How to safely open coconuts

Ingredients

Method

While it can be helpful to know that you can buy your coconut in practically any form you could possibly need it, buying a whole coconut from the supermarket can help you make the most of the fruit. But first, you need to learn how to safely open coconuts so you're not risking your fingers trying to get to the delicious flesh.

What's the difference between hairy coconuts and 'drinking' coconuts?

When you head to the supermarket, you're likely to come across two types of coconuts: the hairy brown coconut as seen in cartoons, and a lighter, greenish one. Rather than being different varieties, they're simply the same type of coconut at different stages of the life cycle.

The green/lighter coconut is younger – which is why they're often called a young or new coconut – and is labelled for drinking because it contains higher levels of coconut water. This is the best type of coconut to get if you want more water, such as when making cocktails. The gooey, gelatinous meat can be scooped out and thrown in a blender to create coconut milk if that's what you need.

Older coconuts are by no means worse than their younger counterparts. In fact, they simply offer different ratios of coconut water to meat. When you open a hairy brown coconut, you'll get a reduced amount of water and will find that the meat is thick, fibrous and full of that great coconut flavour.

Selecting your coconut

With that in mind, before you buy your coconut, make sure you know what you want to do with it. But don't worry too much: if you're wanting the coconut water from inside you can still buy a mature coconut, provided there is still water inside. So how can you tell? When selecting your coconut, pick it up and give it a shake. You should be able to hear liquid sloshing around inside. The less sloshing you hear, the higher meat to water ratio you'll find when you crack it open.

How to safely open coconuts

Whether you're wanting to drink the water straight from the coconut like you're on a tropical island, or get cooking with the flesh of a mature coconut, you need to know how to safely open coconuts before you can get started.

Opening a mature coconut

1. Hold your coconut so the three dots are facing up.
2. Using a clean screwdriver or ice pick, test each of the three dots to see which is the softest. This will be your initial opening point – it should go into the coconut with a little bit of pressure.
3. Wiggle your tool around in the hole to open it up a bit more.
4. Invert your coconut over a glass or bowl so the coconut water can drip out – you may need to give it a little bit of a shake to get the water flowing.
5. To get the meat out, preheat an oven to 200°C (if you have any full-size NEFF oven, the CircoTherm feature ensures even distribution of heat – and makes this step easy).
6. Place your coconut on a baking tray and leave in the oven for 20 minutes.
7. The heat from the oven will help to separate the meat from the shell. Pull it out of the oven when you start to see cracks forming on the hard outer shell of the coconut.
8. Using the back of a sturdy chef's knife or meat cleaver, or even a hammer, hit the coconut repeatedly along the cracks that formed in the oven.
9. When it separates enough around the whole coconut, use your fingers to pry it open the rest of the way.

- Wedge a spoon in between the coconut shell and the meat and use it to separate the two. After being in the oven, the coconut meat should come out in large chunks.
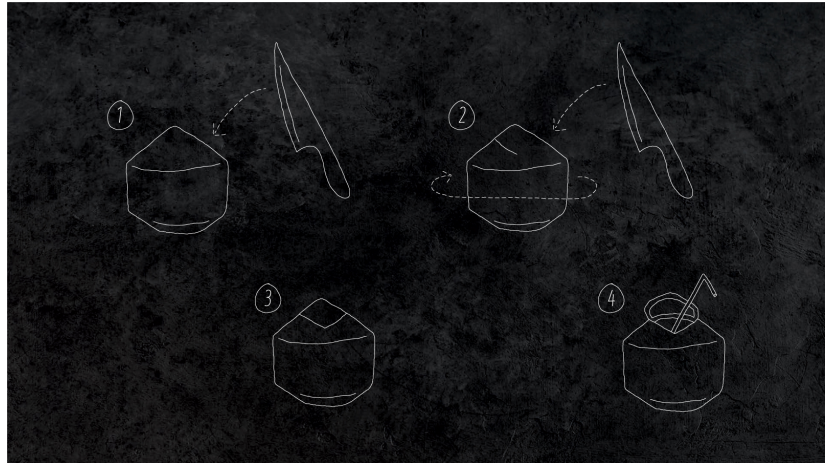
Opening a young coconut

Young coconuts, particularly those that have been peeled to the white shell before sale, can be a bit trickier to open. You can buy a coconut opening tool or even use an electric drill to puncture a whole big enough for a straw to get the liquid out. However, if you want to get at the gelatinous meat inside this is the best method:

1. Hold your coconut securely by the base, being careful to keep your fingers tucked away.
2. Use a sharp, sturdy knife and strike the coconut about an inch away from the point at the top. It may take a couple of tries or a good hard swing to get through the husk.
3. Turn the coconut 90 degrees and do a second strike to overlap with the first.
4. Repeat twice more.
5. Use your knife to pry into the coconut and lever off the top square. You should be able to scoop out the flesh once the water has been drained.

Notes