

THE KAUFMANN MERCANTILE GUIDE

HOW TO  
SPLIT WOOD,  
SHUCK  
AN OYSTER,  
AND  
MASTER OTHER  
SIMPLE  
PLEASURES

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EDITED BY Alexandra Redgrave AND Jessica Hundley

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# PREFACE

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Before this book, there was a store. And before the store, there was a blog called *Kaufmann Mercantile*, which I started in 2009 while living in Los Angeles and working as a filmmaker. At the time, several of my friends were moving away from making film to make furniture. Being more hands on greatly appealed to me. I became interested in how things were made and how they could be maintained or fixed when broken.

Growing up in Germany, where the Green Party has influenced lawmaking for three decades, I had an early understanding of disposable consumerism and its negative effects on the environment. To me, the solutions offered by manufacturers and retailers, like using recycled plastic or green products, couldn't be the only way to improve the status quo. I felt there could be other, simpler solutions: making things yourself; using natural, sustainable materials or ingredients; designing products so they could be easily repaired; producing goods at such high quality, you'd never want to throw them away; or buying only the things you need— independently manufactured and created with care and craftsmanship.

There seemed to be no store with a clear and true focus on quality, so I decided to build one myself. Today, Kaufmann Mercantile searches the globe for the best products and makers out there, with the goal to set a new, better standard for retailers. We research each item in depth and speak with every maker directly to provide detailed information about all our products. From the beginning, our company has been motivated by that same love (or rather, obsession) for quality and by the mission to offer better tools and objects, those things that will truly enrich your everyday life. Since my first blog post—about the Estwing hammer, a trusted tool made in the United States since the 1930s—our editorial platform has grown alongside the store to become a resource for the mindful consumer, offering everything from how-to projects and the history of materials to profiles on pioneering designers and makers.

We're thrilled to now share some of our favorite discoveries and ideas in this book. Many thanks to the editors, Alexandra Redgrave and Jessica Hundley, for their amazing work. I hope you will enjoy reading and learning from the pages that follow. I'd love to hear about the things you make and fix and do—all the self-made adventures this book might inspire.

*Sebastian Kaufmann*

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Write to me at:



# INTRODUCTION

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This book began out of a curiosity for how we grow, build, and craft the world around us. We discovered that there's an art to a simple task done well, from planting with the seasons to caring for cast iron. It calls for consideration and creativity—rolling up our sleeves and digging into the details. It means getting messy, and, perhaps, messing up, to experience the singular satisfaction of doing it yourself.

For guidance and inspiration, we turned to experts and enthusiasts, those wonderful people who dedicate their lives to a particular skill or take pleasure in the day-to-day endeavors that most of us leave to someone else. We also sought out the tools that not only help you get the job done but are a joy to use too.

Each of the how-tos that follow, then, is an opportunity to master the art of the everyday. Some you will use often, such as poaching an egg or securing a knot, while others might explore new territory. Knowing how to ford a stream, for example, requires one to first venture out into the wilderness, and the urge to save a plant's seed arises only after a garden has taken root.

As the book came together, we learned that everyone has their own way of doing things. We by no means want you to think *our* way is the *only* way. Therein lies the beauty of the how-to: the final result or the finished product can be as unique as the person who made it. In our world of modern convenience, doing it yourself is immensely rewarding. And so, consider the book in your hands as a starting point. We hope you, like us, find inspiration in these pages to experiment, to investigate, to create, and to make your everyday a little better.

*Alexandra Redgrave and Jessica Hundley*



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ONE  
Kitchen

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## HOW TO

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# CARE FOR CAST-IRON PANS

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“If I could have only a single pan to cook with for the rest of my life it would be made with cast iron. (I own six in varying sizes.) Cast-iron pans are highly effective, durable, and versatile, whether used on the stovetop or in the oven. Whenever I find old rusted ones in antique stores, I run them through an oven-clean cycle, scrub them down, and reseason them. Then they’re as good as new.”

