



TIME, TRADITION, FAMILY

TOPS KNIVES DEMONSTRATES WHY THEY
ARE A HIGHLY SOUGHT-AFTER BRAND

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PHOTOS BY JOSHUA SWANAGON AND JESUS ARELLANO



01: The "Greenhouse." Any knives that take clear Cerakote need to cure for about 5 days for the coating to fully harden—these coatings include tumbled, Black River wash, etc.

02: Each Kydex sheath has the edges buffed to be smooth to the touch and give them a nice, finished look.

03: Each TOPS knife is sharpened by hand—there are only a couple of sharpeners to ensure a consistent product every time.

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Over the past year, I faced something that has had me thinking about all of the things I would like to do in my life.

I would definitely like to go back to the Amazon jungle. I would love to backpack the Appalachian Trail. Seeing Ireland is also very high on my list. But this past summer, the most attainable and achievable was getting on my motorcycle and heading across the country. What better place to go than the TOPS Knives factory in Ucon, Idaho?

Four-thousand miles, Sturgis Bike Week, Big Horn National Forest, TOPS Knives factory, Grand Tetons National Park, Crazy Horse Monument, Mount Rushmore, Harley-Davidson Museum and a ferry ride across Lake Michigan later, and I got to check this one off my list.

Was it worth it? You better believe it.

First Impressions

When we first pulled up to the factory Wednesday morning, it definitely had an air about it that they work as hard as their knives do. This was a no-nonsense factory designed for one thing—putting out high-quality cutlery.

Fortunately, we were just in time to witness a ceremony honoring the father

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of President Leo Espinoza for winning an internal design competition for a hatchet. It was really great to see the kind of recognition they share within the entire shop. Nobody we met was a spotlight hog in any way.

After the brief ceremony, we went across the street to a little restaurant for breakfast with President, Leo Espinoza and General Manager, Craig Powell and it was apparent, from the way that the staff interacted with them, that they are respected within their community. But more than just the community; any time we were in the factory, the camaraderie was more that of a tight-knit family than just a bunch of employees and employers. There is mutual respect throughout.

Testing, Testing, 1, 2, Tree

After breakfast, we were treated to a true behind-the-scenes activity that most don't get to witness. Testing. TOPS Knives is not a company to rest on their laurels, they put them to the test on a regular basis. While there, we were taken out to a favorite playground of theirs, up in the hills, with plenty of things to chop and hack on.

04: Not only is each knife engraved inhouse, they are all individually serialized.

05: Part of a run of Smoke Jumpers, profiled out and waiting for the grind to be added.

06: After the profile is cut and grinds are added, the knives are tumbled to remove burrs and round out sharp corners. Photo credit: Jesus Arellano.

When we got there, we were presented with a small box full of some of their new offerings, and given the choice of knives we wanted to play with. Then, we all headed down the hill to give our chosen implements a run for the money. I felt right at home.

I was also very impressed watching them work; they were very hard on the knives and stopped occasionally to inspect every aspect of each knife to make sure it was holding up as expected. Of course, they did.

Ok, yes, there were some trees harmed in the making of this article, but in all fairness, they were already on the ground.

A Natural Flow

Thursday was a busy day, as we were given the grand tour of the facilities. Being a new location for TOPS Knives, it was really cool to see how well-thought-out the workflow was. Sometimes, when a company has been located in the same location for an extended period of time, the workflow starts to get a little scattered, because as things change and new processes are brought in, they may be placed

Anniversary

Founded in 1998 by Vietnam veteran Mike Fuller, TOPS Knives is coming up on their 20th anniversary of delivering high-quality knives to professional personnel and civilians alike. As they approach their anniversary year in 2018, TOPS is showing no signs of slowing down and has only made leaps and bounds, with exponential growth, in their 20 years in business.





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where there is room, as opposed to where they work best.

With the TOPS Knives new factory, Leo established a nice workflow throughout the building, right from the start. Add to that, the fact that they moved from

Top Left: A TOPS Mini-SPIE folder getting the finishing touches to ensure it's ready for its new home. Photo credit: Jesus Arellano.

