

## Cutting Edge - Knife Master: South Sound Bladesmith Bob Kramer hammers out knives admired by world-class chefs and auctions them online – some for thousands of dollars

By ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI; STAFF WRITER

May 25, 2011

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Bob Kramer's smithy doesn't look medieval from the outside. Tucked away on a back road between Olympia and Lacey, it's in a bland industrial park with no sign on the door. Walk through reception, though, and you enter another world filled with fiery furnaces, sparking grinders and sticky-hot steel – and at the center of it all, a mild-voiced man in round glasses who makes blades that the princes of the high-flown cooking world line up to buy for thousands of dollars.

"It's a better knife than any other in the world," says Seattle chef Mark Canlis, who owns six of Kramer's blades. "To understand why, you have to start cutting things. He's a master in his trade, and it shows."

Kramer's knives are, in fact, works of art. They recline in display drawers or assert themselves on magnetic racks around the workshop like self-possessed sculptures: the glowing box elder handles studded with brass circles, the glinting steel blades swirled with oil-on-water patterns, and the smooth sheath worthy of a knight's sword. Each one takes a week to make; Kramer and his one employee only make around 150 a year, and the waiting list is many months long.

They also sell like works of art. The standard pricing for a Kramer knife is \$150 for regular steel, \$400 for the swirling Damascus style – per inch, that is. A standard 10-inch Damascus chef's knife would set you back \$4,000, not that Kramer's even taken on any new orders since CBS did a feature on him in 2009.

But for people who don't want to wait, Kramer recently set up an auction page on his website, [www.kramerknives.com](http://www.kramerknives.com). After he discovered a fraudulent eBay auction a few months ago (and called in the FBI to stop it), the knife maker decided he needed an independent sales venue to guarantee authenticity.

The highest price so far has been \$21,600.

Kramer, gloved and masked as he waits for a block of steel to melt in his furnace, shakes his head unbelievably at the price, but he's quick to explain why people who love to cook are willing to spend as much on his knives as they would for a small car.

“People have a rekindled appreciation for hand-crafted items. It’s like the slow-food movement – they’ll pay more for organic tomatoes, for wines without sulfites. Having a tool in the kitchen made by a craftsman rather than a factory has more value than it used to.”

He pauses and squints at the furnace. “And they cut like crazy.”

They do, indeed. Kramer is a master bladesmith, one of only 110 or so in the world, and to get that recognition from the American Bladesmith Society is as difficult and quirky as a medieval quest. First, a knifsmith must pass the journeyman’s test: hand-forging a 10- inch blade that can cut a one-inch rope with one slice, chop a two-by-four block in half (twice), bend to 90 degrees in a vice without breaking and still have an edge that can shave a man’s arm.

Two years after passing this comes the master’s test: forging five Damascus blades (including one 15th-century Quillion dagger) that can all execute those same tasks. One flaw, and you’re disqualified. (As a bonus, Kramer also showed he could use his knife to saw through a bolt before hacking the tops off a row of waterbottles.)

It’s the kind of intensity that only the truly dedicated can stick at. Kramer wasn’t always a knifsmith, though: Growing up in Detroit, he spent his youth coping with dyslexia and went on to be a clown for the Ringling Bros. Circus. He took up sailing, and finally worked in restaurant kitchens during his years at the University of Washington. “It was too much work,” he remembers. “I wanted my own business.”

Through hours of chopping, Kramer became interested in what made knives sharp, and became a traveling knife salesman and sharpener. In 1992, curious at how knives were made, he attended a two-week class at the ABS school in Arkansas.

He’s been addicted ever since. Setting up shop in Olympia, Kramer started collecting equipment, and passed his master’s smith test in 1997. He’s also traveled six times to Japan, studying samurai sword-making, and until recently worked six or seven days a week to figure out how to make the best knife.

“I’m obsessed,” the 52-year-old Kramer says matter-of-factly. “It takes everything I have to do this.”

So how does Kramer make a \$4,000 – or, for that matter, a \$21,000 – knife?

It starts with 25 layers of steel. Kramer welds the corners of a stack of three kinds of tooled steel, and attaches a temporary handle. The stack, around 2 by 2 by 4 inches, then gets heated to 2,300 degrees in a small furnace, rather like a glass-blower’s glory-hole. When it’s sticky-hot, Kramer pulls it out with tongs and hammers it down with a 10-foot-tall power hammer, controlling the descending block with a foot pedal. Back it goes into the furnace, and after three or four hammerings it’s about 18 inches long and a half-inch thick. Kramer then squeezes it with a power vice, the diamond-shaped hole pushing the horizontal steel layers around into bracket-shaped curves. After a few more times, the block is cooled, ground down, cut into fourths and restacked – and the process begins again, with 100 layers.

If he’s making a regular, \$150/inch knife, Kramer will use 400 to 500 layers of steel before he starts grinding and cutting the blade. For a Damascus, he’ll stack up to 1,800 layers, each one pressed and curved in the vice until the inside is as twisted as a candycane. Eventually, the whole thing is impressed with a grooved bar in hydraulic press.

How many hammerings does one knife need?

“As many as it takes,” says Kramer, with Zen-like obliqueness.

When Kramer or his working apprentice finally cuts out the blade shape and grinds it to thickness, those layers are revealed in all their exotic patterns, each blade unique. All that’s left, then, is heat-treating in a liquid salt bath, tempering, hand-hammering to straighten, and a final polish and edge put on the blade, again by hand, before the handle is attached.

It’s hot, dangerous, dirty work. The dozen grinders are kept behind plastic curtains, but even so gritty steel dust coats everything, and Kramer’s fully kitted with mask, earmuffs, apron and heavy-duty gloves. The noise is intense, the heat more so – “I try not to forge anything in summer,” Kramer explains as the furnace flames lick out – and the atmosphere’s esoteric, with Japanese masks and theater posters on the walls alongside woodblock prints of 19th-century smithies.

“I love Japanese culture: the food, the theater, the art,” says Kramer, who once made himself a samurai sword. “They’re perfectionists, and it’s a craftsman society – everyone is striving to be excellent at what they do.”

It sums up Kramer’s own way of life. Apart from a love of travel, and cooking for friends at home with his wife, Bob Kramer’s entire life is about blades.

“People who are really good at what they do, do it all the time,” he points out, “like Picasso, he worked continuously.”

And like Picasso, Kramer has a following of people who collect his knives.

“They’re like pieces of art,” says Ellen Middleton, an Olympia resident who waited 18 months to get her Kramer knives (one a Damascus).

“It took us a while to realize it was an expense worth paying for. Once we did, we were absolutely blown away.”

“The blade has a good weight and balance, and holds an edge longer,” explains Mark Canlis, though he admits that the Damascus styles are collector’s pieces, too expensive to actually use in the kitchen where the acid from tomatoes or lemons might wear away the pattern. “They’re stunningly drop-dead beautiful; it makes you happy just to sit and look at it.”

But the real virtue in a Kramer knife, apparently, is in the cutting.

“When you cut with it, it’s slower, it’s less routine and more art,” says Canlis. “It’s more about the journey than the task. To have a handformed tool really changes the dish. You can taste it.”

Rosemary Ponnekanti: 253-597-8568 [rosemary.ponnekanti@thenewstribune.com](mailto:rosemary.ponnekanti@thenewstribune.com)