

Gerber — A Knife and a Family

All I wanted to do was learn what made my kitchen knife different from others and how to sharpen it. I succeeded: the knife is made of tool steel, the only brand to be so constituted, and it rarely needs sharpening, if at all.

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History

John W. Gerber (1865–1945) brought his family from Montgomery Township, Hickory County, Missouri to Clackamas, Oregon about 1899. His grandfathers had immigrated from Switzerland and France. John’s oldest child, Joseph Roman Gerber (1891–1966) married and moved to Portland by 1910.

In 1910 Joseph Roman Gerber, first child of John W. Gerber, bought a small printing company in Portland, Oregon named Brodie-Burke Company. This business filed incorporation with the state of Oregon in 1910. In 1911 it was renamed Arcady Press Inc. as a partnership of Joseph R. Gerber and John L. Caldwell. By 1915 Joseph’s uncle Albion T. Gerber worked there as a foreman as did his uncle Eugene F. Gerber. By 1918 that business was renamed The Arcady Press & Mail Advertising Company. Joseph’s nephew Thomas William R. Gerber¹ had joined him in the business as Service Department Manager. Joseph began his advertising career and the printing company was expanded by the addition of the Joseph R. Gerber Company, an advertising agency that was later renamed Gerber Advertising Agency.

In 1938 Joseph was approached by David Zephania Murphy, a blacksmith employed by the city of Portland, who had a hobby of making carving knives; his knives had tool steel blades and molded aluminum handles. Murphy took his knives around town to sell, and was quite successful. When Joseph saw Murphy’s knives, he envisioned them as gifts he could send to his clients during the holiday season.

The knives were a hit. Because the knives were so popular, Gerber arranged for Murphy to produce the knives on a larger scale. In 1939 Joseph founded Gerber Legendary Blades as a cutlery manufacturer.² Joseph left the marketing to his eldest son, Francis Roman “Ham” Gerber, and the bookkeeping to his wife. Murphy was in charge of manufacturing. Ham spent his 1940 honeymoon setting up dealerships across the country, primarily at jewelry and specialty item stores.

On December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Murphy switched from making kitchen knives to military combat knives. In 1945, after the war ended, the Gerbers restarted their cutlery

1. Thomas W. Gerber had been the manager of the Western Division of the United Press. In 1918 he bought an interest in the Arcady Press & Mail Advertising Company, of which he became Vice President. He eventually moved to New Hampshire, graduated from Dartmouth College, and became a newspaper editor.

2. Many accounts claim that Gerber Legendary Blades was founded by Pete Gerber. That is not true—Pete was 10 years old in 1939.

business with Ham as president. Inspired by the presence of “legendary” in the firm’s name, Ham gave the kitchen knives names from legend: Excalibur, Miming, Balmung, Joyeuse, etc.

By 1947 Gerber’s knife production had hit its stride.

In 1951, when Ham’s brother Joseph R. “Pete” Gerber Jr. graduated from college, Pete became President of Gerber Legendary Blades while Ham became Vice President. In 1953 the brothers’ father was Chairman of the Board. Francis’ wife Louise was Secretary.

Under Pete Gerber’s leadership from 1951 to 1987, the company grew bigger. Pete focused on expanding the brand’s line of hunting knives and producing knives for the military. Gerber quickly became the most trusted name in knives by the 1960s. The kitchen knives were discontinued by the 1970s. Current production is exclusively outdoor and combat oriented.

Over time, the Gerbers employed several designers. Dean Pollock (1897–1971) was a partner in the Gerber advertising agency by 1958. He had been the art director when, about 1936, he designed the Joyeuse knife. The Gerber Legendary Blades have twice been exhibited by the Museum of Modern Art among their “100 best designs of the year.”



Joseph Roman Gerber flanked by sons Francis Roman Gerber (left) and Joseph Roman Gerber Jr. (right)



From the collection of MOMA

Joyeuse Knife

Designed by Dean Pollock (1897–1971) c. 1936-46

Medium: Chrome-plated tool steel blade and chrome-plated cast aluminum alloy handle

12 1/4" long

Pollock also designed the Miming steak knife and the Ron carving fork.

