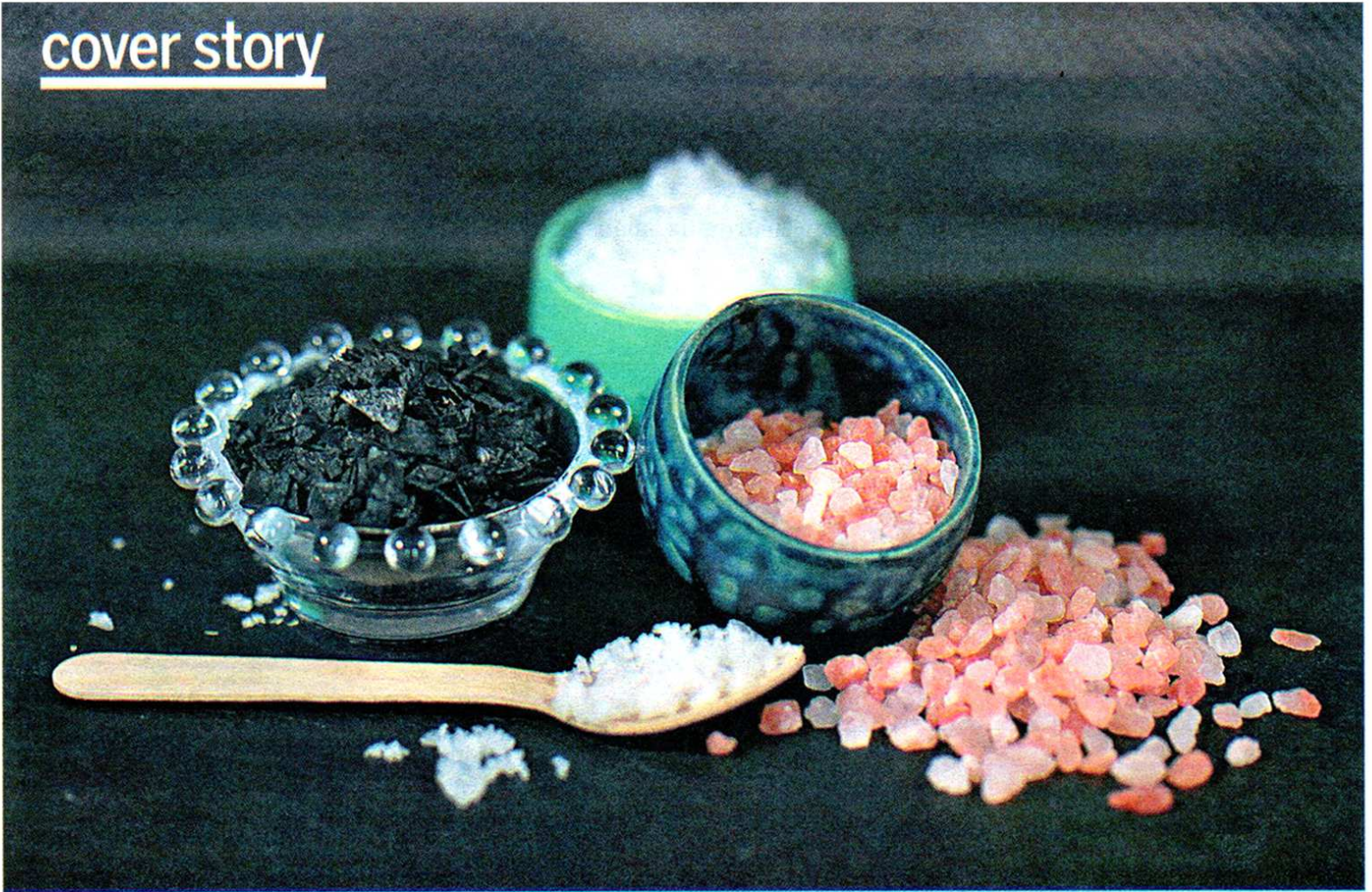


JUST A PINCH

Some local companies advance the trend toward turning artisan sea salt into a home and restaurant staple

BY GILLIAN O'CALLAGHAN | PAGE 18

cover story



FOOD STYLING BY SHERYL JULIAN/GLOBE STAFF; PHOTO BY WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Clockwise from left front: Maldon Sea Salt (from England), Cyprus black sea salt, salt from Atlantic Saltworks in Gloucester, and Himalayan pink salt (mined in Europe and Asia).

WORTH THEIR SALT

It has always had unique characteristics and now saltmakers on the North Shore and the Cape have allies in restaurants and home kitchens who recognize the subtle difference a variety of salt can make on the tongue.

BY GILLIAN O'CALLAGHAN
GLOBE STAFF

Last fall, longtime friends Heather Ahearn and Alison Darnell went to the farmers' market in Salem to shop for dinner and realized that their entire menu was locally sourced — except for the salt. The industrious duo headed down to a quiet corner of Salem Harbor, filled a gallon jug with sea water, and set it on the stove to boil. Many hours later, there was salt in the bottom of the pot.

