

The Rise Of Gourmet Salt

Premium salts have become pantry staples for chefs and serious home cooks, but they do a lot more than just add a salty touch

J.Q. Dickinson Salt-Works' hand-harvested salt makes the perfect finishing touch to any dish, including steak.

WORDS **SASHA GONZALES**



You might not think of salt as anything more than a seasoning, but there was a time when the mineral was so highly prized that it was treated as a commodity. In the 13th century, Venetians travelled to Constantinople (now Istanbul), where they bartered their salt for the exotic spices of Asia. And as far back as 1,000 years ago, salt merchants established salt roads or trade routes which they used to transport salt to the areas that lacked it. Among the most important routes were the ones that spanned from Egypt to Greece, and from Morocco to Timbuktu on the southern edge of the Sahara.

So valuable was salt, in fact, that not only was the mineral heavily taxed in some areas, but at one point, it was also traded for twice the price of gold. In ancient Greece, slaves were traded for salt (the expression “not worth his salt” stems from this practice). During the Anglo-American War of 1812, soldiers received salt brine as payment because the government could not afford to give them money. And in Abyssinia and certain parts of central Africa, slabs of salt were the official currency. Throughout history, wars were fought and revolutions started over salt.



Before refrigeration, the mineral was also used as a preservative. It removed moisture from food, creating a dry environment that inhibited the growth of mould and bacteria. Salt was also combined with vinegar to make brine, which was used to pickle fresh food so that it would last longer.

TABLE SALT VS. GOURMET SALT

These days, while salt is no longer used as currency, it continues to be valued in the culinary world. But we're not talking about regular white table salt; more and more chefs and adventurous home cooks are turning to gourmet salt to season their dishes.

Traditional table salt comes from the sea or from underground salt mines. The salt is washed, cleaned and dried to eliminate any impurities, and anti-caking agents like calcium sulphate—or worse, a toxic chemical called ferrocyanate—are then added to keep the salt dry and prevent it from clumping. This refining process strips away some of its minerals, leaving just pure sodium chloride that can result in a harsh or unpleasant taste that can ruin the flavour of a dish.

“Processed table salt tastes ‘flat’ compared to naturally produced salt,” says Nancy Bruns, co-founder and CEO of J.Q. Dickinson Salt-Works, based in West Virginia in the US. “Once you’ve tasted natural sea salt, it’s hard to go back to the highly refined, industrially produced variety. The difference in taste is substantial. There’s a complexity of flavour to natural sea salt that simply doesn’t exist with industrial salt.”

Andrea Siebert, founder and managing director of Marisol, which works with traditional saltpan producers in southern Portugal to create superior-quality Atlantic sea salt and fleur de sel, agrees. “It’s all about the taste,” she says. “Gourmet salt just tastes better than regular salt, and so does the food that is prepared with it.”

WHAT IS GOURMET SALT?

Salt is found naturally in different parts of the world, and like fine wine, its characteristics are defined by the region where it is produced. Salt is mined in various ways depending on the type of salt in question, and its flavour is largely influenced by two factors: the shape of the crystal and the impurities (microbes and dirt) left behind through minimal processing.

With so many varieties available, shopping for gourmet salt can be daunting and confusing. Each type imparts a unique flavour, and sometimes even texture and appearance.

Sea salt: Any salt labelled ‘sea salt’ must be made from seawater. The water is channelled into small ponds and the water is left to evaporate over a period of time. There are two evaporation methods—forced evaporation and solar evaporation.

“The first involves heating the seawater until it evaporates, leaving only salt grains, while the second uses the sun and the wind to evaporate the seawater,” says Jessica Abel, whose company Saltwest Naturals produces sea salt using both methods. “Due to the climate where we are in Vancouver Island, Canada, we can only produce small amounts of solar-evaporated salt between March and October. We rely on forced evaporation to produce our salt year-round.”

Sea salt can be fine or coarse in texture. It adds a salty burst of flavour and is ideal for cooking with or finishing a dish.

Flake salt: This variety may occur naturally, but some companies make their flake salt by cooking and then evaporating the brine. The flakes differ in shape and size, from small pyramid-like crystals to larger flat shavings. Flake salt has a concentrated salty taste so it makes an excellent finishing touch to food. The best part is: only a tiny amount is needed. The crystals give dishes a crunchy texture.

