

Salt of the Earth

By Sonja Riveland

If your idea of salt is something that comes in one of those round, blue containers, think again. Gourmet shops and upscale grocers are offering dozens of artisan salts from around the world. Fine culinary salts gain their special flavor and color from the minerals present in the waters where the salt is harvested. In addition, there are salts seasoned with enhancements such as fennel or dried truffles. You'll also find salts that have been smoked over a variety of woods, including alder, hickory and mesquite. What's surprising is the broad range of flavors and textures.



HOST A SALT TASTING

A tasting party is a wonderful way to savor the subtleties of gourmet salt. You'll need to present a selection of salts to sprinkle, and finger foods that really let the salt flavors shine. Try platters of steamed edamame, boiled shrimp, crisp radishes, and grilled and sliced steak, along with crusty baguettes served with unsalted butter and a mild cheese such as Port Salut or jack cheese.

Naomi Novotny, vice president of SaltWorks, Inc., an online specialty salt retailer, suggests serving an assortment of salts with different flavors, colors and textures. Her recommendations:

Murray River Pink Flake Salt

The delicate peach-colored flakes from Australia have a rich flavor that is unlike any other salt. Highly regarded by chefs, the salt is mild, yet flavorful, and the crispy crystals melt quickly on warm foods.

Fleur de Sel de Camargue

Known as the Caviar of Salt, this French salt is hand-harvested in Provence. The small, flaky crystals have a moist, crunchy texture and a wonderful, balanced flavor.

Aloha Hawaiian Sea Salt

The bright brick color of this salt comes from the addition of a small amount of purified Hawaiian clay. Rich in minerals, the salt has a distinctive taste. Novotny recommends using the coarse salt to add another texture to your tasting.

Fumée de Sel Chardonnay Oak Smoked

Fleur de Sel by Le Trésor

Fumée de Sel starts with a fine hand-caked French Fleur de Sel. The salt is then cold smoked with wood chips made from five- to seven-year-old seasoned French oak barrels that have been used to age fine Chardonnay. The flavor is fabulously smoky without any bitterness.



SIMPLE SALT SENSATIONS

Once you've tried gourmet salts, you'll think of dozens of ways they can enhance the flavors of food. Here are a few suggestions for savoring the unique qualities of artisan salts.

- Treat your favorite Bloody Mary to a smoked sea salt rim.
- Dip slices of fresh pineapple or mango in a mixture of French sea salt and dried red chili flakes.
- Serve a flight of three or four salts with your next steak dinner.
- Toss balls of fresh mozzarella with extra-virgin olive oil and a dash of truffle salt.
- Brush slices of hearty artisan bread with olive oil and grill, then sprinkle with fennel salt.
- Dish up dark chocolate truffles with honey and lavender salt for dipping. ■

RESOURCES

Premium gourmet salts from around the world can be ordered online from SaltWorks, Inc., at www.saltworks.com.



"Where would we be without salt?" [James Beard]