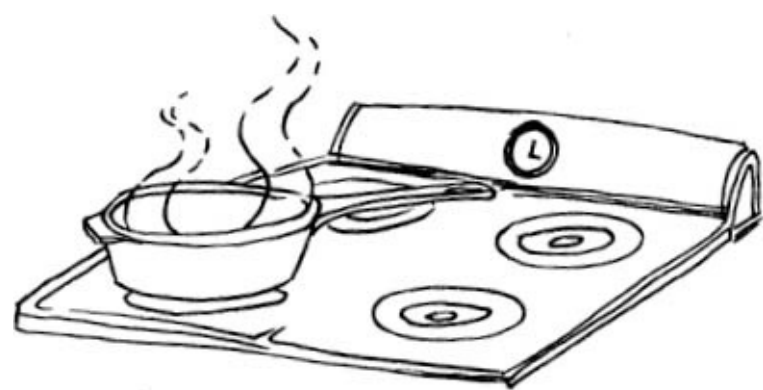
—Michael Ruhlman, cookbook author

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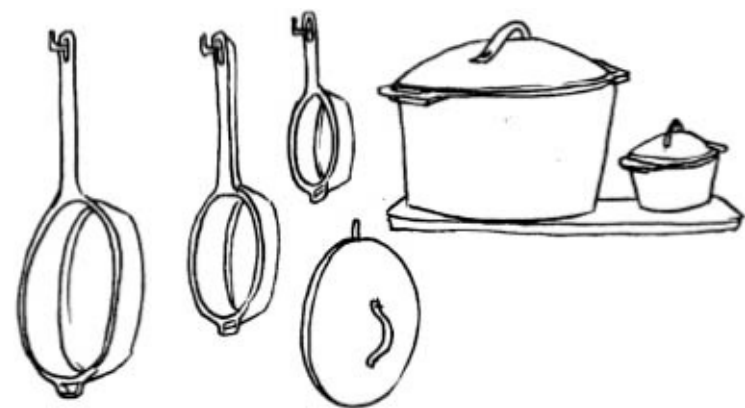
## COOK WHILE THE IRON IS HOT

Thanks to a surface that heats up evenly and requires little oil for cooking—not to mention a high iron content that fortifies your food every time you cook on it—cast-iron pans are the workhorses of kitchenware. Still, the hardy material doesn't take care of itself any more than your dog neatly puts away his bowl. Herewith, a guide.

- 1 Unlike the slippery surface of Teflon and all the other nonstick chemicals that off-gas when heated, cast iron takes a bit more work to get to the optimal temperature. Put the pan on the stove over medium heat for a good three to five minutes until it's thoroughly heated. Then add your cooking oil or lard and throw on your ingredients.



- 2 An issue may, ahem, arise while cooking meat on cast iron: a pungent smell. It could be that the pan is too hot or wasn't cleaned well enough between uses. (If you don't fully rinse off the cooking fat and residue from the previous meal, it can start to burn and smoke.) To prevent your kitchen from smelling like old bacon, cook your meat on medium heat and, once you dish out the cooked ingredients, immediately run your pan under hot running water. (Cold water can potentially cause cracking or damage, as the outer layer of iron contracts faster than the inner core.) The thermal shock kicks off most of the residue and naturally rinses the surface of any oils.



3 If there are still remaining pieces of food, toss on about  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of coarse salt and rub with a sponge. The rough texture of the salt removes excess oils and bits of food without compromising the pan's seasoning (the nonstick coating that naturally forms with use, creating a protective sheen). You can also use a scrubber brush with coarse bristles to loosen any food residue, then rinse again under hot water. No soap needed! In fact, even a little bit of soap could clean away the seasoning you've worked so hard to build up.



## HOW TO SEASON

At some point you may want to reseason your cast-iron cookware, especially if food is sticking, the pan is looking dull, or maybe a relative left it soaking all night in the sink. (A little rust can be scoured away with steel wool before reseasoning.) Scrub your pan, dry it completely, and coat the surface inside and out with a thin layer of flaxseed oil, melted vegetable shortening, or vegetable oil. (Oils that oxidize easily, such as olive oil, will smoke.) Place a sheet of aluminum foil on the bottom rack of the oven to catch any drippings, and bake your pan at 400°F for an hour. Let it sit (with the oven turned off) until cooled. If you prefer, you can recoat the surface after each cleaning.



## The Flax of Life

Flaxseed oil is great for maintaining cast-iron pans because it's an excellent sealant. Flaxseed produces a "drying oil," which transforms into a tough,

protective film. This isn't drying in the sense of losing moisture through evaporation, however. (The term is actually a misnomer.) The transformation happens via a chemical process called polymerization. Similarly, linseed oil, the non-food-grade equivalent of flaxseed oil, is used by artists to produce high-quality oil paints that dry hard and glassy on the canvas, and by woodworkers to give their work a nice luster.



Natural-Bristle Pot Scrubber

Extracted from the fleshy leaves of the agave, tampico fibers (like the ones used in this scrub brush) are resistant to most synthetic chemicals, alkaline and acidic solutions, as well as heat. Traditionally, the fibers were used by Native Americans to make durable ropes and mats. Here, the fibers are stitched together with bronze wire and finished with a light yet incredibly strong birch-wood handle. This simple brush will make quick work of all sorts of tough cleanup jobs for many dinner parties and family meals to come.

