

How to make salt



OF ALL THE PROJECTS WE ATTEMPTED as part of our One-Block Feast (sunset.com/oneblockfeast), this was the most farfetched. We'd read of other people's efforts (memorably Michael Pollan's in his *Omnivore's Dilemma*, in which he scavenges water from trash-strewn wetlands and evaporates it on his stovetop into brown salt that, he writes, "tasted so metallic and so much like chemicals that it actually made me gag.")

But we persisted because we knew we had to have seasoning for our dinner, and figured—what with the San Francisco Bay to one side of us (the same bay that Pollan harvested, actually) and the Pacific on the other, we had some water to choose from. Also, the other raw materials that we'd "imported" for our feast—grapes for the wine, olives for the oil, and milk for the cheese—at least were transformed from their natural state by our own hands. It would be copping out to just go buy salt.

So, we stubbornly ignored a few big reasons not to

make your own salt: 1) You can burn a lot of gas while driving or boating to a clean patch of water; 2) It's hard to get homemade salt tested to be sure it's edible; 3) Making salt can use up even more gas (or electricity).

However, the process was surprisingly easy. And our salt looked pretty (pure white), smelled fresh, tasted exactly like the ocean, and made a fine seasoning for our feast.

WHAT WE MADE Pacific Sea Salt

We hauled drumfuls of Pacific brine to our Menlo Park offices and reduced several gallons of it to salt.

WHAT WE USED Materials, Prices & Sources

Plastic drums We had a few clean 5-gallon drums left over from our olive-oil efforts (www.sunset.com/oneblockfeast), so used them to transport the brine. Any thoroughly washed bucket will do. \$12 each for 5-gal. food-grade plastic drums, min. order 10, at the Olive Oil Source; www.oliveoilsource.com, 805/688-1014.

Stockpot for boiling the brine. From \$60 online or at a cookware shop.

Rimmed baking sheets for baking and evaporating the brine. About \$7 each at a cookware shop.

HOW WE DID IT A Step-by-Step Guide

1. Collection After thinking about the nearest cleanest portion of the ocean, we settled on Bean Hollow beach near Pescadero, since no streams (which can carry toxins and other runoff) flow into the ocean

there. Collected 40 gallons of the chilly Pacific in our plastic drums.

2. Filtering Back at the office, poured a test batch of water through a coffee filter into a stockpot.

3. Boiling Brought the filtered water to a rolling boil and held it there for 20 minutes to kill any noxious bacteria. We were aware that this would have no effect on toxins or heavy metals. In fact, were those present, the cooking might concentrate them.

4. Filtering again To remove any remaining particles.

5. Baking We poured the water into rimmed baking sheets to a depth of about ½ inch and baked it at 350° for about 2 hours, checking often toward the end to make sure we didn't burn the crystals as they formed. Feeling sheepish about the fossil fuel consumed by baking, we also tried putting the brine-filled baking sheets outside to **evaporate in the sun**. Our experiment wasn't perfect, owing to spotty weather and also lots of leaves and other debris blowing into the exposed salt. We're still experimenting. Covering the pans with cheesecloth is probably the next step.

6. Scraping The crystals rimmed the pan

and had to be scraped off with a rigid metal spatula.

Yield: Per 3 cups brine, about 2 table-spoons good-tasting, snowy white salt.

7. Testing We contacted various clean-water agencies to ask about getting our water samples tested to see whether they could be ingested, but it proved fruitless. One officer, with a branch of the EPA, told us, "Why would anyone want to drink salt water?" He had a point.

We also considered sending a salt sample to a food lab, but it would have cost us at least \$200 to test for each possible contaminant. Kinda pricey for seasoning, we thought.

So, at this point, we're happy to have produced salt that tastes good and, who knows, might be completely harmless. Then again, it might not be. Conclusion: Unless you live right on the shore of a verifiably pristine sea, with sunny clear skies for evaporating, it's totally impractical and possibly risky to make your own salt. Here's an instance where storebought is better than homemade.

Interesting Info

As a subject, salt is fascinating. It has roughly 14,000 applications, from de-icing roads to food preservation, and was so valued in Roman times that soldiers were paid wages in salt (the Latin word “salary” emerges from that practice).

Books

Salt: A World History by Mark Kurlansky (Penguin Books, 2002)

Neptune’s Gift: A History of Common Salt by Robert P. Multhauf (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978)

Other

How to Make Salt from Sea-Water by John Leconte (published by the Governor and Council of South Carolina, 1862).

An oddly engrossing pamphlet written at the request of the state’s governor by a chemistry and physics professor at South Carolina College. At a time when the oceans were cleaner than they are today, Leconte spells out how to boil down seawater in 20-foot sheet iron pans over wood fires. You’ll find yourself actually engrossed in the details of sludging and siccage (crystallization).

For the free download, visit <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/lecontej/leconte.html>

The Salt Institute, an association of salt producers, puts forth all sorts of information about salt on its website—everything from solution mining to nutrition to stats on world production (China leads).

Saltinstitute.org