

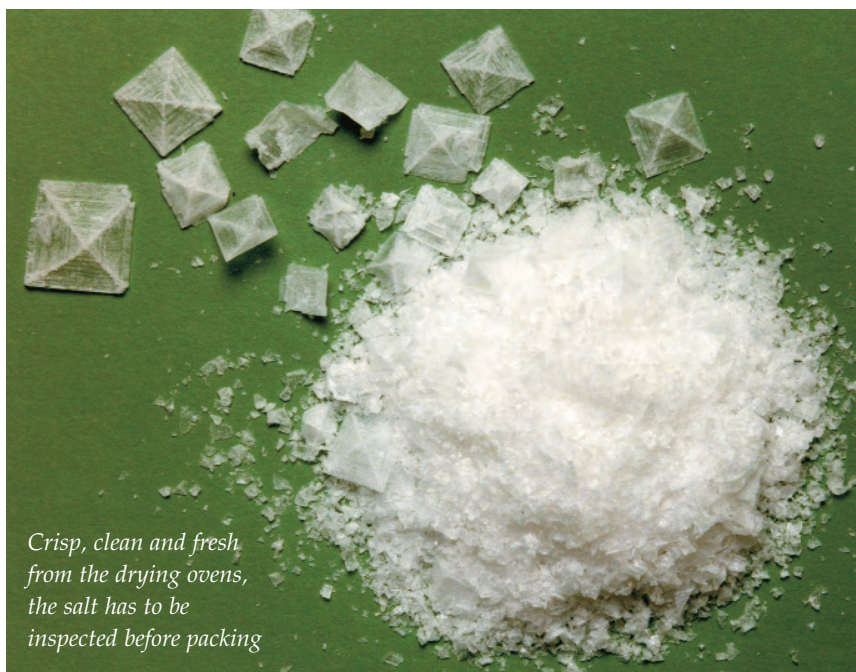
# The Salt Sellers

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Rebecca Hubbard visits the last remaining British sea-salt manufacturer at Maldon in Essex

Salt is a wizard of a mineral; it bleaches cloth, helps tan leather, removes the bitter juice from aubergines and encourages poached eggs to set. A handful sprinkled around tender young lettuce plants decimates a slug invasion in seconds. A truckload thaws icy roads and leaves stubborn white tidemarks on shoes. And as children are well aware, the little piles on the sides of their plates transform from white to sea-green when splashed with a few drops of magic beetroot juice.

Salt has other remarkable properties, too. In the kitchen, a few crystals add zing to the rim of a Margarita and a generous pinch highlights the flavour of you name it – airy sponge cake, crinkle-cut chips, Irish stew, cottage loaves. (The reason why bread often looks inviting but tastes insipid in Italy is that salt is expensive there, so economically minded bakers add but a scant measure.) Salt also serves as an extremely effective preservative, which the ancient Egyptians once slapped on cadavers to turn them into mummies. And which, before the advent of tin-cans and refrigerators, we bought by the block to cure pork, pickle cabbage, salt down fish and keep butter fresh. The sea contains enough salt to cover the world's land mass with a



snowy mantle 115 feet deep, but extracting sufficient quantities of the dry mineral has tested human ingenuity for thousands of years: so much so that, despite there being an average three-quarters of an ounce in every pint of brine, salt has been, historically speaking, a scarce and highly valued resource. In fact, Roman soldiers were paid a salt allowance (*salarium*) as part of their wages, giving us the word “salary”, and the ancient Greeks exchanged slaves for it – hence the phrase “not worth his salt”. And right up until 1825 salt was pounced upon by successive British monarchs and governments as a source of revenue. In 1805 there was a public outcry when the tax on salt was set at an extortionate £30 per ton. We produce salt these days for the table and industrial processes. Most is mined (or rather pumped out of the ground as brine) in

Cheshire. But traditionally salt has also been harvested from our seas. The coast of Essex was a key site – the Domesday survey of 1085 listed 45 salt pans in the area – because environmental conditions are ideal for saltmaking. At low tide, acres of salt are exposed to the sun and wind in numerous shallow inlets and on mud flats. At high tide, the pools of concentrated saline and salt crust are reabsorbed, making the resulting solution even saltier. Low regional rainfall is another favourable factor; too much fresh water would redilute the solution. Today, just one sea-salt manufacturer – the Maldon Crystal Salt Company in Maldon, Essex – remains in business in Britain. White mountains of salt shimmer in the firm's warm, weatherboard storeroom, white outside the River Chelmer sulks its way slowly through marshland to its confluence with the River Blackwater, just yards away, and the sea, 15 miles distant. It is from the Chelmer that the small family firm has drawn its wealth for over 200 years, taking



Maldon Crystal Salt Company's weather-board buildings



brackish river water and, as if by alchemy, transmuting it overnight into sparkling crystals.

The company draws off 30,000 gallons of water from the river at spring tide (every two weeks) when salinity is at a peak and pumps it into storage tanks. After filtering, the greenish water is drained into three shallow stainless-steel evaporating pans heated by furnaces, natural gas replacing coal just eight years ago. And gradually, very gradually, as the warmth circulates under the pans via an ingenious system of brick flues, the shed becomes clouded by marshy-smelling steam.

Initially, the pans are brought to a "galloping boil" so that any trace impurities float to the surface. This froth (or "lees" as it is called in the trade) is carefully scooped off, just as scum is removed from pans of bubbling home-made jam, using a special long-handled copper skimmer. The heat is then reduced and maintained just below boiling point to concentrate the saline solution. It is at this stage that, magically, as if from nowhere, tiny pyramidal salt crystals begin to form, tips down, on the surface of the water. Then the water becomes alive with them – growing,

swirling and eventually clinging together in delicate frost-like patterns. As they grow heavy, the sheets of crystal suddenly sink like weighted doilies through the translucent water to settle at the bottom of the pan in delicate layers.

This crystal formation process continues quietly and mysteriously all night long, and only when the layer of crystals on the pan floor meets the water level is the heat removed. As soon as the pans have cooled down, the crystals are raked out with wooden hoes and left to drain. The remaining highly concentrated saline solution in the pans – the mother liquor – is kept,



more river water is added and the process is begun all over again. Meanwhile, the freshly made salt crystals are dried in ovens and piled up like crisp snowflakes ready for packing and dispatching countrywide.

The salt produced in Maldon using this traditional method is unique. Most sea salt, which is produced by sun-powered evaporation, consists of dense cube-shaped crystals, so hard they have to be ground in a mill. In contrast, Maldon sea salt is soft, flaky and can be crushed effortlessly between the fingers. The hollow crystals also have a distinctive flavour: clean, reminiscent of the sea and completely lacking the bitterness of ordinary table salt. This has helped keep sales of Maldon salt buoyant during the current wave of concern about excessive salt consumption and high blood pressure, because even the barest sprinkle gives a refreshing edge to a slice of juicy, ripe tomato.

We are, of course, hooked on the taste of salt. That's why party guests invariably jostle around bowls of crisps and olives like cows at a lick, and why we continue to choose salted butter in preference to unsalted. (In a few Welsh markets you can still buy traditional extra-salty yellow pats, which are butter's answer to the Dead Sea.) Food manufacturers and inferior cooks have exploited our weakness, slipping in an extra teaspoon to cover up for mediocre ingredients and uninspired recipes.

And in a way, this addiction to salt is unsurprising. Our taste buds are, after all, specialists at detecting it – sweet, sour, bitter and salty are the four basic taste sensations – and our bodies need salt if they are to function effectively. We would, in fact, literally die without a pinch or two a day.