The knives were labeled with words stamped into the underside of the handle:



In this case “RON” is the name of the knife.

In 1987 the Gerbers sold their knife business to Fiskars, a Finnish conglomerate.

Kitchen Knife Materials

At least at the outset the knives were made with recycled metals. Old aluminum heads and pistons, purchased from auto repair shops, were used for the aluminum handles. Recycled power hacksaw blades, ground to shape, were used for the blades; this undoubtedly was the introduction of “tool steel.”

Tool steel, the material the Gerber kitchen knife blades were made of, is also called M-2 steel; it is a High-Speed Steel that works well in blades requiring a hardness rating of 62–66 RC³ — like hacksaw blades. M-2 steel was first used in American cutlery kitchen knives and folding knives by Gerber Legendary Blades; in fact, Gerber was the only knife manufacturer that used this metal. Content: Carbon 85%, Tungsten 6.35%, Molybdenum 5.0%, Chromium 4.0%, Vanadium 2.0%.

Tool steel is particularly suited to cutting tools that need to withstand higher temperatures without losing their temper (hardness). The name *high-speed steel* is based on its ability to cut faster than high carbon steel.

The Gerber blades are classed as stainless steel while having the advantages of high carbon steel:

Durability	Sharpness
Flavor Preservation	Affordable
Recyclable	Hardness
Appearance	Edge retention

They are practically perfect for kitchen use.

Care of Gerber Kitchen Knives

Any efforts at sharpening a knife must be appropriate to the angle to which the knife blade was sharpened by its manufacturer. Blade sharpening is not meant to replace the existing edge.

Gerber knives are sharpened with a uniform 15° angle on each side for a total of 30°.

3. RC is an abbreviation of the Rockwell hardness scale.

The kitchen knives came with the following advice:

CARE OF GERBER BLADES

Keep the cutting edge of Gerber blades clean and dry when not in use. A good rinse in hot water followed by wiping or a quick shake and air drying, will keep the edge clean and bright. (Except for the narrow cutting edge, both handles and blades are impervious to stain or corrosion.)

Many claim that these knives rarely need sharpening. Their material resists most wear from use. However, it may be helpful from time to time to hone the blade, this is done with the sharpening/honing steel sold as Gungnir. It is also possible to hone one of these knives on the back of a ceramic plate.⁴

14 Legendary Blades

The Gerber knives were named by Francis Roman “Ham” Gerber with inspiration from legend.

Balmung was the sword that Sigurd used to kill the dragon Fafnir in Norse mythology.

The Gerber Balmung was a carving knife. Its overall length was 14 1/4 inches.

Curtana, also known as the Sword of Mercy, is a ceremonial sword used at the coronation of British kings and queens. It was first so used at the 1236 marriage of Henry III of England and Eleanor of Provence. It was thought to be the sword of Edward the Confessor. It may have been Tristan’s sword. The *Prose Tristan* (1230–1235 and 1240) states that Tristan's broken sword was inherited and renamed "Cortain" by Ogier the Dane, one of Charlemagne's paladins. And from Cortain the name evolved to Curtana. The current sword is a copy made in the 17th century, and is one of the Crown Jewels of the United Kingdom.

The Gerber Curtana was a cake knife, 9 3/4 inch long.

Durendal or Durandal was the sword of Roland, legendary paladin of Charlemagne in French epic literature. According to *La Chanson de Roland* (The Song of Roland), the sword was brought by an angel to Charlemagne who was at the vale of Moriane, and Charles then gave the sword to Roland. Tradition has it that the sword was capable of cutting through giant boulders of stone with a single strike and was indestructible.

The Gerber Durendal was a boning knife, also described as a small steak carving knife. The overall length is 11 1/2 inches, the blade length is 6 1/2 inches.