Bottom Left: TOPS adds the coating to each knife inhouse, whether it's powder coat or Cerakote. Photo credit: Jesus Arellano.

Middle: Just a few Mini Scandis getting ready to ship out to their new owners.

a smaller location, which allowed Leo to spread out the equipment and leave room in different areas of the factory to allow for expansion in the processes, while maintaining the natural flow.

Processes

There really isn't much that can be said about how their knives are made that isn't already written in other articles about almost any knife manufacturer.

However, what I can say is that throughout my tour, I got to witness some of the processes, which I am not at liberty to disclose, that were put in place by Leo and have really enhanced

the way certain aspects of knifemaking are done and taken to the next level. This goes for both the quality of work and the decreased time it takes to do it.

When asked about the processes they use, President Leo Espinoza had this to say, "One thing that we have always done and always try to do is make a unique product. We don't do things the same as other companies. We make our own way. You know a TOPS knife when you see one, and that's because of the way we do things."

As we walked through the factory, it was clear to me that there are hands

on the knives at almost every single step of the process. TOPS Knives prides themselves on the fact that they are truly hand-finished knives, in every sense. The processes put in place by Leo made that possible without compromising speed or quality.

General Manager, Craig Powell only amplified this sentiment by stating, "I'm always impressed with how much we're able to produce with such a high level of quality. That's because there is a quality control every step of the way. After our knives are cut by the CNC machines, pretty much every step afterwards is handled by a person, and each

person has a part in the quality control process. Once a process is in place and the quality is what we expect, then we worry about how quickly that process can be completed."

Finally, every knife is inspected along the way with final clean up and inspection before packaging. They go the extra mile to make sure that every knife that goes out is up to their standards.

Final Impressions

If you were to judge TOPS Knives solely on their fan base, you would think that they are making knives out of unobtainium and quenching

Top Right/Bottom Right: TOPS holds their quality to very high standards and frequently makes a point of taking their knives into the woods to put them through hard testing. I was privileged to take part in some of that testing. Photo credits: Jesus Arellano.

them in unicorn tears—not that this is necessarily far from the truth. But the actual truth is, this is a reputation they have earned through hard work and dedication.

It is not often that you go into any company and see everybody working together as a family, but that is definitely the case with TOPS Knives. Even better than that, when you go to TOPS Knives, they treat you like one of the family and that is worth its weight in unobtainium. **KI**

Branching Out

Always looking for new ways to grow, TOPS Knives has been branching out into new areas, with new finishes now available, and new folders already hitting the market—and there are more on the very near horizon.

Along with keeping things fresh with their cutlery, TOPS has also been adding some other products to their growing line of accessories, such as a slingshot and spork.

20 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

1998

TOPS opens with Steel Eagle 107D as the first model. 3 employees and Mike (plus a few guys that helped out with startup costs).

Approx. 2000

Moved from a 1-bay garage into a 3-bay garage—all knives are still hand-ground. By this point, they're making Steel Eagles, C.A.T.s, Interceptors and a few other models.

Also, approx. 2000

Leo is teaching himself how to grind, sharpen, and other knifemaking steps, after hours.

Approx. 2003

Leo's first design is released—the Blue Otter—Leo knows all the knifemaking steps and begins doing more for the company than making knives.

Approx. 2004 or 2005

To keep up with demand, some models are now cut with bevels added with CNC machines. The CNC shop is in one building, assembly and finishing in another shop, and offices/shipping in another. More and more models added.

Approx. 2008

Leo is promoted to Vice President. By this point, he has done just about every job in the company, from janitor to photographer, to designer and more.

Late 2014

New building is acquired that is large enough to house assembly/finishing and offices together. CNC is still done in a separate building. Mike is preparing for retirement and having Leo take over.

2015

Mike officially retires (even though everyone still views it as his company), and Leo takes over as president of TOPS.

2018

TOPS Knives celebrates 20 years of excellence.