

The Last Cutting Board You'll Ever Need

We thought we'd picked a winner—until our favorite board warped after just a few years. This time we upped the ante: three months of test kitchen boot camp.

≧ BY AMY GRAVES ≦

Choosing a cutting board can feel like a roll of the dice. You think you're buying a solid, hard-wearing piece of equipment that will last for decades, only to find that it eventually suffers deep gouges, dulls the edge of your knife, or even warps or splits. That's what happened to our once-favorite board, the Totally Bamboo Congo. While it initially passed every test with flying colors, several copies of this model became distorted after a few years of hard-core use in the test kitchen, some even cracking at the seams. Hardly the lifelong purchase we had in mind.

Back at square one, we restarted the search process with nine new boards—wood, bamboo, plastic, and composite models priced from \$22 to nearly \$200—and a firm list of criteria. First and foremost, we wanted space, and lots of it: at least 15 by 20 inches. Any smaller and we feel cramped when butchering chickens and end up chasing carrot coins that roll off the board's edge. We also wanted some heft to keep the boards from slipping and sliding around the counter while we're working. Finally, durability was crucial. We expected shallow scratches, since a blade should stick to the surface just a little; it makes for safer, steadier knife work. Deep gashes, however, would be a deal breaker, as they trap food, odors, and bacteria and can lead to splintering. To get the toughest board we could find, we distributed copies of each model to our test cooks, who put them through three solid months of daily use—the equivalent of years of use in the average home kitchen.

Get a Grip

Our first consideration was how well each of the boards accommodated the knife. More specifically, we observed how the blade responded to the board's surface, and how securely the board stayed anchored to the counter. We wanted a surface smooth enough to allow the knife's edge to glide and make nimble cuts, but nothing so slippery that either the blade or the food slides out of control while in use. This is where most of the wood and bamboo boards excelled: Their soft, subtly textured surfaces offered just enough give and "grip" for the knife to stick

lightly with each stroke as we diced onions and chiles. Conversely, the blade practically slid across the slick surface of one of the plastic boards. And the hard facade of one composite model actually wore down the blade after just 350 strokes. (Knives used on every other board retained edges sharp enough to slice through a piece of paper well beyond 750 strokes.)

As for countertop stability, many cooks slip a nonskid pad or damp paper towel under their boards, but we wanted one that stayed put on its own. That ability depended on one of two factors: the weight of the board and whether it had built-in traction. Thanks to grippy rubber strips affixed to the two lightest boards (both weighing less than 4 pounds), these featherweights stayed anchored to the counter, even as we hacked at chicken with a cleaver. Other models used sheer heft—though the disadvantages of too much bulk became clear when we had to haul the 19-pound composite block to the sink for cleaning.

Wear and Tear

We also evaluated how well the boards survived testing. Each model endured repeated blows from cleavers and chef's knives, and some of them—the plastic boards in particular—had the scars to prove it. With the exception of one model that cleaned up easily despite incurring deep scores, the cleaver gouges acted like mini trenches that trapped food and made them a pain to clean. But the surprise failure was the priciest slab of them all (at nearly \$200). Despite its seemingly indestructible paper-resin composite construction (resin is also used to make skateboard ramps), the board splintered from the cleaver's whack, forcing us to pluck stray bits of it from the chicken.

The durability of the wood and bamboo models mostly depended on how the boards were constructed: end-grain or edge-grain. The former is made by gluing together blocks of wood or bamboo with the grain running perpendicular to the surface of the board, the latter by gluing together longer strips with the grain running parallel to the surface. End-grain models showed fewer scars than the edge-grain boards because their wood fibers faced the surface, and as a result, the knife marks actually closed up within minutes.

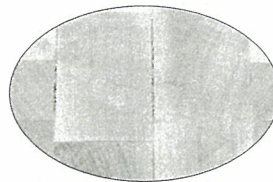
Unfortunately, those exposed wood fibers also soaked up liquid and stains like a sponge, making them prone to warping. The end-grain models in our lineup began to warp—and eventually split—after just a few rinses in the sink. The edge-grain boards, on the other hand, showed no evidence of warping.