# SHUCK AN OYSTER

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“Shucking is one of those sneaky life skills that you may not use every day, but secretly take great pride in when you effortlessly pull it off. I can picture Ernest Hemingway with a cigar dangling out of his mouth and his sleeves rolled up, oyster knife glinting in the afternoon sun, dominating a couple dozen Belons on some Parisian terrace. Any man or woman worth their salt can open an oyster. Plus, standing around the kitchen shucking for a bunch of family and friends is way more fun than just putting an icy plate on the table. Oysters bring people together in a special way.”

—Chris Sherman, Island Creek Oysters



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## DON'T MEAN TO PRY

Like the New England lobster, oysters are part of a long line of workingman's foods that have become a luxury. Due to their high protein-to-cost ratio, oysters were a popular and inexpensive food up until the beginning of the twentieth century. Their association as an aphrodisiac was born out of the myth that Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, sprang forth from the sea on an oyster shell. In fact, oysters are high in zinc, a deficiency of which can lead to impotence—though there is little scientific evidence for the fortifying fable of oysters increasing drive. Either way, oysters make a meal just a little more special once you know how to coax them out of their shells.

### STABBER METHOD

Using an inflexible pointed knife (sometimes called a Chesapeake stabber knife), wedge the blade (with the edge facing away from you) between the two shells, roughly one-third up from the hinge, where the abductor is located. Gently twist the knife a few times until you feel a pop, then run the blade along the top shell and then the bottom to sever the abductor. Industrial shuckers use this method—along with a pair of puncture-proof gloves.



### LOLLIPOP OR HINGE METHOD

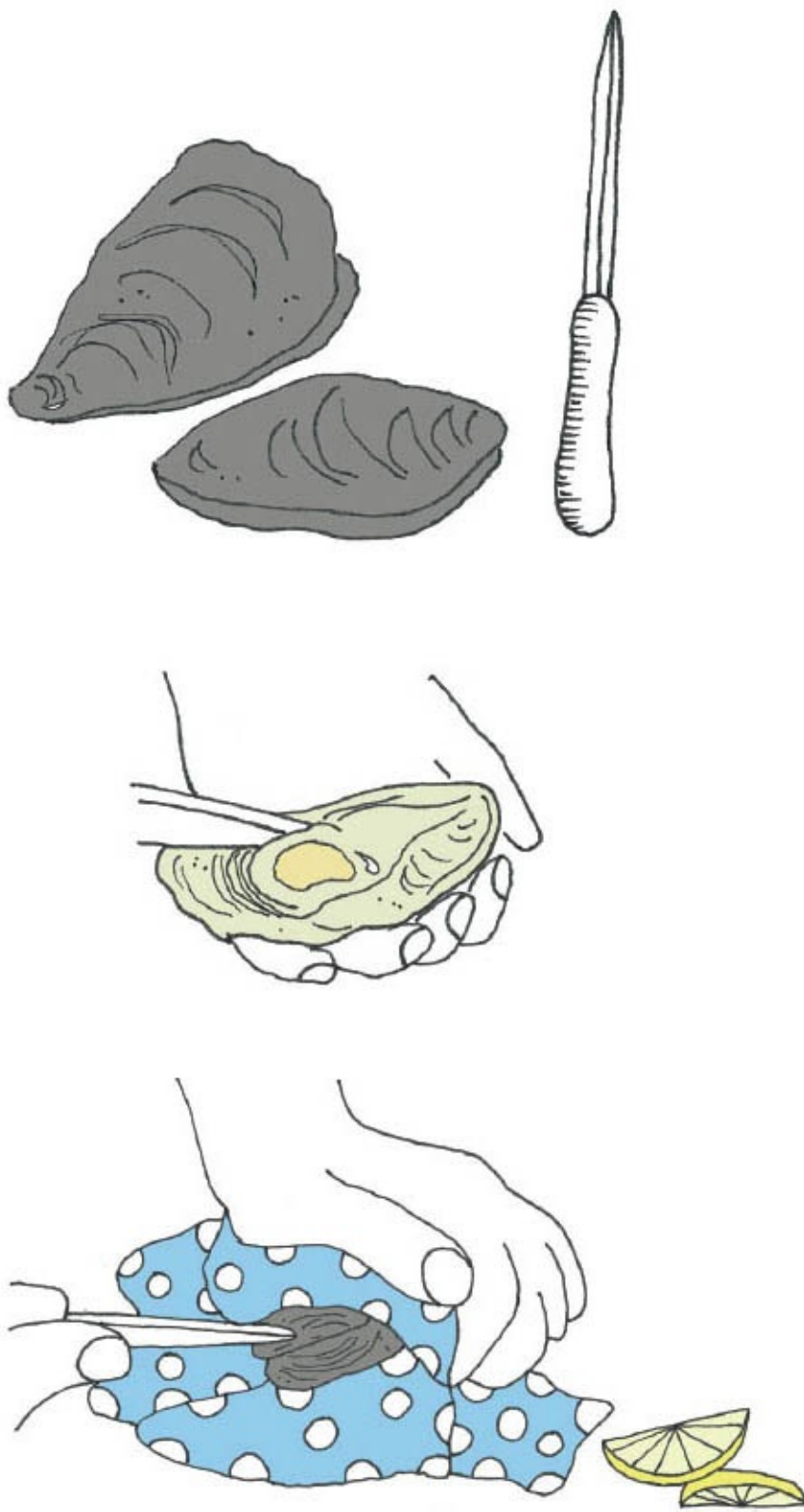
Insert the knife into the hinge, gently wiggling the blade until you hear the hinge pop. With the blade inside, but the shell still sealed, scrape between the top of the shell and the oyster to cut the upper abductor muscle, then repeat for the bottom muscle. Style points for finishing with a Philly Flip, a trick move that flips the meat over (with the oyster cut free) to showcase the smoother side of the flesh in the “cup,” or lower curved shell, while concealing any tears that may have occurred during opening. (Why Philly? The city had almost four hundred oyster houses by the late nineteenth century.) This maneuver also lets you check for shell flakes that

