



Fissler

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Project: Exclusive collaboration with Prof. Thomas Gerlach - "Making of" the knife lines

1. Mr. Gerlach, You have designed the three new knife lines - profession, perfection and passion - for Fissler. Do you actually cook yourself?

Yes and no. My parents had a restaurant on the Möhnesee and employed about ten cooks. I loved to spend time in the kitchen as a child and was sometimes even allowed to help out. I noticed that most of the cooks handled their knives as if they were sacred. Many of them even had their very own set of knives. As an adult, however, I have never gotten around to cooking very much, which makes me more of a cooking theoretician (laughs). But my wife is a fantastic cook, and when we are on the road, we are not likely to skip a good restaurant we are near.

2. In practice, however, you are a renowned designer. How did your collaboration with Fissler come about?

I've been working with Fissler for some time now. Our first joint project was the magic line cookware, and the most recent was the re-launch of the entire pan range. It was based on the idea that not every pan is suited for every cooking method. We wanted to give the consumer a visual orientation guide based on clear design elements. The idea was to make it easy to recognize which pan was meant to be used for what purpose.

3. Was the development of knife design new to you?

Yes. I was a total novice in regard to knife design - just as Fissler was a newcomer to knife design in the current scope. The fact that we were entering unknown territory together made me all the more excited about the project.

4. What is particularly important in designing a knife?

Well, first we develop a story for the product and its design. Ours was: We wanted to make sharpness visible, easily visible. So we set out to identify the characteristics of a knife that would be relevant for our story - and found sharpness, visual impression and balance. A Fissler knife needed to be more than sharp - after all, the consumer expects any knife to be sharp. It had to look sharp, too, and rest nicely in the hand.

Only after that do we define the target groups and determine design priorities for each target group. A knife in the profession line, with its functional and graphic elements, has become almost an object, one that appeals to professional chefs. We have presented the knives in the passion line, with their calm, organic forms, as candidates to become the most



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popular of knives for daily use. For the perfection knives, innovation is key. The rotated tang in the handle is almost a bit of art. Anyone who likes lifestyle will love perfection.

5. Does the designer begin his work with a specific type of knife?

If you are designing an entire knife line, you begin with the core products - which means a large chef's knife and a small paring knife. The other items fall into line between them. The important thing is for you to already have defined the design concept and the target group at this point, so that you know the direction you want to take.

6. How does an expert recognize a premium knife?

Key here are the balance of the knife and the elasticity of the blade. How well does the knife lie in your hand? The way professionals hold a knife is totally different from the way an amateur cook does - much farther to the front, more in the center of balance. The pro can literally "feel" a premium knife. The blade of a carving knife, for example, is so flexible that it can easily slide past the bone.

7. And how can the consumer recognize a premium knife?

The secret lies in the knife's overall aura and, as mentioned above, in its balance. A knife's aura results from its unique combination of brand, product quality, and sales communication. It is all intertwined. If the consumer trusts the brand, he will have a positive attitude toward the product. If the quality of the product is good, this will have a positive impact on the brand. If the salesperson is well informed and convinced that the product is a good one, he will certainly be able to rouse the consumer's enthusiasm, etc. The overall package must be a good one.

In regard to product quality, Fissler clearly has the highest of standards. In the final analysis this is, of course, good for both the product and the customer. In Fissler's profession line, for example, the square rivets not only enhance the look, but add to the quality. Since they are not only inserted, but completely cast, they do not start to wobble, but ensure that the tangs hold much better. Consumers often associate complex ideas with an item. They might think, for example, "It is elaborately manufactured, expensive, and high-quality - thus a premium product." Fissler takes advantage of this very line of thought to differentiate its products from others.

Today's consumers are well-informed. They are well aware that not every product that is labeled premium is truly premium. This is why consumers like to test a product themselves before they buy it. With knives, for

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example, they can inspect their sharpness. (This is relative, however. Before buying a knife, a potential buyer must consider whether he wants a sharp knife that will stay sharp without any special care, or whether he wants a knife that has the ultimate show sharpness, but will soon have to be sharpened again.)

8. How do the design concepts of the three knife lines differ from one another?

Without a doubt, they all have one thing in common: They are all in the premium segment.

In the upper end of the premium segment, total belief in the product is key: "Love it or leave it." The two lines - profession and perfection - polarize, and they are intended to do so.

