



Salt for all Seasons



Dug from the earth, harvested from the sea, salt is a priceless mineral. Nigel Slater visited a seaside village where pure salt has been produced for centuries

The panic is off. Sprinkling salt on our chips is not going to kill us after all. After whipping up another frenzied health scare, the food police have targeted some other based household ingredient as their latest victim. The salt cellar can safely show its face at the table once more.

Not that it ever left mine. I have always been fascinated by salt's glistening, savoury crystals. After all, my cravings for a lump of cheese, a handful of olives or a few potato crisps are barely disguised cries for salt. So what makes this magical mineral so vital, so controversial and so inexplicably delicious?

From the earliest times salt has been

precious enough to trade, smuggle, tax and fight over. African nomads would trade with Arabs, Romans and Egyptians, setting up salt routes and selling blocks of salt for jewels, spices and gold. That this white mineral was valuable was obvious when it became one of the first commodities ever to be taxed. A particularly cruel tax, as salt is more necessity than luxury. It was even made in secret, like moonshine during America's years of Prohibition. During the late eighteenth century, hundreds of salt tax evaders, smugglers and clandestine producers were hanged. Even today, artisan-produced sea salt from a little village in Essex is smuggled into rich Eastern countries whose top chefs think it superior to their own state-produced grains.

Salt is essential to life itself. Our body fluid is full of the stuff. I know that from tasting my own blood, sweat and tears, and it is a fine balance that needs to be kept. Our bodies are now slow to tell us that we have upset the balance by sweating too much, which concentrates the salt in our blood, or by drinking too much liquid, which dilutes it. Messages flash out instantly to eat salt or quench our thirst in order to redress the balance as quickly as possible. Our muscles would seize up and our nerves would fail to carry messages if we were to take in too little salt.

No wonder salt is valuable. Even the word salary comes from the Latin *salarium*, the rations comprising salt and other

necessities with which Roman soldiers were paid. Towns where salt was found have always enjoyed a certain prosperity: Salzburg ('salt town'), Hallstadt (*hals* is the Greek word for salt) and our own Nantwich and Droitwich, from the Anglo-Saxon *wich*, meaning salt.

This brings me to that little seaside village in Essex. To Maldon, where salt has been produced since before the Domesday survey, and probably for over 2,000 years. I had somehow expected something much larger, a sprawling town set around a monstrous steaming factory. I could not have been more wrong. Maldon is a pretty coastal village with a jolly pub, a busy church and what I might call sailing types. The monstrous factory turned out to be a small wood-and-brick quayside business now in its third generation. The Osborne family produce salt as different from the well-known pouring kind as is possible to imagine: sharp, fragile, pyramid-shaped crystals that crumble between your fingers.

Sea salt crystals have a totally different taste from regular grains of table salt. As different as an unpasteurised farmhouse Cheddar is from a packet of processed cheese slices. I have used sea salt for as long as I can remember, and had to buy a pack of ordinary rock salt to compare the two. It is an interesting little exercise and one I recommend. Tasting the two side by side, the standard salt sits uncomfortably on the tongue. There is a deep bitterness to it, and more than a few grains make you

feel curiously queasy. Sea salt is milder, has the flavour of sea spray and lacks the chemical tang of household salt.

Unlike most salts, which contain chemicals to stop them caking in damp weather, the salt at Maldon is absolutely pure. But what really struck me, as I wandered around peering into the steaming pans and running my fingers through the mountains of white crystals, was how little the process has changed since the Middle Ages. Clive Osborne explained that salt has been made on the same site for thousands of years. One reason is that Maldon sits on one of the driest parts of the British coastline. Rain, particularly heavy rain, normally dilutes sea water to a point where it is useless for salt production. Maldon's combination of strong winds, bright sunshine and marshland produces exceedingly salty water.

Early salt collection was done by boiling sea water, caught in shallow pools set in the marshland, over wood fires. Those fires in turn acted as beacons for the local fishing fleets making their way up the coast. Nowadays, the water is collected about every fortnight, at spring (high) tide. It is then pumped into steel evaporating pans. Though 12ft square, they were much smaller than I had expected. In keeping with the scale of the operation there were just three. Each pan sits above a system of brick flues, just as they did in earlier times, though they are now gas-fired.

The great pans of salt water are brought to the boil, bubbling and steaming like something from a James Bond movie. Turned down to a simmer, they will steam away for 15 hours or more until there is little water left. What happens during this time is little short of magic. Started off by a small culture of crystals left in the water (rather like yeast or a vinegar 'mother'), the crystals of salt slowly start to form. Pyramid-shaped and hollow, the crystals fill with water then sink to the bottom of the pans. During the night the salt crystals multiply until there is virtually no water left.

The first job in the morning is to collect the salt that has appeared during the night. Huge wooden rakes drag the salt up into glistening piles around the edges of the pans. At this point the salt is heavy and quite wet. Using huge buckets and spades, the salt is transferred into bunkers. You almost need sunglasses to cope with the spotlessly clean aquamarine walls, ceilings and floors of the salt stores. If no one had been around, I would have jumped into the great snow-like drifts of salt. It stays there until any residual water has drained away, when it is packed into perforated plastic trays and baked at a very low temperature

until it is dry enough to pack.

Even the purest, most organic of products has to undergo modern quality control. I was escorted to a humidity-controlled room, me dressed in protective white coat and trilby rather like the Man from the Ministry. There the salt is checked by hand for any foreign bodies. I was told that occasionally small pieces of lime scale from the sides of the tanks get in. I can't say I saw any. Checked, weighed and automatically packed, the salt is ready for worldwide distribution.

To cook without salt is unthinkable. Pasta, potatoes and rice are virtually inedible without salt, and bread is not much better. I know, I have tried it, and not always intentionally. A little salt makes a big difference. But you really do need only a small amount, and with sea salt, even less. Sometimes, however, it can become the whole point of the dish. Pork and chicken can be quite delicious when rolled in a mixture of sea salt and five spice powder after stir-frying. A whole fish, or even a chicken, stays juicy and flavoursome when baked in a shell of salt. Large fish such as salmon can be cured with salt and herbs to make the delicacy known as gravadlax.

And yet there are those who say we should cut down on salt. There is a belief, but in fact little proof, that salt will adversely affect blood pressure. In fact, the salt we use when cooking and the minute amount most of us use when seasoning our food at the table hardly counts. If you are wanting to cut down on salt, then cut out the processed foods such as tinned vegetables, crisps, snacks and preserved meats. Such foods have an enormous amount of hidden salt. Remember that the amount recommended for adults is 3-8g a day. Just try to measure that on your kitchen scales! Salt's importance in our diet explains why some of our most common sayings refer to it in glowing terms. To describe someone as 'salt of the earth' or 'worth his salt' shows something of the respect in which this magical white substance was held. It worked the other way, too: to describe someone as 'below the salt' was to suggest that their place was well down the table, away from the salt cellar.

There was one aspect of the salt-gathering process I missed at Maldon, one that is carried out every three weeks or so: the huge evaporating pans must be descaled. In line with the purity of the product, no chemicals are used – the lads just climb in and spend a full week inside the giant vats, chipping away at the lime scale with old-fashioned picks. Pity I missed it. I have always wondered what it would be like to live inside a kettle.