might have fallen into the “liquor” (the liquid inside the shell) surrounding the shucked oyster.

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#### UNION OYSTER HOUSE METHOD

Insert your knife at the hinge and invert the oyster, with the knife butt pointing down to the table. Tap the butt on a stone or other sturdy surface until the blade point splits the hinge. Separate the two halves of the shell, releasing the oyster from its top shell but leaving it attached to the bottom shell, or cup, so the oyster is alive until served and slurped down. Wear thick gloves—the folks at Union Oyster House know what they’re doing. (The Boston establishment has been open since 1827, making it the oldest continually operating restaurant in the United States.)



## Shell It Out

What to do with all those shells? Crush them on your driveway for that Cape Cod look all year round, grind them up and feed to your chickens to strengthen their eggshells, or add the shells to your soil for extra calcium. Most areas reuse oyster shells to cultivate and restore oyster beds. Used shells can also be repurposed as a construction material called tabby, which is used in houses, patios, and sidewalks.

## TOOL OF THE TRADE



Curved-Tip Oyster Knife

A common misconception is that the duller the oyster knife blade, the safer it is. In fact, a blunt tip requires extra force to get into the hinge, and that ends up being riskier than its sharper competition. You want a sturdy blade with a good point for plenty of leverage at the hinge, like this model, which has been handmade in New England since 1854 using only American materials.

# SABER A CHAMPAGNE BOTTLE

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“Champagne sabering adds a festive pop to any occasion. The technique is said to have been going since Napoleon Bonaparte’s armies lopped the tops off champagne bottles to celebrate their victories. There’s a bit of physics, a bit of danger, and, of course, a lot of confidence involved. The glimmer of the steel knife, the bubbles, and the light filtered through the glass bottle create quite the spectacle.”

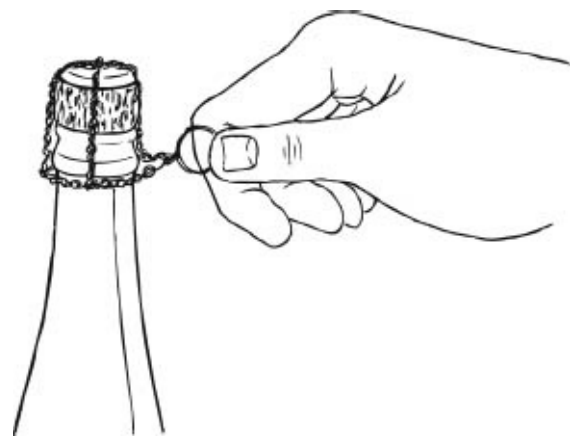
—Becky Sue Epstein, wine and spirits author

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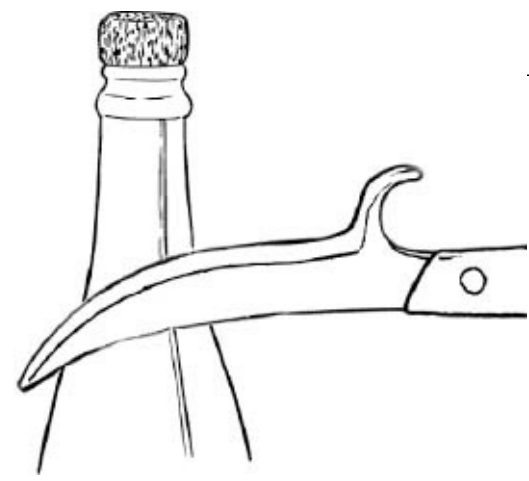
## OFF WITH ITS HEAD!

