

Delectable Carvings

Practice your carving techniques in a new and delicious way

By Kathleen Ryan

If you are looking for new ways to use your woodcarving skills, you might want to step out of the woodshop and into the kitchen. According to world-class food sculptor Jimmy Zhang, you can apply the carving skills you use on wood to transform everyday fruits and vegetables into jaw-dropping centerpieces and breathtaking creations, such as fabulous carved flowers, birds, and sea creatures. “If you can carve a piece of wood, then you can carve a piece of sweet potato. You’re using the same techniques and the same tool. Only the texture is a little different,” said Chef Jimmy.

After winning top national culinary art awards in China, Chef Jimmy relocated to the San Francisco Bay area in 1997. Then, he founded Art Chef Inc. to promote and perpetuate the ancient art of fruit and vegetable carving, which was invented in China more than 2,000 years ago (see “History of Fruit and Vegetable Carving”).

“When embossing or carving things like melons or squash, we use a paring knife, a Thai carving knife, and U and V cutters. These are very similar to woodcarving tools like the paring knives, U-chisel [gouge], and V-chisel,” he explained. “Of course the texture of food is different, so you have to work with it differently. For example, we can use U and V cutters to quickly carve long flower petals or long bird feathers. But then we have to soak the food in cold water until they present the natural curve of flower petals or feathers, which is a little different from the way you use U-chisels and V-chisels on wood.”

One of the biggest advantages of food carving is that the category is so huge—hundreds of different kinds of foods can be used as carving material. “The creations I carve are usually based on the material’s size, color, texture, and shape. I study the food item and then visualize the design in my head before I start to carve,” said Chef Jimmy. “I enjoy the whole process of carving. For me it’s like a physical meditation because I feel so relaxed and calm when I’m concentrating on my carving. It’s a wonderful time.”

The process of carving food can be fairly simple and quick. Some carvings, like small flowers or birds, can be finished in a few minutes. Unfortunately, food carvings are quite perishable, so there is a limited window to appreciate and enjoy them. Chef

Jimmy suggests you work quickly and take lots of photographs. “I usually make nice arrangement for my carvings, and then I take many photos from different angles with different backgrounds. This part of the creative process is also very pleasant for me, because it lets me enjoy the end results when the work is all done.”

To learn the basic techniques of carving food, Chef Jimmy suggest you start on small items, like radishes, carrots, turnips, cucumbers, and melons like honey dew and cantaloupe. “These materials are easy to create simple carvings using basic knife skill,” he said. “It is very good for the beginner to practice controlling the knives, making sure every cut is accurate, even, and smooth.”

In addition to teaching and practicing this amazing art, Chef Jimmy is constantly seeking new ways to improve his techniques and take his artistry to the next level. He encourages wood carvers of all skill levels to join him in exploring the fun and artistry of food carving.



To see a step-by-step slide show on fruit and vegetable carving, visit <https://picasaweb.google.com/zjimmy/DemoAtArtGarly?feat=directlink#>
Or visit his Chef Jimmy’s website at www.artchef.com.

History of Fruit and Vegetable Carving

The ancient art of carving fruits and vegetables began around 2,000 years ago in China. It developed slowly over time, flourishing as far back as the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-906). This exquisite craft was used to garnish feudal banquets as well as to decorate the tables of the middle classes. Food carving techniques were introduced to Thailand in 1364 and developed under direction from the king. Although both countries perfected and perpetuated the art, there are differences in interpretation between Chinese and Thai carvings. Thai carvers make mostly floral images, whereas the Chinese create the allegorical figures and images represented in their stories and legends. Today, fruit and vegetable carving is a highly cultivated art form practiced all over the world.

Tips For Carving Fruits and Vegetables

- Select fruits and vegetables that are more resistant to wilting and browning.
- Eliminate any fruits and vegetables that have bruises or rotten spots.
- Clean all fruits and vegetables thoroughly before carving.
- Handle foods carefully so as not to damage them during the carving process.
- Use only knives with stainless steel or bronze blades to avoid food discoloration.
- All carving tools must be very sharp with clean edges.
- Items to be carved should be appropriate to the dish or display size in which they are to be used.

