



# CARVED OUT

Balance, precision and a determination to always know more drives knifemaker Sam Gleeson's obsession with the perfect blade.

PHOTOGRAPHY **SHANTANU STARICK**

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Sam is working on renovating the mezzanine of his workshop. "I've had too many long winters in cold, dark, damp workshops."



**ABOVE** Reclaimed timber cut-offs that will become handles. **ABOVE RIGHT** A knife is rough grinded into shape and then heat treated and quenched, before grinding again. **RIGHT** “The heat treatment and quenching is what hardens it all up and turns it into knife steel,” explains Sam. **BELOW** Blades awaiting handles. “There are two types of handle,” according to Sam. “A Western-style of two pieces riveted together or a Japanese style, in which the knife slots into the handle.”



**Sam Gleeson has lived many lives, in many places** – as a chef, surfer, furniture maker, a stint founding and running the World Mountainboard Championships. Now, in a small workshop just outside Ennistymon in Co Clare, he’s perfecting a knifemaking craft that is a happy melding of all of his passions.

Originally from outside Cambridge, England, Sam arrived in Dublin “with the intention of being there for two months” to help his friends Aisling Rogerson and Luca D’Alfonso build their café, The Fumbally, in Dublin 8. He ended up staying, cheffing there for the first year and then, as interest in the recycled nature of his and Barry Rogerson’s Fumbally fit-out grew, the duo set up This Is What We Do, creating upcycled furniture for homes and restaurants.

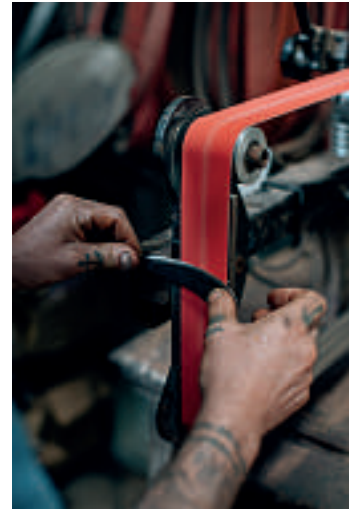
Eventually drawn out to the West of Ireland for the waves, it was on a sunny holiday in Schull that he had his first experience at a grinder with friend and fellow knifemaker Fingal Ferguson. “He asked if I wanted to make a blade and afterwards he sent me away with the finished piece and a few other bits and that really got me interested.” He spent the next year messing around in his own time, confessedly using “not the most suitable tools”, but after a second attempt with Fingal a year later, he realised how far his skills had developed. “We made another knife and I felt I had come a fair way from what I had previously understood.” Back in his own workshop, an old agricultural building next to the 120-year-old farmhouse he shares with his wife, chef Niamh Fox, he invested in a new grinder, and the hobby took over from there.

Sam’s workshop is an ode to the reclaimed and inherited machines and tools that sit on shelves and benches, including an anvil and some hand tools that belonged to his father. Making parts for vintage engines, Sam’s tutelage in the malleability of metal really began in his dad’s garage. “I was never a ‘rev head’, but what I loved were the





Finished knives with Sam's logo are ready to be sent to their owners, who wait about 14 months for their order.



machines Dad had. He could take a piece of metal and create a part for a tractor from 1890 or a racing car from 1920 or an aeroplane that had flown in World War II.

"I really enjoy making stuff with his tools, knowing the amount of hours he put in using them over the years," Sam explains, and this philosophy of inheritance is one that has trickled into his knifemaking – creating a piece that will last beyond this generation, remaining functional as well as beautiful. Striving for this level of perfection is also what keeps Sam intrigued. "I really enjoy the process of it, it's so many different things and the more I understand about it and the more I learn the more it opens up and each batch of knives gets better and better."

Now he's ready to dive even deeper, signing up to a blacksmithing course and building a small forge in his workshop to make his own steel. "At the moment I buy a big flat piece of high-carbon steel that I rough grind, heat treat and grind again – it's a lot of hand-sanding.

**ABOVE** Sam's workshop is an archive of salvaged and handmade tools and machines. "I'm also lucky enough to have done some great barter recently with a blacksmith friend, and have some amazing handmade forging hammers that we have been making from old steel." **TOP RIGHT** There's a lot of hand-sanding involved. Sam admits, especially in the final stages of making the blade. **ABOVE RIGHT** A completed pocket knife.

Eventually, I'd like to be making knives as good as Fingal, but with steel I've forged too."

Part of the appeal of the forge, as well as creating something from the very beginning, is the breadth of options that opens up with it. "The Japanese – they are amazing knifemakers – do this folded style," Sam explains. The first is Damascus steel or *suminagashi*, a multiple-layered steel that produces a woodgrain effect when you grind it – "It creates all these little lines that change depending on how you fold it". The second is *kasumi* – three layers, usually a high-carbon steel clad in softer steel either side. "The whole purpose," Sam extols, "is to combine the hard, brittle edge of the carbon steel that you can sharpen easily with the flex of the softer steel to create the perfect knife."

"I mean it's a millennia of genius," says Sam, of Japanese kitchen knifemaking. "So much of Japanese craft and food is about slowness and craft, time and precision." It's easy to see why this methodical nature might appeal to Sam, a constant evolution of skill and development, a continual striving for perfection.

For now, that's a slow and steady development for Sam. Family life and the arrival of a little boy earlier this year, coupled with the opening of their new café Little Fox in Ennistymon, is keeping him busy. But finding the balance is part of the draw too. "It's nice to be able to make things and I love growing vegetables and being out doors and going surfing. If I'm working in the workshop at 11 o'clock at night because I happened to go surfing for four hours during the day, that doesn't bother me." [thisiswhatwedo.ie](http://thisiswhatwedo.ie); [littlefox.ie](http://littlefox.ie)