



NOVEMBER 7, 2012

The Best

When I got back to San Francisco after a three month trip to Southeast Asia last year, I had no possessions. I was living out of hotels. Everything I carried had to fit into a backpack, so I spent the time to carefully research and buy only the very best of each individual item I was carrying. The best towel. The best pen and notebook. The best headlamp. The best headphones. The best wallet. Everything I owned had been carefully designed by a person who cared deeply about the problem being solved.

An interesting side effect, which I hadn't anticipated, was that I developed a blind trust in the things I used. I trusted my lamp to be bright enough to light up the wheel well of a truck when its tire went flat, and it was. I trusted my wallet to hold cash, boarding passes, and IDs without deforming or falling apart, and it did. I trusted that my towel would dry quickly, because it was designed for travel, and it did. I trusted the zippers on my backpack to stay closed as I hiked through the night, and they did. These might seem like stupid things to worry about, but when you have trust in everything you own, you don't have to worry about anything. It's liberating and an amazing feeling. My life was markedly better because of it.

When I finally moved into an apartment, I resolved to continue the same lifestyle. I'd only buy the very best of everything, even if that meant owning very few things. If I wanted flatware, for example, I'd force myself to research the industry, history, and philosophy behind flatware, then explore the biological implications of different designs, and finally—but only after becoming completely confident

in my ability to gauge quality—I'd carefully select the very best, and most practical, flatware that is for sale.

As it turns out, Sori Yanagi, a Japanese product designer from a family that made Samurai swords, created the perfect flatware in 2002. [You can see and buy it at MoMA.](#)



Yanagi's flatware is great because he designed it from a position of functional design instead of salable design.

Yanagi:

Things that are easy to use survive, regardless of what is fashionable, and people want to use them forever. But if things are created merely for a passing vogue and not for a purpose, people soon get bored with them and throw them away. The fundamental problem is that many products are created to be sold, not used.

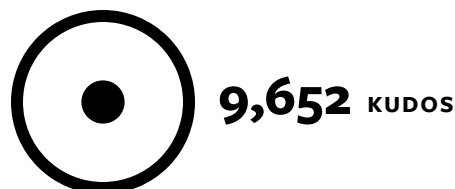
Some of the things that matter in flatware design are obvious, like the material and weight. Other things, which are arguably more important, are seemingly never even considered, like how the metal feels against your teeth, for example, or how the weight balances in your hand. The long term durability of each utensil is also important, and so is the slipperiness of the metal against food. Yanagi thought about these things.

Yanagi designed his flatware to stand the test of time. He died in 2011, but his design lives on.

“The best” isn’t necessarily a product or thing. It’s the reward for winning the battle fought between patience, obsession, and desire. It takes an unreasonably long amount of time to find the best of something. It requires that you know everything about a product’s market, manufacture, and design, and that you can navigate deceptive pricing and marketing. It requires that you find the best thing for *yourself*, which means you need to know what actually matters to you.

Reasonable people would probably not spend the time to read a book about the history of flatware, buy twenty sets, and test the feeling of each metal utensil against their teeth. That sounds completely insane. But who cares about reasonable people?

If you’re an unreasonable person, trust me: the time it takes to find the best of something is completely worth it. It’s better to have a few fantastic things designed for you than to have many untrustworthy things poorly designed to please everyone. The result—being able to blindly trust the things you own—is intensely liberating.



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