

Tricks of the trade; how to master cooking with salt

The ability to salt food well is one of the most fundamental tenets of cookery. In a previous article I extolled the virtues of Halen Môn sea salt; a high quality product that is loved by cooks around the world for its exquisite properties. Here, I would like to build on that and talk about how to salt your food perfectly each time and expand your repertoire with a few tricks of the trade. Trust me, salt will never seem the same again.

How to enhance your food

Put very simply, salt makes everything taste better. The recent trend of salted desserts such as caramels and chocolates is no passing fad but simply an extension of what we already knew; that it matters not if the food is sweet or savoury. Obviously there are guidelines with matters of common sense and taste to adhere to. It isn't a case of waving a magic salty wand at everything that passes and expecting it to be transformed. But with a few pointers and some practice you will find no limits to the extraordinary flavours that you can conjure up with salt.

Food should not taste salty, although there are instances when you want to taste the salt; there is a world of difference between excellent salt such as Halen Môn or Fleur de sel and free flowing table salt. Until I discovered proper salt, and how to use it well, I believed that I wasn't fond of salt. And yes, there are certain health guidelines that come with the intake of salt, but using decent salt correctly can often mean using less salt and getting more flavour.

There are various ways in which salt affects flavour, and taste, but to keep it simple let's just say that it enhances flavour by adding depth. As opposed to lemon which enhances flavour by lifting the palate, brightening and accentuating the flavours it finds. To use a musical analogy, think of it as the bass and the treble. I mention lemon not only as a comparison but also as a natural partner; for me the lemon is never very far away from the salt. Like I say; treble and bass.

There are a multitude of salts available to us now; Himalayan Pink Salt, Black Salt, Persian Blue Salt and even salt blocks for cooking and serving. Even without these delightful additions to your kitchen cupboards I would recommend having a few types of salt to hand. Normal table salt is useful for baking and some general uses such as cooking water. A flaky sea salt such as Halen Môn is good for just about everything and works well as a finishing salt, although you could add Fleur de Sel to your repertoire for this purpose. Finally you may find coarse sea salt useful for when you need a large quantity of salt.

At its most basic, salt in cooking should be added in layers, and tasted at each step of the procedure. If you are cooking a stew for instance, you would add a tiny pinch of salt in with the onions to begin with, then after adding everything else and letting it simmer for a while you would taste the stew, probably go with a tiny pinch more, simmer, taste and maybe just at the end you would season with a tiny pinch more and some freshly ground pepper (and even just one drop of lemon juice). By the way, it is fairly pointless seasoning with pepper while cooking. Do it at the end to keep the aromatic intensity.

Most of us are aware that water for pasta should be salty, but this also applies to water for vegetables, potatoes, soaking chips etc. About 3% is the stated value, which works out at 3g per 100ml water. If you think of a large pan of water for pasta as being roughly 2 litres then it works out at 1.5 tablespoons per litre of water, using ordinary table salt. Oh, and don't add oil to your pasta water.

Beyond this taste as you go/check your seasoning/adjust your seasoning combo that lies at the root of good salting there are various other tricks available to you.

The classic way to garnish fish is to take half a lemon, dip it in salt and tie it in a square of muslin. Not only does this look particularly elegant but it gives the diner an easy way to mix salt and lemon, without pips, in one simple squeeze. Another way to add a breath of salt to food at the table is to fill an atomiser with a salty solution of warm water and mist the food with it. This works particularly well where not a lot of salt is needed; it is already dissolved and more easily directed.

You can use coarse salt in large quantities to cook in the oven and in the frying pan. If you fill a frying pan with a thick layer of coarse salt, with herbs strewn into it if you like, and heat it until the salt is smoking hot you can then add prawns with their shells on and cook for a few minutes on either side until they become opaque. This is one of the best ways that I know to cook exceedingly fresh large prawns. A whole fish can be cooked in a similar manner, by burying it in coarse salt and baking in a hot oven for about 25 minutes per kilogram of fish. Both of these methods bring out the seasidey, saline quality of the fish and accentuate the sweet tender flesh with incredible results.

My last word goes to flavoured salts. Not the domain of fancy gift shops or folk with too much time and money, flavoured salts are actually a brilliant shortcut and a great way of getting more than one dimension into your food. I bought some gorgeous Amalfi lemons in the summer and added the pared rind to several jars of Halen Môn. Almost instantly the salt took on the flavour of the lemon and can be added to practically anything to instantly enhance and accentuate the flavours (remember the treble and bass?) Because the salt is a natural preservative, it draws the moisture out of the lemon and stops it from deteriorating. You can use this method with almost anything: a sprig of rosemary, a used vanilla pod, dried chillies, lavender and rose petals. Be inventive. The beauty of flavoured salts is not just the dimension that they add to cooking, but how useful they are for grazing; rosemary salt over a quick tomato salad? Rose salt on a bit of vanilla ice cream is divine.

So, when using salt, learn to trust your judgement and your palate by using a few flakes at a time and building up layers of intensity. Play with flavoured salts and cooking seafood in large amounts of rock salt. Experiment with salting sweet foods like ice-cream or fresh fruit. I have one more trick up my sleeve but you will have to check out my post on cooking the perfect steak to find out. Happy Seasoning.

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