cleaver

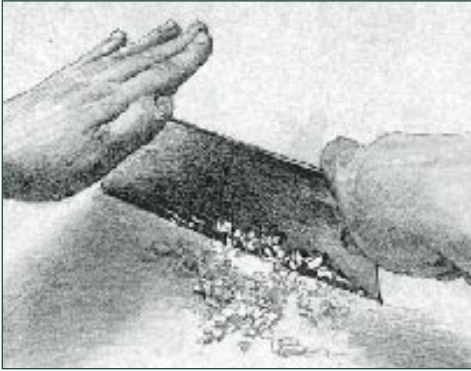


To hold the vegetable cleaver for slicing, lay your palm on the handle near the blade so that you can rest your thumb and your index finger on opposite sides of the blade. Slightly curl your index finger. Curl your remaining three fingers around the handle. The thumb and index finger allow for better control of the knife. The wrist should barely move when slicing.



With your other hand curl your fingertips like a claw to anchor the food. This serves as a guide for the blade. Never lift the blade's edge higher than your knuckles when slicing.

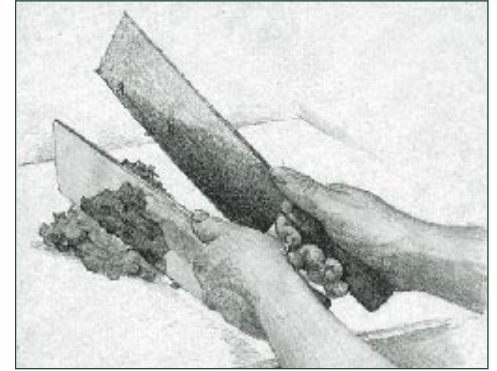
Mincing with a Vegetable Cleaver



To “rock-mince” firmer foods, hold the cleaver as you would for slicing but press the palm of your free hand across the far end of the blade’s blunt edge. Lift the blade, keeping its tip in constant contact with the cutting board, then mince continuously from one side to the next, pivoting from the tip.



To mince soft foods, curl your index finger around the neck of the vegetable cleaver’s blade, place your thumb on top of the blunt edge of the blade, and curl your remaining fingers around the handle. Flick the cleaver up with your wrist and let the weight of the knife drive the fall.



To mince with two vegetable cleavers, grip one knife in each hand, alternating the lift-and-fall rhythm of the knives. Frequently scoop up minced ingredients and flip them back into the pile to ensure even mincing.

Cleaver Quick Tips



To julienne vegetables, slice them diagonally into thin oblong coins. Stack the coins and finely slice them lengthwise at a diagonal.



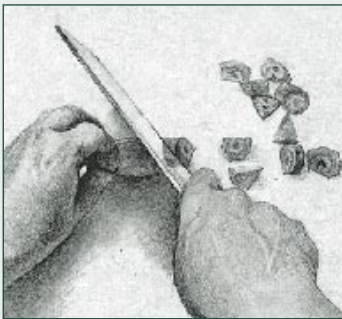
Use the front blunt edge of either the vegetable or meat cleaver as a dough scraper.



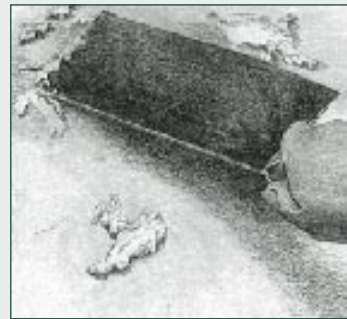
You can use the blunt edge of the cleaver blade to pound both sides of meat in a crosshatch pattern in order to tenderize it.



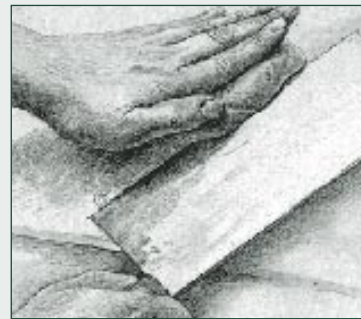
Use the broad side of the cleaver to loosen garlic cloves from a head, loosen skin on garlic, or pound meat to uniform thickness.



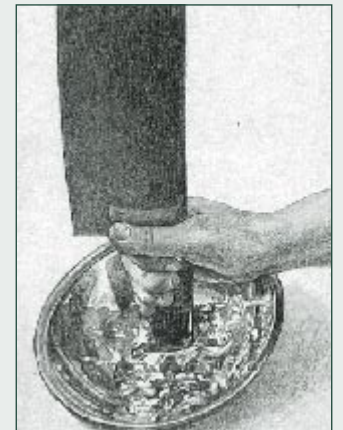
Roll-cutting coarse cylindrical vegetables creates a crude triangular cut that maximizes the exposed surface area to speed up cooking. Place a peeled carrot on a cutting board. Beginning at the carrot’s tip, slice diagonally at about 45 degrees. Roll the carrot toward you with a quarter turn. Slice again. Repeat.



The large flat surface of the cleaver blade acts as a quick, mess-free scooper for carrying piles of chopped food from the cutting board to a pan or plate. Use your hand to anchor food against the cleaver as you lift and carry it.



To butterfly a steak, pork chop, or boneless chicken breast (shown here), place the food by the edge of the cutting board, then place the palm of your free hand on top with your fingers slightly flexed. Hold your vegetable cleaver parallel to the cutting board and butterfly the food with a gentle sawing motion.



To mash ginger, herbs, peppercorns, or a small bowl of beans, place the food in a small bowl, then grind it with the butt of the cleaver handle.