Profession is for the intrinsically creative individuals, who care about having fine things in their life and examine the product very carefully. A profession knife comes very close to an archetypal knife. It is unconventional, always present in the user's hand, very striking due to its high material density, and can be more precisely controlled when cutting. Its subtle aesthetics paired with the highest of quality appeal especially to purists and, of course, professionals.

People to whom prestige is important like to be surrounded with products that demonstrate an upscale lifestyle. They want everything to be as "perfect" as possible. The perfection line with its pure aesthetics is thus perfect for them.

We see the passion line at the other end of the premium segment. Its knives also have a unique design, but they have a more organic look and therefore greater charm. Passion knives do not polarize like the profession or perfection knives, but people generally identify with them.

9. Did you take the target groups for the various knife lines into account while developing their designs, or were they allocated to these groups afterwards?

In line with the conceptual approach of my company, via4 Design, we begin by analyzing the positioning. The overall positioning of the brand is key, and the products' individual positionings are found within it. In collaboration with the client, we visualize each individual target group as precisely as possible. At the product level, we then need to find out what features will help us to win over which target group. Of course, we must always make sure that our ideas are in line with the overall image of the

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Fissler brand. In a word, target group definition and corporate positioning go hand in hand.

One thing must be absolutely clear for every new product development: The product must be perfect, otherwise we are in danger of damaging the brand - in the case of Fissler, a very valuable brand - as a whole. An additional prerequisite for Fissler was that the design concept of the knife lines had to work all over the world.

10. Form follows function - Functionality plays a significant role for Fissler and for the consumer. How have you been able to link your credo "Form follows emotion" with Fissler's standards of functionality?

This is actually a very simple matter today. People will not buy an item that does not work. This means that the discussion regarding design versus functionality is no longer necessary. The emotionality that arises from design, however, can also be useful. Form thus exerts an influence on the emotionalization of the target group.

11. How long does the process of designing a knife take, from the idea to the realization of the item? What are the most important steps in the process?

It didn't take much time for us to come to an agreement with Fissler regarding the design. The creative process per se took about 20 percent of the overall development time. It normally takes a year, depending on the breadth of the product range. The classic sequence is something like this: We determine the target groups and give them a face. At the very beginning, we tried out various knives, simply to get a feeling for the subject matter. Initial design suggestions are made. When we have decided on some, we make up foam models. These are followed by cast prototypes. The overall process is highly computer-aided, but at the same time requires quite a bit of handcraft know-how, such as grinding. In the course of a completely new product development like this, problems naturally arise from time to time. Not everything can be implemented exactly the way it has originally been envisioned. When this happens, you have to consider what problems can be solved by changes in the design - without altering the character of the product.

In the development of the knife lines for Fissler, for example, some new production equipment was necessary. Such details that are involved with a project are exciting and provide additional motivation.



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12. What features make the three knife lines especially user-friendly?

A great plus point for the user is the extreme sharpness of all three knife lines, resulting from the special polishing step. This makes it possible for the knives to be used easily and safely. By the way, it is much safer to handle sharp knives than dull ones. With dull knives, a great deal of force must be exerted for cutting, you can slip more easily, and the danger of injury is thus greater. The Fissler knives stay sharp for a very long time and can easily be re-sharpened with a sharpening steel. Also user-friendly is the fact that all of the knives can be cleaned perfectly and very easily.

The product lines are also structured so that even the occasional cook will immediately know which knife is intended for which purpose. But even passionate cooks who appreciate the extraordinary will find special products in the range, such as the profession Nakiri knife.

13. Have the designs also undergone practical testing?

We conducted the practical testing with the help of a professional chef. Frank Buchholz, who also collaborates with Fissler in other areas, tested the knives under true-to-life conditions. He preferred the profession line - as did many other professional chefs.

14. What materials did you use for the new knife lines? Were you also involved in selecting the materials?

Chromium molybdenum steels, plastics > Details from Mr. Reining, Ms. Somerlik.

Finding the ideal balance between permanent sharpness and easy re-sharpening.

Intensive research/Refining of cross sections.

15. Did your work end once the design was completed, or were you also involved in the production process?

My work was pretty much done after the design phase. However, I did continue to take part in meetings of the work group and served as an advisor to Fissler. Although it rarely happens, one sometimes confronts difficulties in producing a real product out of a design idea. If this should happen, designers, material technicians and engineers join forces to search for the best solution. In the case of the Fissler knives, for example, the thickness of the handles had to be adjusted.

16. The perfection and passion knife lines were awarded with the red dot. How do you feel about receiving a coveted design prize like the red dot?



