

There's no saltier salt anywhere on God's good earth than the salt that comes from the sea at Maldon.

Most salt that finds its way to the table is rock salt, mined and refined. Much of it has other material deliberately added, usually to make it flow more freely from the canister. The additives presumably do no harm, but they certainly change the taste of the salt.

Maldon salt isn't like that at all. It doesn't come out of the ground, but from evaporation of sea water. It comes in crisp, white, flaky crystals, not as grains. Not only does it have nothing added to it in the course of manufacture, but the ancient, simple, primitive process by which it is obtained yields a product of quite remarkable purity: one of the Maldon Crystal Salt Company's most prized testimonials is an analyst's report which shows it to be 99.617 per cent pure sodium chloride.

Place a crystal on your tongue and there's a pleasant, salty tingle – none of the nasty after-taste which most table salts leave. Drop a crystal into a glass of water and it will dissolve without trace; other table salts would leave the water cloudy.

They've been making salt at Maldon now for something like 2,000 years.

The present proprietor of Maldon Crystal Salt Works, Mr C. B. Osborne, has been in the industry 40 years. It came into his ownership in 1937. Before that it had belonged to his father.

His is now the only plant in Britain which makes salt from sea water, though once the coast of Essex was lined with similar set-ups.

How has this one survived when so many others have faded away? Partly know-how, says Mr Osborne, partly specially favourable conditions. The Blackwater estuary, whence his water comes, ebbs and flows endlessly over vast acreages of mud which, over the centuries, have become saturated with salt (they're called "saltings" in fact) and so the river water hereabouts is saltier than the sea itself.

Mr Osborne works his salty sorcery in a range of tar-black, weatherboard

sheds on the south bank of the Blackwater just below Fullbridge.

He uses two 14 ft-square, brick-built, steel-lined pans. Each holds about 400-500 gallons of sea water, each is heated by 6-7 cwts of coal a day, each yields 5-6 cwts of salt crystals daily.

The tanks are filled in the morning. By noon or soon after they are boiling. All the rest of the day and night they silently simmer until, next morning, they are full of almost nothing but vast drifts of brilliant snow-white crystals (there is, actually, a little water left – otherwise the pan would boil dry and the salt would burn).

The best and biggest crystals, being last to form, are first to be raked off in the morning. These are the crystals that go into the eye-catching blue and white packets on grocers' shelves all over the world. The second layer, smaller and less well formed, goes into food manufacture. A third grade may also turn up in your home as bath salts.

The process has about it the uncanny, silent inexorability of nature elementally at work, beautifully simple, incredibly complex, only minimally aided by the hand of man.

The grey-green water is still. Curtains of steam rise from it. You think of a jungle swamp. It wouldn't be at all surprising if a crocodile were to emerge from the mist – except that Mr Osborne assures you it would have been filtered out along with all other solids in the four stages of filtration through which every drop of water passes on its way from river to vat.

The crystals can be seen forming on the smooth surface of the simmering water. Each is a hollow pyramid, tiny in the early stages, sometimes as much as 1/2 inches square in the later stages of a boiling.

They cluster together as if magnetised. Suddenly sunk by the weight of water in their pyramidal hollows, a whole cluster will slip silently to the bottom of the pan. A new chain will begin to form.

#### **Mans' role**

Man's part in the process is comparatively small. A reservoir is filled once a fortnight at highest or spring tides. It

is necessary to know precisely the right moment to open the sluices so as to get the saltiest water, and this varies with the seasons according to how much fresh water is flowing down the river. It is necessary also to stoke with skill to ensure a long, even heat. There are hints of other, secret know-how, "securely under lock and key in case," as Mr Osborne delicately puts it, "anything should happen."

But basically it's a matter of boiling up a pan of sea water and letting nature take its spectacular course. And the plant matches the simplicity of the process.

You'll look in vain, for example, for extraction machinery to get rid of all that briny steam. They just don't line the roof; out goes the steam through the gaps in the tiles.

The only tools are a simple wooden hoe for raking the salt and a shovel for skimming the water much as a housewife skims jam with a tablespoon.

Beneath the pans is an intricate arrangement of baffles and flues to take an even heat to all parts of what is really a vast, shallow, malleable steel saucepan. The pattern of these ducts is traditional and is faithfully followed whenever an old pan has to be reconstructed or a new one is built. Mr Osborne doesn't know who invented it. He only knows that on the one occasion when he allowed an expert to "improve" it he was mighty glad to get back to the original arrangement.

Yet the product of this simple plant and this one man's know-how is in world-wide demand. At 3s 3d a 1lb packet it sells like hot cakes in such plush beaneries as Fortnum's and Harrods Food Hall. Cordon bleu cooks recommend it. Hollywood and New York know the brilliant beauty and the special savour of it.

In the past six years, says Mr Osborne, sales have increased six times. "I can hardly keep up with home demand, let alone exports."

But there's good news for gourmets. Mr Osborne is thinking of putting in a third pan.

That means a 50 per cent increase in the world supply of Maldon's curious crystals.

