

Worth its Salt

by Michael Bateman



The best salt, writes Michael Bateman, is sifted straight from the sea. And this year's heavy rains may make it more of a delicacy than ever

There is a salt crisis in Maldon. Normal crystallisation will be resumed as soon as possible. Blame it on el Niño, or on the greenhouse effect, but three months of steady rain has so diluted the waters of the Blackwater estuary in Essex that it is no longer worth turning into salt.

This marshland has one of the saltiest concentrations of brackish water in the land. It was first exploited by the Romans, who established a salt industry here. They prized salt highly, and some soldiers were paid in this currency – becoming the first people to earn a “salary”.

Maldon Sea Salt is the most exclusive table salt. Stylish cartons of the white, flaky crystals are sold in top stores from Knightsbridge to Paris. It is the acceptable face of a product that has become one of the villains of our times. Salt has been a vital ingredient for food producers, not to mention cooks, for more than two millennia. Before the invention of canning and the development of modern chilling techniques, salt was the essential preservative. Salting became a craft, producing such gastronomic delights as Parma ham (not to mention Bayonne and Ardennes ham); Mediterranean treats such as anchovies, capers and olives; and northern delicacies such as Arbroath smokies and Manx kippers.

But now the health managers (particularly in the US) are ready to impeach the snow-white crystal. An excess of salt, they point out, creates an imbalance in the body between sodium and potassium, a condition which can increase the risk of high blood pressure and strokes.

The World Health Organisation has determined that it's OK to consume up to five grammes of salt a day. But the UK national average is 10 to 12 grammes a day, meaning that for every person who consumes a sensible

amount there are as many who use it to a dangerous degree.

Salt is one of only four sensations that our taste buds can register. Two (bitter and sour) are unpleasant, and two (sweet and salt) are pleasing. The last two have been put to hefty use by the food industry in the processing of foods. Salt reinforces the taste of canned meats and fish, of cheese, of canned vegetables (doubling their salt content) and, even more dramatically, of snacks such as crisps and salted peanuts. Some salt also finds its way into desserts and biscuits. A single serving of some ready-to-eat breakfast cereals, for example, can be guilty of containing as much as a whole gramme of salt.

The Bill Clinton of the salt world is poor old President Marmite, currently accused of crimes and misdemeanours committed against minors, youngsters entrapped by its salty allure. Should our mate Marmite be expelled from its exalted office as head of the nursery eating programme? Probably not, although if you are using more than one 57-gramme pot a week you're definitely out of order.

But back to Maldon Sea Salt, surely one of life's great luxuries. When I visited the operation, I was very surprised to find it a little more than a cottage industry.

Most table salt, the free-running, fine-grained stuff, is made from rock salt deposits that are flushed out of deep mines and then treated to remove impurities. It is purified because most commercial salt is put to non-domestic use, mainly in the chemical industry. Sea salt, by contrast, is full of impurities – various minerals which all contribute to its keen, appetising flavour.

Sea salt can be produced in two ways. In the Mediterranean, sea water is dried in salt pans by sun and wind to produce the characteristically chunky crystals we know as *gros sel*, or coarse salt. A superior class of sea salt sold in France is *fleur de sel* – literally “flower of salt”, crystals skimmed from the surface of pans of sea water – and this, essentially, is what Maldon Sea Salt is too.

maldon Crystal Salt Company's boss is Clive Osborne, a third-generation salt maker. Twice a month, at high tide, he pumps up sea water from local marshland where it becomes trapped during low tides. This water is intensely saline, much of it having evaporated already in the sun and wind. It is then boiled rapidly in several dozen large metal pans, about 10ft across and 5ft deep, before being left to simmer for about 16 hours. As it simmers, pyramid-shaped crystals form on the surface, sinking as they grow heavier. The pans are then drained, and the crystals raked off and dried.

But this season's rains, says Mr Osborne, have introduced unwelcome fresh water, diluting the sea water in the marshes. His company's attempts to make salt have been thwarted for three months. “This has been the worst ever,” he says. “We installed a new salt pan but we haven't been able to use it yet.” Come April, he hopes, the waters will return to normal, and salt production will resume.

One of these days people will realise that £1.25 for 250 grammes is no price to pay for such a luxury and it will fly off the shelves. Until then, I'll continue to use my Maldon Sea Salt with abandon, and not just as a condiment. Sea salt is essential for two sensational treats: salted almonds and the all-purpose Moroccan relish, preserved lemons (see right). Home-made salted almonds are one of the world's unsung delights. Blanch half a pound or so of organic almonds by soaking in boiling water for five minutes, then slipping them out of their skins. Mop dry and lay on an oiled baking sheet. Place in the oven on a very low heat for 30 minutes or till they turn a pale biscuit colour. Sprinkle with a tablespoon of sea salt, put in a bowl, cover, and leave for an hour before serving. (If you are too impatient, gently fry a handful of blanched almonds in a pan with a teaspoon of vegetable oil and a little salt, shaking to prevent burning. Remove from the pan when nicely coloured and drain on kitchen paper.)