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During the course of my career, I have won more than 100 prizes. The red dot award is certainly one of the world's most renowned design prizes. Awards are not that important to me personally. But I can understand that my clients care about them, because an independent award always represents a confirmation from a neutral source. I particularly like the concept of the Kitchen Innovation Award, in which the jury is composed of consumers as well as experts.

17. A product's design seems to play an important role for an increasing number of consumers. How do you explain this trend? Does good design make it more likely for a customer to purchase the item?

Let me ask you a question in return: Are there any articles of daily use around today that do not demonstrate design? As I see it, there are hardly any. Just in the kitchen - whether it is a built-in appliance, a garbage can, or an egg pick - nothing is spared offbeat design. All too often, in fact, the design is an end in itself, one which negatively impacts the function.

I say "spared" because many objects are unnecessarily over-designed and the market is following a trend toward simplification. More and more consumers are moving away from the useless and toward the essential, perhaps even to a greater extent toward existential human needs. And these definitely include good knives. If a knife fulfills its basic function - that is, if it cuts very well - and you can practically see how sharp the knife is, as is the case with the Fissler knives, then I would say, "Yes, design like this does increase the customer's readiness to purchase it."

18. Award-winning German design is copied again and again, which means enormous losses for the manufacturer. To what extent have you been affected by the growing market for counterfeit products?

I am certainly familiar with the problem of illegal copies. The losses suffered by the manufacturers of the originals, in regard to image and sales, are very aggravating. I believe that in most cases the thesis "only the successful are copied" applies - but this is little comfort, of course. As I see it, ideal protection from copies does not yet exist. Just the same, the higher the bar in product details, technology and quality, the more difficult it is for product pirates to jump over it. The hurdle for the new knives from Fissler is in any case very high.

19. What does "Made in Germany" mean to you?

To me, from the point of view of the designer, Made in Germany means increasing the know-how we have in Germany and taking advantage of the resulting competitive edge. To create this situation, and to maintain the



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competitive edge thus achieved, long-term investments in Germany as a location must be implemented.

20. Do you have a favorite knife?

Yes, the bread knife. It is also excellent for slicing tomatoes, whose surface tension often makes them very difficult to cut and which cause nightmares for knife manufacturers. (laughs)

21. What would you like to design next?

I would like to devote myself to products that stabilize the product range. These are products that are popular because of their archetypal character and that do not founder in the rapids of useless things. As you can see, I am particularly fond of the trend toward simplification. This is why I enjoyed working on the knives so much, for they are an integral part of our daily life.

22. What artists and designers have had an especially strong influence on you?

I have always tried to develop my own style and to establish my own identity, so other artists or designers have not had much influence on my work. I simply prefer a lively dialogue with "my" students to hoping for inspiration in a museum of mute art. Modern design requires modern-day stimuli. This is why I value collaboration with young people so much. It frees you from traditional patterns and opens your eyes to a new creativity.

23. How would you describe your style?

My style is primarily characterized by an intensive dialogue with the client and offensive forward thinking. When working on a project, my team and I immerse ourselves in the client's world. To begin with, we try to get to know the company and understand it. Then we think about which products or ideas would take it forward strategically. The work of a designer is comparable to that of an actor who has mastered his craft. He takes on a role and puts his own mark on it. No more and no less. I find it important to always avoid forcing the client to accept a design idea. The emphasis should always be placed on the brand or the product. This is why I like to think of myself as a "low-key designer."

24. Would you mention a few of your references?

Via4 Design developed the design for the "Max Blue" brand for the Deutsche Bank, for example. We created new theme worlds for Swarovski and a new corporate design for county of Calw. I am always especially proud when we have completed demanding and difficult projects. When Fissler, a manufacturer of cookware, decided to enter a new field and for



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the first time put knife lines on the market which it had developed itself from scratch, this was precisely that kind of exciting challenge.

25. Mr. Gerlach, what did you like best about working with Fissler?

Our collaboration was characterized by professionalism, striving for quality, and staying power. Fissler places extremely high standards of quality on the products in its core product range, and these standards were to be applied to the new range as well. It was obvious that this would not always be easy. But the people I worked with at Fissler were extremely capable. And even if my suggestions hurt more than once, my interlocutors were always willing to listen and absolutely determined to work out the best possible solution. This spurred on our collaboration and impressed me very much.

Professor Gerlach, thank you for this interesting conversation.