



fleur de sel



Hawaiian
alaea (red)
sea salt



smoked
sea salt



Maldon
sea salt



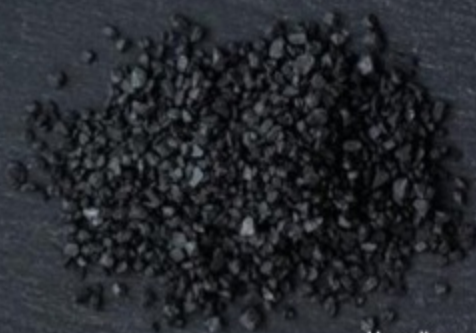
sel gris



pink
Himalayan
salt



flavored (Thai
ginger) salt



Hawaiian
black lava
salt

WORTH YOUR SALT

You use it every day, but do you take advantage of all that it can do?

Learn the ins and outs of this not-so-simple seasoning. *BY SANDYG*

So, what is it exactly?

Salt is a natural mineral made up of **sodium and chloride** (that's the NaCl you might recall from chemistry class). It's used to season and preserve food, and for more nonculinary purposes than you can shake a saltshaker at. Oddly enough, only about 6% of manufactured salt ends up in food. The majority is used industrially and agriculturally, for everything from melting ice on roads to making plant food and detergents.

Where does it come from?

Salt is found primarily in seas, oceans, saltwater lakes, and the dried-up underground remains of ancient seas and oceans. It's harvested in three primary ways: by **deep-shaft mining** (drilling into salt beds, a process used for most rock salt), **solution mining** (putting freshwater into a salty mine to dissolve the salt and then pumping it out and evaporating it, a process used for most table salt), or **solar evaporation** (letting salty water from the sea or salt lakes

evaporate in shallow pools through exposure to sun and wind, a process used for sea salt).

Why do we need it?

Up to a point, the sodium we get from salt does a body good. It **helps us absorb nutrients** from food, **maintains fluid** in our blood cells, and **carries information** to our muscles and nerves. We don't need a ton of it, however. The recommended cap on sodium for adults is **2,300 milligrams a day**—just shy of what's in a teaspoon of table salt. Too much sodium interferes with the body's synthesis of nitric oxide (a molecule that tells our cells when to dilate arteries, among other things); when that happens, blood vessels constrict and blood pressure elevates, which can lead to strokes and heart attacks. Excess sodium also leaches calcium from bones, making them more vulnerable to fractures.

What does it do?

Salt brings its own flavor to the party. But more importantly, it **enhances other flavors**,

bringing out and boosting the best in each ingredient. It puts the exclamation point on a dish, so to speak. (Try this: Cook some tomato sauce, soup, or chili, and leave out the salt. Then divide the dish in half, salt one half, and taste both. You'll be surprised at how flat and uninteresting the unsalted version tastes.) And that little bit of salt added to cakes or cookies? It **pulls flavor forward** and **suppresses bitterness**, pumping up sweetness in everything from caramel to chocolate. In a brine, salt enhances flavor and also **tenderizes and moisturizes** through osmosis. Salt also has been used as a preservative for thousands of years. We still preserve hams and lemons by packing them away in salt. That's because when you have a high enough concentration of salt, it **wicks away moisture**, pulling it out of whatever's being preserved; that concentrates the flavor of the preserved food and **inhibits the growth of bacteria** that rely on moist environments to thrive.

SALT FAQs

Should I salt the water?

If cooking pasta or spuds in it, yes!

Pasta and potatoes absorb some salt as they cook; it gets right into their core. If you season them only after they are cooked, the salt won't penetrate these starchy foods, and they won't taste as full-flavored. How much salt to put in the pot will depend on the type you use (you'll need more kosher salt than table or sea salt) and how much water your pot holds. But 1½ tablespoons for every quart of water is a good starting point. Taste and add more salt until the water tastes like seawater. Yes, that's pretty salty, but you'll be pouring most of it off when you drain your pasta or potatoes.