A Cut Above

Finally, we considered how much nurture the boards required to stay in good shape. The wood and bamboo models need to be oiled regularly lest they dry out and shrink, absorb too much water, split, or crack. But the fact is, most people don't oil their cutting boards with any regularity. That's why we were intrigued when, even after four weeks of use, the Proteak Edge Grain Teak Cutting Board never appeared "thirsty." Even more impressive, after months of slicing, chopping, hacking, and washing, it retained its satiny, flat surface. With a little research, we discovered that teak, a tropical wood, contains *tectoquinones*, components of oily resins that are resistant to moisture, allowing this particular board to survive far better than the other wood and bamboo models. (Sailboats and expensive outdoor furniture are often made of teak because it can withstand the elements.) At \$85, it's not cheap, but it's far from the most expensive board we tested and offers all the features we want: plenty of space, a knife-friendly surface, and longevity with minimal fuss. We think that makes it worth the price—and the trouble of oiling it every now and then. But if a carefree, dishwasher-safe board is a must, the reversible plastic OXO Good Grips Carving & Cutting Board (\$21.99) makes a good, considerably cheaper alternative.

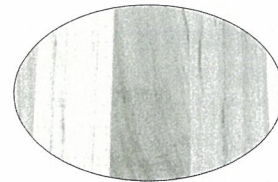
Soaking Up Water at Warp Speed

The alignment of the grain in the wood and bamboo boards in our lineup proved key to their durability.



END-GRAIN = MORE WARPING

In this model from Catskill, blocks of wood are glued together with the exposed grain facing up, which allowed the board to easily soak up liquid and warp.



EDGE-GRAIN = LESS WARPING

This winning model from Proteak is made from planks in which the grain runs parallel to the surface. The planks absorb less moisture and are less prone to warping.

Watch Us Try to Destroy Them

Video available FREE for 4 months at www.CooksIllustrated.com/oct11

KEY

GOOD: ★★★

FAIR: ★★

POOR: ★

TESTING CUTTING BOARDS

We tested nine cutting boards by evaluating their user-friendliness, wear on a chef's knife, ease of cleanup, and durability. All boards were purchased online and appear in order of preference. Sources for the top-rated boards are on page 32.

CUTTING We diced onions, chopped chipotle chiles, minced herbs, and hacked up chicken thighs. Boards with a slight "grip" that kept the blade (and food) from sliding around got higher marks. Those that dulled a knife were downgraded.

DURABILITY We gave copies of each board to test cooks for three months of hard-core use. We ran the dishwasher-safe boards through the test kitchen's high-heat commercial dishwasher 40 to 75 times; we also ran duplicate copies in the top rack of a home dishwasher. After testing was complete, we shoved each board off the countertop. Our ideal: no warping, splitting, cracking, or splintering, and only minimal gouging or scuffing.

USER-FRIENDLINESS Roominess and countertop stability were key, but a good board also was a snap to maneuver (handles were a plus), came clean easily, and didn't require frequent oiling or special care.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

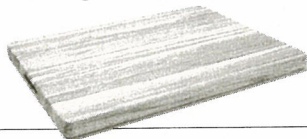
PROTEAK Edge Grain Teak Cutting Board

Model: 107 Price: \$84.99

Material: Mexican teak

Dimensions: 18 by 24 in

Weight: 15.05 lb



CRITERIA	TESTERS' COMMENTS
Cutting	★★★★
Durability	★★★★
User-friendliness	★★★★
Dishwasher-safe	No

Roomy, knife-friendly, and exceptionally durable, this teak slab was worth every penny. It resisted warping and cracking, showed only minor scratches, never seemed "thirsty," and—despite its heft—was easy to lift and clean, thanks to handholds on each end.

RECOMMENDED

OXO Good Grips Carving & Cutting Board

Model: 1063789 Price: \$21.99

Material: Polypropylene (plastic)

Dimensions: 14.5 by 21 in

Weight: 3.85 lb



Cutting	★★★★
Durability	★★★
User-friendliness	★★★★
Dishwasher-safe	Yes

Our favorite bargain board sports rubber strips on both sides that keep its lightweight frame anchored to the counter—and make it reversible. It did suffer deep scratches and gouges but never split or warped, and it cleaned up stain-free in the dishwasher.

