

SALT AND PEPPER

When I was a boy—back when the world was young—salt and pepper were just that. Salt came in a blue cardboard cylinder labeled Morton's and in two flavors, iodized and not. And it was white. Pepper came in a small rectangular tin can, and was little black specks. Then Julia Child suggested putting ground white pepper in your cream or light-colored sauces, as she didn't like the little black specks which she said made it look like there were bug droppings in your dinner—and the genie was out of the bottle!

Before long, every head waiter with a fake French accent was prancing up to your table with a pepper grinder the size of a baseball bat, liberally spraying freshly ground black pepper over your salad, your water glass, and you. Then we were told that pepper not only came in black and white, but in green and pink and for all I know, purple—not to mention Szechwan pepper, which turns out not even to be real pepper!

Now it's salt's turn. Salt is a chemical compound of sodium and chloride which is necessary for our bodies—in a reasonable amount. Mother Nature, smart girl that she is, makes it easy for our bodies to take in salt by letting salt bring out the flavor in the food we eat. Salt has always been an essential and valuable commodity—Roman legionnaires used to be paid in salt. Salt comes from a number of different places—it can be produced from the sea, by evaporating sea water, or it can be found inland, in mineral deposits that can be mined.

But salt isn't just salt anymore. As I write this, thanks to Andrae's Bakery in Amador City which sells more types of salt than I've ever heard of, I'm staring at containers of kosher salt, Hawaiian red salt, "salish", which is an alder-wood smoked salt, Himalayan pink salt, grey sea salt from Re Island, France, and handcrafted Balinese sea salt. I passed on the Bolivian pink salt from the Andes Mountains. There is a limit, after all.

The Hawaiian red salt is a coarse salt that gets its dark orangish color from the red earth of the islands—like the T-shirts, I guess. The grey sea salt from France is an extremely coarse salt, with large lumps, a dingy grey in color, like a Clorox ad showing unbleached laundry. The salish is a charcoal-gray very coarse salt with a pronounced smoky aroma. The Himalayan pink salt is a slightly coarse salt with a faint pinkish tinge—very lovely. The Balinese sea salt is also slightly coarse, and of the purest white—but then so is the kosher salt.

And then there is the packaging. The Himalayan pink salt comes in a lovely round pinkish tin with a little wooden spoon attached. It is described as coming from the foothills of the Himalayas where it was originally a marine fossil that was formed during the Mesozoic era, and gets its pink color from iron and other minerals that have been leaching into it for the last 200 million years. OK. The Balinese sea salt comes in a lovely brown box, with a great deal of writing on the sides. And there's a pamphlet inside the box, with color photos of the salt-making process, including one of a nubile Balinese maiden standing at the water's edge, balancing a very large basket of salt on her head.

But is there any difference in the taste of salt? Isn't it all just—well—salty? Actually, the differences are significant and surprising. The Balinese sea salt is by far and away the saltiest of the bunch, with kind of a flat, strong and very salty taste. You'll clearly need only a little. The smoked salt has a definite smoky flavor. The Himalayan pink salt has a clean, slightly metallic taste to it—no doubt from all of those marine fossils. The Hawaiian red salt mercifully doesn't taste of dirt, but has a nice mild salty flavor. The mildest salt of all is the grey French sea salt, although biting down on a chunk of it can be rather a surprise. And ordinary table salt, when compared to these other salts, has a distinct and rather unpleasant bitter taste to it.

I use kosher salt in my everyday cooking—it's not as chunky as the coarse salt, but granular enough for me to easily pick up out of it's covered dish and sprinkle in by hand. It's easier that way to control the amount you're adding than it is if you pour the salt in. And kosher salt has a mild salty taste, unlike the sea salt. I use the Balinese sea salt in my salt grinder—which grinds a fine salt "dust" on the food which vanishes instantly—and you only need to use a little. The smoked salt was delicious on a steak, and the grey French sea salt is delicious in a salad. So run down to Andrae's Bakery and try some of these here fancy salts. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Cook.