

# Knife Safety: Practice What You Preach

Originally Published *Club Gourmet Magazine*, May/June 2005

© ALAN E. ACHATZ, CCM, CHE

ClubSafetySolutions LLC

[www.ClubSafetySolutions.com](http://www.ClubSafetySolutions.com)

What do you do when the guy who preaches safety injures himself? Do you laugh? Do you think he doesn't know what he's doing?

When I visit clubs, restaurants and other businesses and review their injury/illness logs, it seems there are always knife injuries as part and parcel of daily operations. Most times, it is an inexperienced person that either cuts / stabs themselves and sometimes someone around them.

Years back, I learned how to chop vegetables hard way. Now I tuck my thumb and curl my fingers to guide a knife blade while chopping. Prior to learning the proper way to chop, I lost the edges from two fingertips while chopping a bag of onions. When I cut the second tip, I had to go to the hospital and was asked if I brought the tips with me? The answer was no and to this day there is a slight angle on two of my fingers.

Now that I am older and supposedly wiser, I have a drawer full of knives. Eight different paring knives; a handful of stiff, flexible and curved boning knives; three different French knives; seven carving and bread knives; oyster & clam knives, cleavers and a meat saw. There is an electric knife sharpener, a three-stone sharpening set and the ubiquitous sharpening steel. Most who know me know that my knives are sharp!

Is it a sharp knife or dull knife that cuts you? Which cuts deeper a regular blade or serrated? A dull area on a blade is what causes the knife to slip; the sharp area does a nice job of slicing. A serrated blade can cut to the bone!

## SO HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

I decided to make soup. My basement freezer is different than most residential freezers as I have various stocks and glace de viande already put up. I grabbed a few gallons of frozen stock and started chopping the garlic, carrots, celery, onions, and cooked off the rice while browning the meat.

The meat and rice were ready to be added to the almost thawed stock. The onions, garlic and celery had been 'sweated' and were ready to join the stock. I had almost finished chopping the carrots and felt the section of the blade that pivots while I chop getting dull. I figured that since I

was almost done I could finish the last pound or so of carrots before I re-sharpened the blade. Oh, how wrong I was! The blade got the backside of my index finger on the down stroke!

OK, I know first aid and have been a first responder. I have seen enough knife cuts while working in the kitchen or as a manager and know that direct pressure and elevation are the first steps. With this knowledge it is nice to say that nary a drop of blood spilt in the kitchen. So there I was pinching my cut knowing that I gotta good 'nick' and had to bandage myself, go get stitches and finish the soup. I grabbed a paper towel, antiseptic, surgical tape and went into the bathroom. Before turning on the water I got the tape and towel ready and went at the bandaging task. The water laid the skin flap open and after losing 4 drops of blood, I was ready to clean up the kitchen before leaving for the emergency room.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

After an hour of waiting to see the doctor for stitches, I was ushered in. I was asked how it happened and told the story and I asked what I should have done differently. The Doc said that paper towels or tissues are never to be used as they dissolve into the cut. If the cut seals up the wound has to be reopened to remove the paper. So use cloth or gauze.

I had assumed that my 'nick' was going to require 6 or 7 stitches and when I asked the Doc for his thoughts as to how many stitches and he said four. (There are times when one knows to shut up and this was one of them.) So he administered the anesthesia and I looked away while he stitched. I will admit to flinching quite a few times. When he finished, he said he gave me six stitches and the way he made that statement I wondered if the insurance company might have dictated that only four stitches are supposed to be put into an index finger cut?

What did I learn? When a knife feels dull, STOP, and sharpen it!

## **OTHER THOUGHTS ON KNIFE SAFETY**

- *If you drop a knife let it fall.* Don't try and grab it (or kick it). I have seen the results of such actions and it is a lot worse than my few stitches.
- *Don't put knives in the sink.* Way back as a lowly pot washer I found one the hard way! Luckily I found the handle first in that soapy water.
- *A knife drawer may not be the best mode of storage.* Dividers inside the drawer or a block unit may be better than loose storage.
- *Do NOT walk with a knife in hand.*
- *Do NOT turn and talk to someone with a knife in hand.* You might stab someone.

## **A FEW CLOSING THOUGHTS**

Knife safety is a tremendous undertaking. Training will be continual due to the constant turnover in the industry and training may include servers, bus persons, snack bar and bartenders.

First responders will also have to be knowledgeable in first aid and blood borne pathogen clean-up procedures.

Safety can never be taken for granted even by a safety pro. If you would have told me that I was going to cut myself with one of my own knives and end up with 6 stitches, I may have laughed at you. Now I don't mind if you laugh at me as long as you (or your staff) do not suffer a similar malady!