Murray River Gourmet Salt Flakes, produced by Murray River Salt in Victoria, Australia, can be used in cooking or as a finishing salt. The company’s marketing manager, Jane Schmidt says that the product, which comes from the salty Murray River beds, is lower in sodium than other salt products and contains trace amounts of magnesium, potassium, calcium and iodine. This results in a subtle flavour that enhances, rather than overpowers, a dish.

Fleur de sel: Fleur de sel, which means ‘flower of salt’, is the thin, crusty layer of salt that forms on the surface of seawater as it evaporates. As this layer is quite fragile, it has to be harvested by hand—either raked in from the water, as is

Top

Brine entering the Murray-Darling Basin in Australia. It will flow down to crystallisers to be turned into salt

Opposite page, from top left

Processing salt at J.Q. Dickinson Salt-Works; Harvesting fleur de sel in southern Portugal for Marisol; Crystallised salt waiting to be harvested and processed



PHOTO: LAUREN STONESTREET



WORDS: CHARLENE CHOW

Salt Emporium

The next time you're vacationing in Okinawa, drop by Ma-suya on Heiwa Street, Naha City. This is where you will find more than 500 kinds of salt from Okinawa and around the world, including Bolivia, the Himalayas and Europe.

The shop is owned by Choji Nishizato, a native of Miyakojima island, Okinawa. His company, Paradise Plan Co. started making 'yukisio', or snow salt, from Miyakojima in the 1990s. With a texture that is as fine and light as snow (hence its name), the salt has a place in the Guinness Book of Records for salt containing the highest number of minerals—18 kinds including sodium, potassium, calcium and iron. Made with underground seawater that seeped through rocks that were once coral reef, yukisio does not taste too salty and is even a little sweet.

There are plenty of other specialty salts to check out at Ma-suya including oyster salt made from the extract of fresh oysters from the Seto Inland Sea. One ton of oysters only yields four kilograms of this premium salt. Another bestseller is magma salt, a rock salt made with the magma of the Himalayas. Says Shiei Shu, the international sales manager of Paradise Plan Co., "This salt smells like hot springs and tastes like boiled egg. But add a little bit of it to steaming rice and you'll end up with more umami flavour."

3-2-59 Makishi, Naha City, Okinawa, Japan. Tel: +81 098-860-6405; ma-suya.net



Master of Brine

Up close and personal with Anantara Mai Khao Phuket Villas' salt guru, Natthawut Supim

What sort of training does one need to be a salt guru?

Most of the training I got was from a salt supplier that we work with. They trained me and told me about the characteristics of each salt.

My day-to-day work is mostly spent at dinner service, presenting the salts and matching them with dishes that guests have ordered.

Why the need for a dedicated salt guru at your restaurant?

Our restaurant is named 'Sea.Fire.Salt'. Sea refers to our menu, which is heavily influenced by items from the sea; fire as the style of our cooking is over a charcoal grill, and salt because we have around 17 types of salt from around the world for use in the restaurant. We present our grilled items on a Himalayan salt brick that is heated up to 200 degrees Celsius.

How effective are specific salts in enhancing flavour?

Some salt really gives impact to a dish. For instance, you may think that a Cyprus black lava flake salt is simply a Mediterranean flake salt mixed with activated charcoal, but the beautiful colour is not the only benefit of the added charcoal. It also gives the food a unique taste and acts as a natural detoxifier.

Which are two of the most unusual salts in your salt trolley?

I would say tom yum salt. It is one of the signature salts we make using the same ingredients base as tom yum. We dry and grind them down, and leave [the mixture] for a few months in Thai sea salt with herbs. It's great for grilled items and adds a touch of Thai. Even if it has become a little common now, another of my favourite is the Himalayan pink salt, because it is a pure, hand-mined salt found naturally deep inside the pristine Himalayan mountains. The high-mineral crystals range in colour from sheer white to deep reds, which indicates up to around 84 trace elements and iron. The redder their hue, the higher the amount of minerals, especially iron.

What kinds of food would you usually pair these salts with?

Tom yum salt goes well with king prawns, whole baked fish and good cuts of beef. Himalayan pink salt is more versatile. It is great with all seafood and meats, but is also mild enough for some cocktails and desserts.

Name three gourmet salts you would recommend for the home cook.

I recommend the Himalayan pink salt. Another is the Vintage Merlot salt, which is amazing with a good steak or lamb. It has a rich burgundy colour and oak flavour. The Durango hickory smoked sea salt adds a whole different taste to barbecues. Always remember: salt is a seasoning to enhance a dish, not overpower it.



done in France, or collected using special sieves, as is the practice in Portugal. The environmental conditions have to be perfect (sunny and windy) for the salt to crystallise, or 'bloom'.