Although sabering off the top of a champagne bottle might seem like a feat best left to a professional pirate, a few simple pointers will sharpen your technique considerably. When sabering—there are experts you can hire, if ever you start to feel weak wisted—do it outside where you have plenty of room, and practice with a cheap bottle beforehand. Because, as Napoleon would surely agree, the only thing worse than botching a sabering job is wasting good champagne.

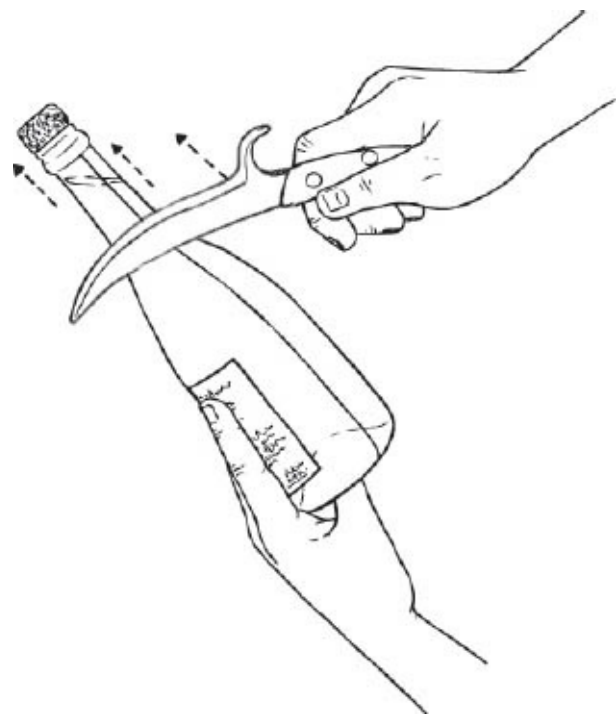
- 1 Chill the champagne bottle by fully submerging it in an ice bucket (the neck also needs to be cold) or refrigerating it for two to four hours. The cold ensures that the glass is brittle and the liquid is as carbonated as possible. Chilled champagne will expel from the bottle as a controlled stream of foam when sabered, whereas sabering warm or room-temperature champagne will cause the bottle to explode.
- 2 Unpeel the foil of the chilled bottle and remove the wire cage so that the neck is completely exposed.



- 3 Find the crease, or the seam, where the two halves of the bottle meet. The bottle is weakest where this seam meets the lip; this is the place you will strike. Run your knife along the seam a few times to get your bearings without hitting the lip. (The saber itself doesn't break the bottle: it propagates a small crack that allows the pressure inside to release and the brittle glass to separate cleanly.)



- 4 In one hand, hold the body of the bottle (not the neck) pointing away from you at 45 degrees to the ground. Place the blade flat against the bottle, with the edge aimed toward the lip. Swiftly and surely glide the knife all the way along the seam and right through the lip with the force of slamming a door. This motion will take the top off the bottle. Make sure to keep your hands off the neck at all times; only the blade should be in contact.



- 5 Leave the bottle at 45 degrees for a few seconds, so that the pressure of the carbonated beverage pushes out any miniscule shards of glass in a foamy stream—and also for dramatic effect. Then bring your champagne flutes to the bottle and let the party begin!

## A Drop in Time

Champagne has a long history of fueling celebrations. Starting in the late fifth century, French kings held their coronations in the city of Reims, in the heart of the Champagne-Ardenne region. Festivities were held before and after the crowning, during which time the famed fizzy libation flowed freely. The sparkling beverage continued to whet the whistles of merrymakers during the Napoleonic Era,

according to popular lore. In 1814, triumphant in the hard-won Battle of Reims, the thirsty and victorious French cavalry reputedly grabbed bottles of champagne and, from atop their horses, sliced off the tops with their sabers, spraying the effervescent liquid dramatically into the air. The saddled soldiers rode away while guzzling their bottles of champagne, leaving a trail of foam and dust in their wake.



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sample content of The Kaufmann Mercantile Guide: How to Split Wood, Shuck an Oyster, and Master Other Simple Pleasures

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