 **Rice needs salt, too.** Since rice is generally cooked in a smaller amount of water and not drained, its cooking water doesn't need to be as generously salted as pasta or

potato water. Figure about ½ teaspoon of table salt for 1 cup of rice and 2 cups of water. If you're a salt lover, you can always taste once it's done and add more then.

Beans like salt in their water, as well.

You might have heard that salting beans while they cook toughens them, but that's not true. Salting the water may slow the softening of the bean, but as with spaghetti and spuds, it'll get some of the flavor right into the bean.

When should I salt food?

 Salt in large quantities has a drying effect, which is good if you're curing a ham or making jerky. But the small amount you use to season food actually helps ingredients hold onto their juices. And salting **before** you cook large pieces of meat can be a very good thing. Planning on roasting a chicken?

Sprinkle it inside and out with coarse salt and refrigerate it overnight. The resulting chicken will have crispy skin and moist meat. The salt will initially pull out some of the liquid in the meat, but then the now-salty liquid will be pulled back into the meat, getting trapped inside the muscle and breaking down some of the tough protein bonds, making for a super-juicy dish. This works with thick steaks, chops, and roasts, too. Just season them a few hours before cooking. Cuts of meat that are less than an inch thick should be seasoned shortly before cooking.

 A little bit of salt sprinkled on chopped onions or mushrooms **during** their cooking will draw out some of the liquid, which helps the vegetables soften. Some salt added to beaten eggs as they cook helps them to thicken and coagulate and, if you don't cook them too long, makes for a tender scramble.

SALT STORAGE

What's that in the shaker? No, it's not a bug. As many a diner owner can attest, a few grains of uncooked rice added to a saltshaker will absorb moisture and help salt flow freely—provided the rice doesn't clog the holes in the lid. Even if it contains anticaking agents, salt can clump wherever the humidity is high.

Saltcellar: It's just a name for a container for salt. (It comes from the early 1400s Anglo-Norman word *saler*, for salt container, which eventually morphed into the term "saltcellar.") It allows for easier and more accurate measuring than a shaker, plus it's better for larger-grain salts that won't fit through the holes of a shaker. There are all kinds of saltcellars on the market—some made of wood, others of ceramic or glass. Get one with a lid to keep out dust and moisture.

What about those pigs? "Salt pigs" are ceramic containers shaped like elbow macaroni (or a pig snout, hence the name) that hold salt. Even though there's no lid, the curved shape helps keep dust and debris from falling into the salt. While some come with scoops, traditional pigs have an opening wide enough for a whole hand, so you can just grab a pinch when you need it. Those with unglazed interiors help absorb moisture and prevent salt from caking.

Rock it, or not? Some specialty salts are sold in large rocks with a special grater to make your own flakes. It looks cool, and the grated salt is nice to finish a dish. But it's not necessarily better than already-flaked salt. If you like a very coarse salt but don't want to chip a tooth on it in your salad, you can put it in a salt mill (like a pepper mill) to grind it more finely at the table.

 If you're seasoning a dish that cooks for a long time, like a soup or a stew, you want to salt just a little in the beginning, then taste it **after** cooking, adding more salt if needed. The cooking liquid will evaporate some as it cooks, but the salt doesn't go anywhere, which means the liquid gets saltier as it reduces. If you're watching your sodium, by all means you can add a little at the end of the cooking time, or at the table, or omit it altogether and opt for a squeeze of lemon or a salt substitute to lift the flavor.

What if I've oversalted the dish?

 It's happened to all of us, and it's a hard spot to wiggle out of. The primary fix is to **add more unsalted ingredients** to the dish and hope for the best. For example, if you've oversalted a soup or a sauce, you can add water or unsalted broth to decrease the salt-to-liquid ratio. You may need to add more of all the other ingredients too, though, as you'll have diluted the other flavors as well.

What are salt substitutes?