Because of how it forms, fleur de sel is produced only in small amounts. This, combined with its labour-intensive method of harvesting, makes it the most expensive of sea salts. Fleur de sel is produced in Europe and the Americas. Its high moisture content puts it in the 'wet salt' category.

"Fleur de sel crystals are less compact and dissolve more easily, so they have that melt-in-the-mouth quality," says Siebert. Use fleur de sel as a finishing flourish to give an earthy, delicate saltiness to food.

Sel gris: This is French for 'grey salt'. It is the salt that is harvested from beneath the fine, top layer of fleur de sel. This moist, coarse-grain salt is grey in colour, which comes from the clay found at the bottom of the salt flats. (The salt is allowed to come into contact with the bottom of the salt flats before being raked.) It is hand-harvested in the same way as fleur de sel. Sel gris



has a high mineral content, giving it an earthy, savoury flavour. It is an excellent all-purpose salt.

Coloured salt: Gourmet salts are available in a wide range of colours—think Himalayan pink salt, Persian blue salt, Bolivian rose salt, black charcoal salt and Hawaiian red clay salt, to name a few. Some of these are naturally-occurring, like Himalayan black salt, which comes from the veins that run through Himalayan pink salt, while others contain an extra ingredient that gives them their colour, like Cyprus black lava salt, which is made from Mediterranean white sea salt flakes spiked with purified volcanic charcoal. These salts embody different flavours, depending on their colour and provenance.

Flavoured salt: Many gourmet salt companies also produce flavoured varieties—these may include smoked salt, and salt blended with dried herbs or other ingredients.

Saltwest Naturals, for instance, makes roasted garlic and onion infused, and salted aramel chocolate flavoured salts—these are made from Canadian sea salt dressed with various flavourings. J.Q. Dickinson Salt-Works' Smoked Salt is slowly smoked for three days over local apple wood, giving it an interesting smoky character.

Rock salt: This variety is obtained from salt mines that were created by ancient evaporated oceans. Rock salt is usually sold in an organic, unprocessed form and is seldom used directly in cooking. However, the large, pebble-like chunks are often used to create a 'bed' on which to serve other ingredients, such as oysters in the shell.

ENHANCING INGREDIENTS

Siebert says that gourmet salt imparts more than just saltiness to food. Thanks to its rich mineral

composition and natural moisture, it accentuates the inherent flavours of a dish. "You don't want to ruin the flavour of a good cut of meat or an expensive fish, for instance, with cheap table salt," she says.

Chef Han Li Guang, owner of Restaurant Labyrinth in Singapore, says that salt is an intriguing ingredient to work with because it enhances the umami quality of certain foods. However, he tends to use it more as a secondary seasoning agent than a primary one. He explains: "When it comes to seasoning my dishes, I'm quite fond of salted products, like salted fish and salted eggs. Salt brings out the natural 'umami-ness' of those ingredients. When added to dishes, these ingredients give the food a unique salty edge. At the moment, I'm experimenting with salty soya crystals, a by-product of soya sauce making. I'll be using the crystals in stocks for my next menu."

Ioannis Stefanopoulos, executive chef of Alati, a Greek restaurant on Amoy Street, is a fan of fleur de sel from Kythira, an island in Greece. "This to me is the king of salts," he shares. "It's hand-harvested and unprocessed, and it tastes like the Aegean and Ionian Seas. I like adding just salt and rosemary to a rack of lamb, and for salads, nothing's better than a sprinkling of oregano, black pepper, extra virgin olive oil and salt flakes."

To make the salt-baked fish dish Alati is known for, chef Stefanopoulos mixes coarse salt with egg white and then encases a whole fish in the salty paste. "The salt crust seals in all the moisture and flavour from the fish as it bakes, and the result is a dish that's not only delicious but also succulent and aromatic," he says. "Salt is such a simple ingredient and you really don't need a lot to enhance a dish's flavours. I call it Mother Nature's gift because it brings food to life." **WD**

Opposite page

Fleur de sel, or flor de sal in Portuguese, is categorised as a wet salt because of its high moisture content

From bottom right

Murray River Salt flaked salt; Saltwest Natural's handcrafted Canadian sea salt flavoured with caramel chocolate; Crunchy flaked salt adds an interesting texture to salads and other dishes

