
Salt of the Earth

by Gail Duff

Salt was first extracted from the sea around the eastern shores of Britain in the Iron Age. Its chief use at first was as a preservative, mixed into butter and cheese and rubbed into meat and fish before they were smoked.

Salty sauces were very much a feature of Roman cuisine and Romans in this country used the Iron Age methods of producing salt by evaporating sea water in shallow pottery dishes. Roman soldiers were paid in salt, and from this comes our word "salary". Ham (perna) and bacon (petas) were either dry salted or barrelled in brine.

In the tenth century, salting meat was the only way of keeping it through the winter. Like the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons used both wet and dry salting methods and the meats were flavoured with honey, juniper berries and sweet ale. Along the east coast the salt from the sand above the usual tide line, which was only covered on some days of the year by spring tides, was dissolved into fresh or sea water which was then filtered through peat and turf. At this time the brine springs in Worcestershire and Cheshire were discovered, and so we get the towns of Droitwich, Nantwich, Middlewich and Northwich; "wich" being the Anglo-Saxon word for salt-producing area.

In early medieval times butter and cheese were still salted to preserve them, and salt tubs for brining meats were a necessity in every household. In the manor houses large, decorative, silver or gold salt cellars were kept in the livery cupboard and placed on the top table at meal times. Smaller, plain ones were placed on the side tables that were "below the salt". Salt pans and brine springs were owned by manors and monasteries and let out to tenants, and salt was traded throughout the country.

Bay salt was also imported from France. This was coarse, dark coloured, full of impurities but with a slightly sweet flavour. It was considered better for preserving than the local salts, as it penetrated the meats more deeply.

The most popular way of producing salt at the moment is by the vacuum method. Natural brine is purified and pumped through three or more steam

heated vessels and the thick, milky-looking salt-slurry is skimmed off and filtered. This is skimmed off and filtered. This produces what is known as pure dried vacuum salt, or cooking salt. So-called prepared salt for the table has one per cent magnesium carbonate added to make it free-flowing.

There are two criticisms of this process. The first is the obvious one of the added chemical (I would rather have a natural salt and use a salt mill) and the second is the "purification". It is carried out to prevent the boilers from "furring", but it takes out important minerals and trace elements without which our bodies cannot properly use the pure salt.

There is one firm in Cheshire that is still using the old method of gently evaporating the brine in large shallow steel pans to produce what is called natural crystal salt, which retains all the minerals. It has a definite taste and is excellent for bread making and cooking and for putting into a salt mill. It is also very cheap. You can buy it, unlabelled, from whole food co-operatives and it is also marketed under the Harmony label.

Sea salt also contains the right balance of minerals, and if you don't fancy a product of the polluted Mediterranean, look nearer home. The best sea salt on the market at the moment is the one produced by the Maldon Salt Company which has its factory on the site of a medieval saltworks in Essex. The salt-water storage tanks are filled by the two-weekly spring tides when the saline content of the water is at its height. The brine is gently simmered, again in open steel pans, to produce delicate, flaky salt crystals with a slightly sweet flavour. This salt is quite expensive but superb for the table in a salt mill. You can also crush garlic with it, add it to vegetables or to any cooked dish and also use it in bread and pastry making. In the latter cases, dissolve the salt in any liquid you are using before adding it to the flour to ensure the flavour is evenly distributed.

Another good brand of sea-salt is marketed by Hofels of Suffolk. They also make a sesame salt from gently roasted sesame seeds and sea salt which are ground together. A little of this, worked with a crushed clove of garlic, will give a hint of a nutty flavour to a salad.