 Many consist of sodium-free **potassium chloride**. Others are a reduced-sodium combo of **regular salt and potassium chloride**. Some folks find potassium chloride a little bitter, and it isn't recommended for people with kidney disease. Some blends are **salt cut with other flavor-boosters** (such as herbs, spices, or citrus peel), which makes them lower in sodium than straight salt, but not sodium-free.

SALTY SAYINGS *In ye olde days, guests would dine at a long table with a large saltcellar set in the middle. Distinguished guests would sit "above the salt" (between the salt and the host at the head of the table); common folks sat below.*

SALTY SAYINGS *Because salt was highly valued and expensive, Roman soldiers were paid partly with salt. If you were a Roman soldier doing a good job, you were considered worth your wages, or literally "worth your salt." The English term "salary" comes from the Latin words for salt (sal) and salt payments (salarium).*

NOT IN MY FOOD, THANKS

➤ **Rock salt or ice cream salt** is large chunks of sodium chloride that are used for melting ice on roads, sidewalks, driveways, or your front stoop. When dumped on ice, rock salt lowers the melting point of ice (and the freezing point of water) to below the usual 32°F mark, speeding up melting. Rock salt is also used when making churned homemade ice cream. Because ice cream needs to be colder than water to freeze, you add rock salt to the outer container along with ice to create a super-cold brine that's liquid but actually colder than solid ice—so the cream in the inner container can freeze. You can also add rock salt to ice in coolers to help speed the chilling of canned or bottled beverages, but it's not intended for consumption.

➤ **Epsom salt** looks like rock salt, but it's actually a mineral compound of magnesium and sulfate, named for the bitter saline springs near the town of Epsom, England. Because

magnesium and sulfate are both absorbed easily through the skin and shown to reduce inflammation and electrolyte imbalances in the body, Epsom salt is often added to bathwater to alleviate muscle aches and pains.

➤ **Curing salt**, also known as Prague powder or pink salt, is a combo of salt, sodium nitrite, glycerin, and food coloring. While it's used to cure things like ham and bacon, it is not intended for the table, nor should it be sprinkled on food like regular salt. In high enough amounts, it can be toxic. For this reason, curing salt is colored pink so it won't be confused with regular salt. But if you're curing your own meats, look for it online or at specialty stores.

➤ Many ice melt products contain not just sodium chloride but also other compounds to further speed melting or minimize harm to concrete and vegetation. These products are not edible.

FANCY SALTS

The labor involved in the harvesting and making of these fancier salts means they come at a higher price. Fortunately, a little goes a long way. Another good thing: If kept dry, they'll last indefinitely.

 **Fleur de sel**, "the flower of salt," originally meant sea salt harvested by Trappist monks from the surface of saltwater ponds along the French Atlantic coast, but it's now harvested in many other countries as well. Sun and wind evaporate the seawater, leaving behind large but light, delicate, irregularly shaped salt crystals that are skimmed by hand from the top of the salt pan (a shallow depression where saltwater collects, evaporates, and leaves behind a salt deposit). It contains an abundance of trace minerals, giving it a mellow, complex taste. To fully appreciate its flavor, use it as a finishing salt, sprinkling it on a dish just before serving, so that it doesn't dissolve entirely into the dish before it's eaten.

 **Sel gris**, French for "gray salt," is harvested from clay-lined salt ponds along the French Atlantic coast and in many other countries around the world. While *fleur de sel* is harvested from the top of the salt pan, *sel gris* comes from the bottom and is harvested by raking, which picks up some clay along with the salt, giving the salt its gray color. This coarse sea salt has higher moisture content than many salts and contains lots of minerals. Its crystals are large and slightly damp, perfect for finishing.

 **Maldon sea salt** hails from the town of Maldon on the east coast of Essex, England. Seawater is first boiled, then filtered to remove

any impurities, then heated again until the salt crystallizes. The resulting sea-salt flakes are white, pyramid-shaped, and clean and briny tasting. While you could certainly use Maldon in your salt mill, it's a wonderful finishing salt, adding a nice crunch when sprinkled on cooked meat, poultry, fish, and vegetables.