JOHN BOOS Chop-N-Slice Reversible

Model: 214 Price: \$44.95

Material: Maple

Dimensions: 15 by 20 in

Weight: 9.4 lb



Cutting	★★★★
Durability	★★
User-friendliness	★★★★
Dishwasher-safe	No

A classic wood model, this reversible, edge-grain board's slightly rough surface offered twofold control: It securely held the counter and gently gripped the knives. Though it absorbed stains and developed hairline cracks after a few months, it never warped.

NOT RECOMMENDED

SAGE Non-Skid Chop Board

Model: SNS-141619S Price: \$46.95

Material: Wood-laminate composite

Dimensions: 16 by 19 in

Weight: 3.15 lb



Cutting	★
Durability	★★
User-friendliness	★★★★
Dishwasher-safe	Yes

This model had its perks: It was thin and lightweight, dishwasher-safe, and stayed put thanks to its nonskid feet. Unfortunately, it warped after several commercial dishwasher runs and was the only model to commit the ultimate cutting board no-no: It dulled a knife.

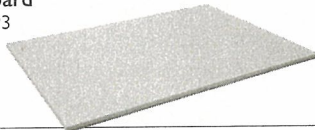
THE CUTTING BOARD FACTORY Industrial Grade Polymer Cutting Board

Model: CG-18024 Price: \$27.93

Material: Polyethylene (plastic)

Dimensions: 18 by 25.25 in

Weight: 7.7 lb



Cutting	★★
Durability	★
User-friendliness	★★
Dishwasher-safe	Yes

The good news: This plastic board is reversible and can be custom-cut to any size. It never warped, even in the commercial dishwasher. The bad news: Chef's knives couldn't grip its slick surface, and the cleaver left cuts so deep that it pulled up strips of plastic.

CATSKILL CRAFTSMEN End Grain Chopping Block

Model: 1822 Price: \$79

Material: Yellow birch

Dimensions: 17 by 20.75 in

Weight: 17.6 lb



Cutting	★★½
Durability	★
User-friendliness	★
Dishwasher-safe	No

What this hefty end-grain block offered in knife-friendliness (a cushiony, grippy surface for controlled cutting) it lacked in durability. Despite a starter coat of oil, both copies cracked after a few rinses and eventually warped, developing bent corners.

TOTALLY BAMBOO CONGO Large Prep Board

Model: 20-3476 Price: \$140

Material: Butcher block-style bamboo

Dimensions: 16.5 by 21.75 in

Weight: 13.75 lb



Cutting	★★
Durability	★
User-friendliness	★
Dishwasher-safe	No

Both copies of this end-grain board arrived slightly distorted, and the warping worsened somewhat over time. Though its feet kept it steady, the rubber pads peeled off. The knife gripped the surface well enough but made a harsh, grating, scissor-like sound as it cut.

THINK BAMBOO Heavy Duty Cutting Board

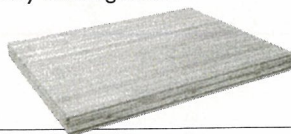
Model: TB002 Price: \$89.87

Material: Edge-grain bamboo

encased by end-grain bamboo

Dimensions: 17.5 by 23.5 in

Weight: 14.85 lb



Cutting	★
Durability	★
User-friendliness	★
Dishwasher-safe	No

Small cracks visible upon arrival in this hybrid-grain board widened after the first wash. Eventually, it warped so badly that it looked shingled. Scratches marred the surface and the cleaver left deep scores. Lacking handles, its 15-pound body was a beast to maneuver.

EPICUREAN Big Block Series Thick Cutting Board with Cascade Effect

Model: 014-241802015 Price: \$199

Material: Richlite (paper and resin composite)

Dimensions: 18 by 24 in

Weight: 19 lb



Cutting	★
Durability	★
User-friendliness	★
Dishwasher-safe	Yes

We figured this model—the heaviest and priciest in the lineup—was in it for the long haul. We were wrong. Cleaver whacks left gouges and raised splinters. Its two best features, roominess and dishwasher-safety, clashed with each other, as this large version (it's available smaller) doesn't fit in most dishwashers.