

Many are the varieties in the salt of the earth

by Pam_Adams

The shelves of specialty cooking stores are filled with pepper, pepper mills, salt shakers and salts ... Flavorbank's Brittany Celtic Sea Salts, "harvested from the North Atlantic coast of Europe."

SPECIALTY SALT - The tables are being turned when it comes to salt. The taste buds of many are turning away from the old box of Morton table salt, and now are craving the taste for specialty salts like rock salt, sea salt and kosher salt. CNS Photo by Ron Johnson. The same stores offer a thin, square see-through tube of Coarse Sea Salt Crystals, a "sun purified all natural sea salt." It is, according to the blurb on the tube, "acclaimed by chefs as being as essential to fine foods as freshly ground pepper."

While Tidman's Natural Rock Salt is merely "ideal for salt grinders and cooking."

There's a tall, red, circular box of La Baleine Sea Salt, "from the clear, blue Mediterranean." The boxes next to it are identical, except they're blue and marked "fine," instead of "coarse."

Then there are squat, white square boxes with holly green print, pure flaky crystals of Maldon Sea Salt. Hand-harvested on the southeastern coast of England, "it's pronounced and distinctive 'salty' taste means less is required, an advantage for those who wish to reduce their salt intake ..."

By now you're wondering whatever happened to a plain, old box of Morton's. The blue box of table salt with the little girl in the yellow rain coat. She's probably not going anywhere any time soon, especially when you're baking or making a pot of soup. But gourmet salts, also known as specialty salts, are crowding her space.

"They're extremely popular," says Kathy Wight, owner of the Recipe Box, a specialty cooking store in Peoria, Ill. "I think it's because of the Food Network."

Both on and off the cable television station, chefs trumpet the wonders of an ever-increasing array of exotic salts. Along with fleur de sel, the priciest of salts, (some brands cost over \$30 a pound,) there's black sea salt from India, red sea salt from Hawaii, Ksorian sea salt from South Africa, or Danish salt, a sea salt smoked over wood.

Besides the exotic sea salts, there's kosher salts, available at most grocery stores.

"I probably haven't used regular Morton's for 20 years," says Cheryl Bunn, a Peoria cook. She uses kosher salt for regular cooking. Her son introduced her to specialty salts when he began working for Williams-Sonoma about 10 years ago, and more after he switched jobs to work for cooking.com. Her favorite? A fleur de sel.

"You only use it for finishing touches," Bunn says. "But if you put it on a fresh tomato? Oh my God, it just opens up the taste."

Fleur de sel, or flower of salt, is the thin film skimmed from the top of sea salts harvested by hand along the French Atlantic coast. Sea salts, as one might expect, hail from evaporated sea water. Crystals of sodium chloride - salt in its pure form - take on different shapes, colors and tastes depending on the amount and types of minerals in the water from which they're harvested.

In Peoria, the Recipe Box doesn't carry any fleur de sel brands but Wight, the owner, is just as emphatic about the taste difference between table salt and sea salt.

"If you taste a teaspoon of sea salt first, then a teaspoon of table salt, you'd spit the table salt right out," Wight says.

For the record, most table salt is mined from underground deposits then processed and refined into tiny, fine grains. Potassium iodide is usually added to protect against thyroid disease. Other additives are included to prevent drying and caking.

Kosher salt can be mined or harvested from the sea, it's processed in a way that shapes a coarse crystal, capable of withdrawing liquid from meat, the crucial part of koshering.

The taste debate got so widespread that Cook's Illustrated magazine conducted a taste test, "a two-month odyssey," editors called it, involving nine brands of salt in five different kitchen applications.

"We wondered if a pinch here or a smidgen there is really worth \$36 a pound. Will your biscuits or steak taste better if you spend more money on salt?"

The results surprised them, but not the expert on the science of taste and smell they interviewed.

The reason for the taste difference is simple, according to Dr. Gary Beauchamp, director of the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia. Flat crystals or crystals with holes create a different taste sensation than small, evenly shaped granular crystals.

Who knew?

In a pinch

In its October 2002 issue, Cook's Illustrated magazine reported on the results of a salt taste test.

The test involved nine salts, including two kinds of table salt (one iodized, one not), two brands of kosher salt, and five widely-available sea salts.

They tested each salt by sprinkling them on roast beef, by using them to bake plain biscuits, and by dissolving them in spring water, chicken stock and pasta cooking water.

Of the five tests, Cook's testers tasted the most profound differences in the beef. Tasters loved the crunch of the large sea salt flakes or crystals when sprinkled over slices of roast tenderloin.

Here, according to the magazine, Maldon sea salt (\$3.95 for 8.8 ounces) was the clear winner, followed by Fleur de Sel de Camargue (\$9.95 for 4.4 ounces) and Light Grey Celtic Sea Salt (\$7.75 for 24 ounces).

In the biscuit test, Morton table salt (\$0.59 for 26 ounces), both iodized and non-iodized, bounced back from a uniformly low ranking in the meat test. Here, it was the clear winner while most of the sea salts landed at the bottom of the ratings.

Most tasters also liked how Diamond Crystal Kosher Salt (\$1.99 for 48 ounces) performed in biscuits.

All nine salts tasted pretty much the same after they were dissolved in spring water, chicken stock and pasta cooking water.

The other three salts in the test were Morton Coarse Kosher Salt (\$1.69 for 48 ounces); La Baleine Sea Salt Fine Crystals (\$4.95 for 26.5 ounces), and Esprit du Sel de Ile de Re, another fleur de sel (\$9 for 8.8 ounces.)

A salt primer

Salt is no longer just salt, now that salt shakers are giving way to salt mills or grinders, it is time for a salt primer.

- Celtic Gray sea salt: From the Atlantic coast of France, it is harvested as medium-sized crystals. Moderate to expensive in price, some is sold as is, some is crushed before it's sold.

- Condiment salt (or finishing salt): A contemporary name for salts that should be sprinkled onto food immediately before serving rather than used during cooking.

- Flavor salt: Monosodium glutamate used as a flavor enhancer in many Asian cuisines, often labeled as "flavor salt" or "salt with flavor."

- Fleur de sel (flower of salt): The queen of sea salts, produced along the French Atlantic coast, it's the top crust skimmed from salt pans in Brittany. Once discarded as unprofitable, it is now the world's highest-priced salt. Delicately flavored, its main contribution to a dish is its texture. Use it as a finishing salt.

- Iodized salt: Table salt, with potassium iodide added, to prevent against thyroid conditions.

- Kosher salt: A coarse crystal efficient at withdrawing liquid from meat, the most crucial part of koshering. It's also good for other cooking uses.

- Maldon salt: Coarse, uneven flakes from Essex, England. It's thin, flaky texture melts quickly on the tongue, making it an excellent finishing salt.

- Oshima Island Red Label salt: Brand name of the top grade of salt produced on Oshima Island, Japan.

- Popcorn salt: Very fine salt that clings readily to popcorn.

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