Excalibur, in Arthurian legend, was the sword of Arthur who drew it from a stone. The sword was made on the isle of Avalon.

The Gerber Excalibur was a carving knife with a long narrow blade. The overall length was 16 3/4 inches.

Flamborge. The name may have been a variation of flamberge, a type of sword with a wavy blade. The undulating shape of the blade is said to have advantages in combat.

The Gerber Flamborge was a chef style knife with a 10 inch blade, 15 1/2 inch overall.

French. No legend here. There are two styles of chef’s knives (that differ primarily in the shape of the blade): French and German. That the blade shapes differ is not evident in photos of modern knives.

The Gerber French was a chef style knife with a 8 inch blade.

4. This technique is described at <https://www.oregonculinaryinstitute.com/2010/8/3/cuts-like-a-knife>

Gungnir, in Norse mythology, was the spear of the god Odin.

The Gerber Gungnir was a rod sharpener (honing steel). Its overall length was 15 1/4 inches.

Joyeuse was the legendary sword of Emperor Charlemagne. Some legends claim Joyeuse was forged to contain the Lance of Longinus within its pommel; others say the blade was smithed from the same materials as Roland's Durendal and Ogier's Curtana.

The Gerber Joyeuse was a small steak carving knife, 11 1/2 inch long overall with a 6 inch blade. It was originally designed by Dean Pollock and is in the permanent collection of MOMA.

Lord Sandwich. The legend here revolves about the origin of the word “sandwich”. It is said to have been John Montague, the 4th Earl of Sandwich (1718–1792), who requested meat served between two pieces of bread in order to avoid interrupting a gambling game. (Members of the English aristocracy, like dukes, barons, earls, etc., are generally referred to as “Lord” so-and-so.” Consequently, the Earl of Sandwich was addressed as Lord Sandwich.)

The Gerber Lord Sandwich had a serrated cutting edge and a squared off tip. It was designed to slice bread.

In Norse mythology, **Miming** was a forest-dwelling troll, the son of Hothbrod and foster son of Gevar. In a Teutonic version of the myth of the death of Balder, Miming's sword is the weapon that Hodur uses to slay Balder; here, Hodur is not blind but is instead a physically potent figure. Miming's sword was said to have been forged by Weyland, the god of smithing, for his son Heime.

The Gerber Miming was a steak knife. It was originally designed by Dean Pollock and is in the permanent collection of MOMA.

Pixie. In the UK, pixies are the little people believed to inhabit ancient underground ancestor sites. They are mythical creatures of folklore.

The Gerber Pixie was originally a bird and trout knife (a sportsman's knife). I use it as a paring knife. It could be used as a fruit knife. The overall length is 7 in, the blade 3 1/2 in.

Ron. In the Arthurian legend, Ron was the spear of Arthur. Its early names were Rhongomyniad and Rhongowennan.

The Gerber Ron was a carving fork with two tines, it was 11 inches long. It was originally designed by Dean Pollock and is in the permanent collection of MOMA.

Siegfried was the legendary dragon-slaying hero in the *Nibelungenlied* (The Song of the Nibelungs), an epic poem in Middle High German.

The Gerber Siegfried was a carving fork with two tines. It was shorter, flatter, and narrower than Ron. It is 10 7/8 inch long.

Snick was not a sword, but the sharp clicking sound made by things like a latch.

Gerber made two knives with this name: Little Snick and Big Snick. Little Snick was a carving knife with an 8 inch blade and a forked tip. The Big Snick was 18 inch long carving knife, also with a forked tip, its blade is over 12 inches long.

Snickersnee was a large knife. The name has evolved over a couple of centuries from a two-word phrase: steake or snye, which was also written as stick or snee, snick or snee, snick-a-snee, and in other ways. All these versions go back to a couple of Dutch words meaning to thrust or cut.

The Gerber Snickersnee knife was a carving knife with a forked tip, it was 15 1/2 inch long, the blade was 10 1/4” inches long.