

Fruit Carving 101

The “wow” effect is what all chefs strive for when preparing food.

By Daniel Pliska, CEC, *executive chef/assistant manager, the University Club and Catering, University of Missouri, Columbia, Mo.*

It has been said that the artistry of food preparation touches the five basic senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch. Visual appeal is perhaps sensed first, and that leads to the enjoyment that comes from employing the other senses. Visual presentations are often brought to a high artistic level in sugar, chocolate, ice, vegetable and fruit carvings.

When working with sugar and chocolate, there are chemistry aspects to be considered and special tools to be mastered. This is also the case with ice carving, with the addition of the physical strength required. Among these mediums, vegetable and fruit carving is the least complicated.

Fruit carving requires few tools—often just a small paring knife. It can be done simply and quickly for production, or taken to another level with more time and training. It is one of the mainstays of buffet presentations on cruise ships and in hotels and resorts, as well as in clubs.

Watermelon Crown

- 1) Cut top and bottom off watermelon; reserve for garnish.
- 2) Split watermelon in half on bias.
- 3) Scoop out with ice cream scoop; reserve spheres.
- 4) Cut top of watermelon three-quarters of way down to bottom, leaving lip. “V” cut at 45° angles to create 90° texture in flesh.
- 5) Place spheres back in watermelon. Carve top and bottom with “v” cut to create fans. Garnish crowns with fans and additional fruit and berries, if desired.





The art of carving

The detailed techniques used in both fruit and vegetable carving came to the U.S. from Asia, where it has been practiced for more than a thousand years. The traditional styles come from China, Thailand and Japan. The Chinese style is perhaps the oldest, and is said to have originated during the Tang Dynasty in the 6th century. In the traditional Chinese style, carvings are often three-dimensional and crowned with small animal figurines.

In Thailand the art is called *kai-sa-luk*, and is said to have had its beginnings in The Royal Palace, Sukothai, about 700 years ago. Because it was once feared that this art would be lost, today it is taught in schools from the early grades through university. The other traditional style of carving, *mukimono* art, comes from Japan and is said to have been popular during the Edo period, 1600-1800. Classic *mukimono* carvings typically have clean, precise lines.

Modern practice

Although ancient in origin and steeped in legend and history, fruit and vegetable carving is again coming into fashion. In 2008 on *Food Network Challenge* "The Rematch: Fantasy Fruit Sculpture," Ray Duey, CEC, owner, Chef Ray Presents, Woodbridge, Calif., paired with James Parker, owner, Veggy Art, Chantilly, Va.,

to create a multitier masterpiece that stood more than 6 feet tall and featured a sun sculpture towering over a seabed adorned with a carved treasure chest and shipwrecked vessel. The piece, which was completed in four hours, won a gold medal and \$10,000.

Competitions are becoming more popular, and many criteria are taken into consideration during judging, according to Bill Sy, CEC, AAC, academic department director of culinary arts at The International Culinary School at The Art Institute of Tucson (Arizona). Sy is trained in both Chinese and Thai techniques of fruit and vegetable carving, and often serves as an international judge. He says judges look for the degree of difficulty in the techniques, as well as the variety of product, number of products used, detail, color contrast and, finally, overall design and total presentation. Sy says Chinese food seldom uses garnishes except for vegetable and fruit carvings.

Learning curve

Even though the art of carving fruit can be highly detailed when done by experts, simpler carvings can be used in daily production, such as those shown here, which can be completed in from 2 to 15 minutes. Even though many carvings are made with just a paring knife, there are

Left: This winning sculpture is from the Food Network Challenge featuring Ray Duey and James Parker. Center: Bill Sy is trained in Chinese and Thai fruit and vegetable carving techniques, and often judges competitions. Right: Ray Duey carves a watermelon half into an elaborate flower.

specific toolkits that contain from six pieces at the basic level to 87 cutting pieces used by expert carvers. Certain fruits, such as papayas, canary melons, watermelons and Chinese melons, lend themselves well to carving, but almost any fruit can be carved into something beautiful. Some of the more unusual fruits that work well are plums and rhubarb, according to Duey.

Fruit and vegetable carving, which is often a major component of a garde manger's skill set, is rarely taught in U.S. culinary schools; however, videos and seminars can be found on the Internet.

Although advanced skills take years and an innate artistic skill to master, simpler techniques for daily production can be learned quickly and used to add the "wow" effect to a fruit display. With so many styles, techniques and skills displayed in fruit carving, it is yet another area of culinary arts that should be learned, and one that will help to elevate our profession to an even higher level.

Carvings by Daniel Pliska

Photos by Lauren Frisch



Pineapple

1) Split pineapple almost in half through green top, leaving $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch base on bottom of one half. **2)** Cut off top on other half. **3)** Peel; slice. Separate slices; place back on base in overlapping fashion. **4)** Place split pineapple top behind main piece; garnish with additional fruit, if desired.

Cantaloupe Flower

1) Cut cantaloupe into five-pointed crown, still connected at base. **2)** "V" cut into each point on melon; repeat on other side. **3)** Separate into two halves; clean out seeds. **4)** Cut two slices into sides of each point; repeat on reverse side of points. Repeat on other side of crown. **5)** Pull points away from center to create petals. **6)** Cut orange or kiwi crown; place in center of each melon half. **7)** Place sides together or use each side separately for different fruit trays.



Honeydew Artichoke

1) Cut off melon bottom. Cut skin and $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch flesh away from melon, forming five petals and leaving bottoms attached. **2)** Trim each petal into clean oval shape. Cut sides of each petal into 3-4 leaves, with nice leaf on top. **3)** On inside of petal, cut stem; "v" cut between each leaf to create texture. **4)** On melon center, starting from top, cut small arch shapes all around melon to form artichoke center leaves. Cut away center to between arches. Cut more arch shapes below first row of arches; carefully trim down between rows of arches. Remove piece cut between rows to create texture. **5)** Continue on another one or two rows until bottom of melon is reached. Fan out outside leaves; use for garnish.

