

Sensational Salts

Gourmet salts pack a flavorful punch

Our bodies need sodium to regulate water balance and control muscle and nerve functions; however, most Americans get about five times the 1,500 mg daily (about $\frac{2}{3}$ teaspoons of table salt) recommended for adults between ages 50 and 70. Eating that much salt can raise the risk for high blood pressure—which affects one in three American adults—and may lead to heart and kidney disease, stroke, and blindness. So there's no question that people need to keep sodium levels in check, but this doesn't mean that you need to compromise flavor, especially if you give "gourmet salts" a fair shake.

SALT BASICS

Salt varieties such as *sel gris* and pink salts have recently skyrocketed in popularity among chefs and home cooks. Gourmet salts are often less refined, containing traces of other minerals, including iron, magnesium, calcium, potassium, manganese, zinc, and iodine. These trace minerals might contribute to flavor, but they have little effect on the nutritional profile: Sodium content of gourmet salts vary, but they generally contain comparable levels to that found in table salt.

Most chefs and retailers agree that, rather than mineral content, texture matters most. The regional environment greatly affects how salt crystallizes when it evaporates, making some salts light and flaky and others coarse and crunchy. Instead of using salt while cooking, add a small amount of gourmet salt to finished dishes. It will give them flavor with less salt and ultimately lower the sodium content of meals. Since salts differ in taste and texture, which kind you use—and how much—will vary depending on the dish you're preparing.

When choosing salts, Michael Stebner, executive chef at True Food Kitchen, a restaurant I co-developed in Phoenix (foxrc.com/true_food_kitchen.html), recommends opting for hand-harvested and

single-origin salts. Single-origin salts have a more distinctive flavor and texture, versus mass-produced salts, which often combine salt from different locations, losing unique taste profiles. These salts can be pricey, but you get what you pay for.

Putting salt through a grinder can also change how salt affects a dish. Grinding doesn't necessarily change flavor, but it does damage a salt's natural texture; many chefs suggest using coarser salt in pinches instead. It's also true that the finer you grind the salt, the more sodium it has per teaspoon, since fine grains sit flatter in a measuring spoon. For example, kosher salt contains about 25 percent less sodium per serving than table salt, thanks to its larger crystals.

SEASONINGS WORTH THEIR SALT

These choice seasonings take top billing with chefs and gastronomy aficionados:

Fleur de sel—the light, lacy film of salt that forms before evaporation is complete. With mild salinity and great texture, just a sprinkle offers pop and crunch without super-intense saltiness.

Sel gris—gray sea salt from the coastal area of Brittany, France. This layer underneath fleur de sel (because it's wet and a little brackish), has a strong mineral, briny flavor; you don't need much.

Pink Himalayan salt—often fashioned into bowls or serving platters in restaurants. It has mild salinity and flaky texture, and it's pretty. Grate a few thin flakes off a block to accent your meal.

Black salt (kala namak)—traditionally used in Indian cuisine as a condiment or added to chutneys. It has a strong sulfuric aroma and taste.

Infused salts—commonly infused with ingredients like caraway, truffles, or lavender. Always use to finish a dish because the flavor dissipates during cooking, tempting you to oversalt.

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