

Foodie Freak: Richard Ethridge, knife miracle worker

Contributed by Ross A. Christensen
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I was in The Kitchen Gallery in downtown Lakeport (I'll cover them another day) and I asked if they knew of anyone who sharpened knives locally. The woman behind the counter mentioned a man who could "do miracles with knives" and scribbled a name and number on the back of a card.

Being a cynic I thought, "Miracles? Yeah, right." I mean, I still needed my knives sharpened, but I certainly wasn't expecting a revelation.

So I called the man whose name was on the card, Richard Ethridge, and brought him my first round of knives.

He's an open and very interesting person. Spending his youth in the Marine Corps and hanging out in San Francisco at the height of the Haight-Ashbury days, Ethridge is something of a free spirit and nomad. He got into knife sharpening in 1968 and fell in love with it.

"Steel makes sense to me," he said.

With that talent under his belt he started wandering from place to place around the country, doing odd sharpening jobs to support himself, and picking up and leaving whenever he wanted to move on.

When he was in his 40s, Ethridge apprenticed with Exclusive Cutlery in San Francisco for two and a half years. He then worked for some of the large clothing manufacturers in the city, sharpening their tools.

He is now retired but likes to keep his hand in the sharpening business. And he does it for the love and the art and the craftsmanship of it, not just to make a buck.

Ethridge is an artist as well as a master craftsman, working in pencil, pastels, photography and graphic design, in addition to the metalwork. "But I always come back to working with steel," he said.

He does all his work freehand, by feel and eye, something most people don't do anymore. But just how good are his sharpening skills?

A couple of days after I dropped off my first batch of knives, he called me to say that they were done. When I arrived to pick them up he showed them to me, and not only were they exceptionally sharp but they were polished and more beautiful than the day that I bought them.

Then he demonstrated to me just how sharp they were by shaving the hair off a spot on his arm. Which makes me wonder, how is it anybody in the cutlery industry has any hair left on their arms?

That evening as I started dinner preparations I pulled out one of the newly sharpened knives and was absolutely amazed – no, not amazed – struck with fear at how sharp my knives had become. I mean, in the kitchen the knife is my tool, to do what I command, yet right then I had respect for the blade's ability.

All I had to do was point my knife at an eggplant and just out of sheer terror it immediately fell apart into perfect slices, as if it would rather fall apart of its own free will rather than feel the blade. Maybe that is an exaggeration, but seriously, the knives Ethridge worked on are so sharp that they slide through their tasks without effort.

I have since brought to Ethridge every kind of knife I have to be sharpened: chef's knives, filet knives, paring knives, even some of my favorite gardening tools like my asparagus knife, and my prized Japanese machete. My daughter even had him polish and sharpen her woodworking tools. Every time, I'm stunned with the beauty and the quality of the job.

I'm convinced that if you were to give Ethridge a rusty harmonica he could return it to you as a razor sharp kitchen tool that could still be in tune (not that you would want to have it near your mouth in any way)!

There are people everywhere who do a great job at what they do and I appreciate every one of them, but very rarely can I call someone a "master craftsman" without any hesitation or fear of overstatement like I can with Ethridge. He not only makes knives work to their full potential, but he also beautifies them beyond expectation.

Since he's retired now and works in his own small space, Ethridge can't really manage large items like swords or saws. He prefers to do fine cutlery restoration, to work with knives, scissors, clippers, and smaller garden tools.

His prices are very reasonable, especially considering the quality job he does. So reasonable that I have never asked him how much a job would be, I just ask him "What do I owe you?" when it's time to pick up my knives. If the job is big enough, say a beauty shop or cooking school, he can do the work at their site, but with the cost of gas and everything I wouldn't expect him to come to my house for my small amount of knives.

Ethridge is on my list of true hidden jewels of the county, and we are far richer to have him here.

You can get your knives sharpened with Ethridge by calling him at 707-631-1772. His place in Nice is easy to find in a beautiful park, 2570 Lakeshore Dr. No. A-3.

Ross A. Christensen is an award-winning gardener and gourmet cook. He is the author of "Sushi A to Z, The Ultimate Guide" and is currently working on a new book. He has been a public speaker for many years and enjoys being involved in the community.

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