 **Hawaiian black lava salt** is harvested from the Pacific Ocean. Seawater is heated to remove impurities, then dried and combined with lava and activated charcoal, which gives it an earthy flavor and a glossy black color. Use it as a finishing salt.

 **Hawaiian a/aea (red) sea salt** is the result of natural evaporation. It is coarse in texture, red in color, and briny with mineral notes. Its color comes from red volcanic clay and iron.

 **Pink Himalayan salt** is hand-mined from ancient seabeds in Pakistan. It comes in different granulations, from very coarse to very fine. It's also sold in large rocks that you can grate, and in slabs that can double as a serving tray and chilling/cooking pan. Its color comes from the range of minerals and iron it contains. It's considered by some to be the purest of salts and to contain healing properties.

 **Smoked salts** are made by smoking sea salt over a wood fire to lend a smoky and woody flavor. A pinch makes chocolate-marshmallow ice cream taste like a s'more!

 **Flavored salts** abound. In the spice aisle and at gourmet food stores, you can find salts that are spiked with ground chili peppers, citrus peel, dried herbs, mushrooms, and even truffles.

BASIC SALTS

 **Table salt** (the stuff you most likely have in your saltshaker) is mined from underground salt deposits and refined to remove minerals and create a uniformly white color and a fine texture. It can be found both plain and iodized. The iodine (first mixed with salt in the U.S. in 1924 by Morton Salt Inc.) is added to highly refined salts that don't come from the sea (which is a natural source of iodine) to help prevent thyroid disease. If you eat a varied diet, chances are you're getting the recommended daily minimum: 150 micrograms (or 200 to 300 micrograms for pregnant women). A teaspoon of iodized table salt has 400 micrograms. If you have a sensitive palate, you might notice a slightly bitter or metallic taste in iodized salt. Although processed foods are high in sodium, the salt used in them tends not to be iodized. Table salt may also contain calcium silicate—an odorless, tasteless anticaking agent that prevents clumping.

 **Kosher salt**, mined from underground salt deposits, is not itself kosher. Rather, it's used for "koshering" meats and poultry. Its large grains pull blood out of meat, thereby koshering it. Kosher salt is larger-grained and less dense (with more space between the crystals) than table salt, so if you're measuring by the teaspoon, you'll get less of a salty taste than you would from the same amount of table salt. The two brands you'll generally find in the market, Diamond Crystal and Morton, are made differently. Diamond Crystal is light and fluffy with pyramid-shaped crystals and has 1,120 milligrams of sodium per teaspoon. Morton is a little denser and coarser, and has 1,920 milligrams of sodium per teaspoon. Like table salt, some kosher salt contains calcium silicate to prevent clumping.

 **Sea salt** is produced when the water in oceans or saltwater lakes or ponds evaporates. The evaporation leaves behind some minerals, giving the salt a little bit of flavor and color. While some folks claim sea salt to be healthier than regular salt, this hasn't been proven. Sea salt comes in coarse and fine crystals. The coarse is ideal for a salt mill or salt grinder, if you have one of those.

 **Canning and pickling salts** contain no additives, as those would make for cloudy brines (not bad as far as taste, but aesthetically unappealing). While labeled for canning and pickling, they're fine to use in cooking and baking, too.

DIY FLAVORED SALTS

You can **make your own flavored salts** by adding the dried ingredient of your choice to sea salt or kosher salt. Start small with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup salt and 1 teaspoon flavoring, all buzzed together in a food processor until well combined. Try adding dried chipotle peppers for both smoke and spice, or dried citrus peel for a sunny note. (The next time you're juicing an orange, tangerine, lemon, or lime, peel the fruit first and set the peels aside to dry.) Citrus salt is particularly good on chicken, fish, vegetables, or pasta, or even deviled eggs.

