



As sharp as a samurai sword and sometimes as expensive as a small car: Hocho - Japanese cooking knives rank among the best, sharpest and most expensive knives in the world. This is actually not surprising, because the Japanese have been forging swords for thousands of years.

It is not only the star-winning chefs who swear by these super sharp cutting tools from Japan, which are suitable for cutting even the most delicate foods carefully. A rising number of keen cooks has discovered the advantages of Japanese knives, too. Of course, the food does not taste any different, but they make cooking more fun! And you hardly shed any more tears when cutting onions: thanks to the incredible sharpness of the knives, the amount of ethereal oils released is reduced compared with the "squeezing technique" of conventional knives.

The secret of their sharpness does not only lie in traditional manufacturing, but also in the extreme hardness of the knives. The so-called Rockwell hardness (HRC) indicates the degree of hardness. While a good German knife has a hardness of 54 to 56 HRC, a Japanese knife has a hardness of 63 HRC. It could not be any harder: as hard steel is very brittle, the knives would break if they got wedged in even slightly. In order to make the knives flexible, several layers of hard carbon steel and iron are forge-welded. This method is similar to the one applied with the famous samurai swords.

Unlike German knives Japanese super knives are usually sharpened from one side only. This way the cutting edge gets an acute angle, which improves the cutting efficiency. However, this design has a big disadvantage for the unpractised cook: those who are not used to the knife will constantly slip off the food to be cut. On the whole these knives cannot really be recommended to a layman, as they require much more care than conventional knives. Hocho must not be put into the dishwasher. For one thing the blade can be damaged when striking together with cutlery and for another, carbon steel is unfortunately not stainless. So after use, the knives should be cleaned under running water only and dried immediately. It is then recommendable to oil the blade.

The best Hocho are manufactured in Sakai that can be compared to Solingen in Germany. One of the best-known forging masters is the 79-year-old Keijiro Doi from the AOKI Forge. He is a master of the traditional Japanese art of forging swords and his blades belong to the sharpest that money can buy. His most expensive pieces are sold at a price of more than 8,000 euros. That is per piece, of course. It is obvious that these knives are made for the best cooks in the world. They are so hard that it is almost impossible for a layman to sharpen them.

Those who think that these knives are manufactured with the help of Japanese high technology are very much mistaken. Master Doi's knives are completely hand-made. When forging he does not measure the temperature with a thermometer, but he feels it.

The old workshop, which looks like a relic of days gone by, must not be changed in any way, because every change could be disturbing to the Master. By the way, Master Doi does not at all consider retiring. "There is much more to learn", says the old man humbly.