

Season

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The bonding of sodium and chlorine atoms has had a profound impact on civilization.

by KENT OSWALD

When most of us think of salt, we picture a shaker full of white, iodized granules — a commodity so ubiquitous it would be nearly forgettable if it weren't for dietitians and doctors constantly reminding us of the perils of overconsumption.

It wasn't always that way.

For Roman historian Pliny the Elder, "civilized life" was "impossible without salt." Many centuries later, Nathaniel Hawthorne elevated salt to the metaphysical realm, writing that there was "something holy" in it. Poet and philosopher Kahlil Gibran concurred, writing that "there must be something strangely sacred in salt. It is in our tears and in the sea." That's exceedingly high praise, but the more we know about salt, the more deserved the praise becomes.

Salt is composed mostly of sodium chloride, a chemical compound that's necessary to the survival of all living creatures. Anthropologists speculate that around 10,000 B.C., when humans began to make the move from a diet consisting overwhelmingly of meat (which provides plenty of sodium) to farming and raising domesticated animals, they began to actively seek out salt as a dietary supplement for themselves and their livestock. Of course, they might have been searching for salt because human taste buds are hard-wired to appreciate its flavor: Saltiness is one of only five recognized basic tastes.

Whatever the motivation, salt was being harvested in China by 6000 B.C. at the latest. A little over three millennia later came the *Peng-Tzao-Kan-Mu*, a Chinese pharmacology treatise that describes different salt extraction and production processes in detail and mentions nearly 50 types of salt.

When humans realized that salt is an excellent preservative, it became more sought after, and its applications became more varied and widespread. Ancient Egyptians used the salt found in the waters of the Nile delta to prepare fish (which became a source of trade), and the innovators also used salt during the mummification process. Mark Kurlansky, author of *Salt: A World History*, says that facts like these about the history of salt illustrate "how a food becomes a commodity of trade and gets into economies, then politics, then international relations, then culture and religion."

Realizing its importance to health, ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans included salt in many medicinal treatments — some dating back to the third millennium B.C. Salt also figured in religious practice, serving as a ritual purifying agent in monotheistic, pagan, and animistic faiths. Ultimately, salt became an economic force: At different times and places, it was a form of currency and was taxed. One of the first acts during the French Revolution was the repeal

of a repressive salt tax, while Gandhi's protest of the British salt tax was an important step toward Indian independence. As for commerce, the salt trade helped spur the development of roads (the Via Salaria in Italy, for example), encouraging cultural exchanges by linking far-flung countries.

Today, salt is no longer responsible for the creation of roads, but rather for keeping them safe. According to the Salt Institute, a trade association based in North America, 64 percent of its members' 2007 salt production was used for de-icing roads; salt for human consumption accounted for just 5 percent. The rest is used in a wide array of industries, including the manufacture of glass, wood pulp, detergents, and synthetic rubber.

Yet salt and food are naturally and inextricably linked — and several of the world's leading chefs are loudly championing this most common of seasonings.

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"There is a big difference between overly refined table salt and pretty much everything else," says *New York Times* food writer Mark Bittman, author of *How to Cook Everything: 2,000 Simple Recipes for Great Food*. That's because table salt has been stripped of the trace minerals that give different salts their flavor — and some say their health benefits. "The

difference in salt isn't the salt," explains Bill Penzey, owner of the eponymous Wisconsin-based spice retailer. He explains that since 99 percent of all salt is sodium chloride, "it's the differences in the impurities, and the shape of it" that help determine taste. Sea salt harvested in the Cayman Islands, for instance, will have a different mix of trace minerals to savor than the salt that's been mined since the early Iron Age in Hallstatt, Austria, or the compound produced in Northwich, England, the self-proclaimed "salt capital of the world," or seasoning from the Detroit Salt Mine, which has been in operation since 1911.

"Just like wines, salt enhances the flavor of all sorts of foods," says David Burke, the multi-honored chef with restaurants in New York, Chicago, and Las Vegas. "And chefs are looking to work with new types of salt." Burke's favorite is pink Himalayan rock salt, which he employs not only as a seasoning, but also as dishware: Kobe beef and sashimi are served on slabs of it, and pasta and fried rice arrive in salt bowls. He also adds a touch of salt on

cheesecake to bring out its sweetness and "make it pop." Even the walls at his Las Vegas eatery are made of Himalayan rock salt.

"You use salt to build levels of flavor," says David Walzog, head chef at SW Steakhouse in the Wynn Las Vegas, which earned the 2007 Epicurean Award for Best Steakhouse in *Las Vegas Life*. Walzog seasons generously with kosher salt prior to grilling to "bring out the innate flavors" of beef and achieve a wonderful, charred exterior that easily elevates a ribeye to the level of filet mignon. At other times, he focuses on the interplay of tastes. For a Christmas prime-rib dinner, Walzog included a salt presentation with the meal, letting diners explore how to change the flavor profile of food by sprinkling red, black, pink, or white finishing salts.

For chef Paul Bartolotta, salt is a foundational seasoning, critical to the success of any dish. "One of the simplest ways to have food not be inspired is to omit the correct amount of salt," he insists. And for a particular delicacy at his Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare (also at the Wynn Las Vegas) that means

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about two and a half pounds of Sicilian sea salt used on a fish sized for two. The salt is mixed into a batter with lemon and orange zest, as well as ground star anise and wild fennel. Egg whites are added to help the mixture solidify before the fish is encased and roasted. When the crust is cracked open table-side and the salt scraped away, the dish's aroma entices you to dig in — but not before you drizzle it lightly with olive oil or citrus vinaigrette.

But the entree is not the end of salt's place at the table. At the Salt Institute Web site, you'll find recipes that feature salt in drinks, hors d'oeuvres, breads, vegetables, and so on. Perhaps the most unusual place that you find salt taking a place of prominence is at dinner's end. "I believe we're about to see a trend of salty desserts," says Bittman. "I like chocolate and salt a lot."

Since salt is imbued with sacred qualities and chocolate is considered the food of the gods, he just might be on to something.

Kent Oswald writes on a variety of subjects from his home in Rye, New York.

SALTY LANGUAGE

As man discovered new uses for salt, the word became firmly entrenched in our vocabulary. We use it to talk about religion, money, philosophy, and as a figure of speech. Moses is instructed by the Lord to tell the Israelites: "With all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt" (Leviticus 2:13). Jesus admonishes

his followers to "have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another" (Mark 9:50).

We call good friends the "salt of the earth," whether they come from a family that is "above the salt" or not. We also encourage the gullible to take things "with a grain of salt."

Financial experts tell us to "salt away" a portion of

our "salary" (from the Latin *salarium*, the salt allowance with which troops were sometimes paid), particularly if we are planning for a retirement as reward for trooping to and from "the salt mines" every working day. Unfortunately, that dreary commute is sometimes filled with worry as to whether our boss finds us

"worth our salt."

And even though Pythagoras said "salt is born of the purest of parents: the sun and the sea," it doesn't mean the compound can't be used for evil — for example when we enjoy our enemies' troubles so much that we "rub salt in their wounds" to make them sting more.

— K.O.