"Once we saw that salt," recalls Ahearn, "we didn't turn back." The pair's venture, Atlantic Saltworks, was founded last year. The business partners joined the ranks of a small but growing group of artisan New England saltmakers, including Marblehead Salt Co., launched by Andrew Bushell, also last year, and the two-year-old Cape businesses, Cape Cod Saltworks in Orleans and Wellfleet Sea Salt Co. in Wellfleet. The senior entrepreneur in the group is Maine Sea Salt Co., of Marshfield, Maine, in business for 16 years. All these companies use the evaporation process to make salt, rather than harvesting salt from mines.

"In the last two to three years there has been an exponential growth in saltmakers who are finding their own story and are figuring out how to make their own salt," says Mark Bitterman, author of "Salted: A Manifesto on the World's Most Essential Mineral, with Recipes," on the phone from Portland, Ore. He recently tasted Atlantic Saltworks' product and was smitten. "It's a very beguiling salt. They're leaving a lot of the briny, rich flavors of magnesium. I love that."

Developing that flavor came after the entrepreneurs sampled seawater at 20 spots along the North Shore, from Swampscott to Newburyport. They settled on the waters off Gloucester. "The salinity was almost the same everywhere, but we were shocked at the differences in flavor," says Ahearn. They will soon start construction on a production facility in Gloucester, thanks to a recent successful Kickstarter campaign.

To create the unique characteristics of his sea salt, Bushell collects seawater from 14 different locations off the Marblehead coast. He learned the 1,600-year-old process for making delicate flaky salt over eight months spent at an ancient monastery on Mount Athos, on a Greek peninsula. All of the company's profits are donated to aiding Syrian refugees through the St. Paul's Foundation, where he is executive chairman. Earlier this year Bushell transformed the 125-year-old garage next to his home into a state-of-the-art production facility, where he is combining, he says, "a totally new way of using modern equipment to do something

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PHOTOS BY JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Atlantic Saltworks co-owners Alison Darnell (above and top left) and Heather Ahearn (top right) collect seawater in buckets in Gloucester for boiling it down to make their artisan salt.

SALT TECHNIQUES

Cooking food in a salt crust keeps the contents moist by protecting them from dry oven heat. The presentation — a whole chicken or fish in a golden brown crust that must be chipped off — is dramatic. Chef Mitchell Randall of Boston's Ostra, a huge fan of this technique, is serving a salt-crust branzino. "A lot of people think that it is really going to be salty and overpowering," he says. "But it's a pristine way to cook, with [a paste made from] kosher salt and egg whites; there are no other flavors influencing it other than the bones and skin. It is the most pure way you are going to eat any fish. Nothing else is influencing it like the flavor of the grills or other things that you are cooking in the kitchen or what else is in the oven with it. It is just totally itself."

Preserving lemons in a salt brine is an ancient North African technique. The bright fruits are quartered, generously salted, and tucked into sterilized jars filled with the juices from the fruit. For an additional layer of flavor, add peppercorns or cinnamon sticks. Pop them into the fridge and in several weeks,

they will be transformed into a mild seasoning.

Soaking dried beans in salted water before cooking helps weaken their skins, avoiding the crunchy bean phenomenon. Mix 2 to 3 tablespoons of salt with 1 gallon of water and let the beans soak at room temperature overnight (if you're in a hurry, even a few hours in the salty bath will help soften them). Drain and rinse well before cooking.

Some recipes instruct the cook to salt eggplant to draw out the bitter juices. In French, the technique is called "degorging." After salting, you have to rinse the eggplant and dry it. Use the method to soften strands of raw zucchini that will not be cooked, and shreds of cabbage before making slaw.

Many cooks add a pinch of salt to every confection to heighten the other flavors. Hawaiians salt pineapple before eating to bring out the sweetness, and others salt melons (particularly watermelon), mango, and guava. The French salt small radishes (and eat them with butter).

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very old."

At A&J King Artisan Bakers in Salem, a sprinkle of Bushell's salt tops the Flying Dutchman spiced caramel latte. Co-owner Andy King describes the salt as "soft on the palate and melting on the tongue, which makes it wonderful for finishing pastry or drinks. It's definitely a product that deserves to be featured, not buried, with other supporting ingredients." Restaurant and bar manager Charlie Gaeta of the Blue Ox in Lynn adds Marblehead Salt's flakes to his "local Bloody Mary," which also features vodka from Roxbury's Bully Boy Distillers and a pickle garnish from Maitland Mountain Farm in Salem. "We never bring in a local product just because it's local," says Gaeta. "It has to be really good."

In restaurants and home kitchens kosher salt has become the standard (its description as "kosher" comes from its use in the Jewish tradition of salting meat to draw out blood as part of the koshering process). Larger granules make kosher salt both easier to pick up with the fingertips, and to distribute evenly. And without the additives present in table salt, most notably iodine, kosher salt is often considered to have a cleaner taste.

Natural salt fans, however, including author Bitterman, want to change this widespread preference for kosher salt. "Moving to kosher salt from iodized table salt is like moving from Twinkies to Ho Hos," he argues. "They are both industrially processed foods." Anyone who focuses on using unprocessed, whole ingredients, he says, should choose naturally occurring sea or rock salts.

As with many trends, sea salts gained popularity because of their use by chefs. Matthew Tropeano, chef of Pain D'Avignon Cafe-Boulangerie in Hyannis, keeps bright white Maldon Sea Salt in his kitchen for finishing many dishes. "It's beautiful flaky salt from England that chefs all over use." He is also smoking Maldon salt in a hot smoker he fashioned from a discarded dishwasher.

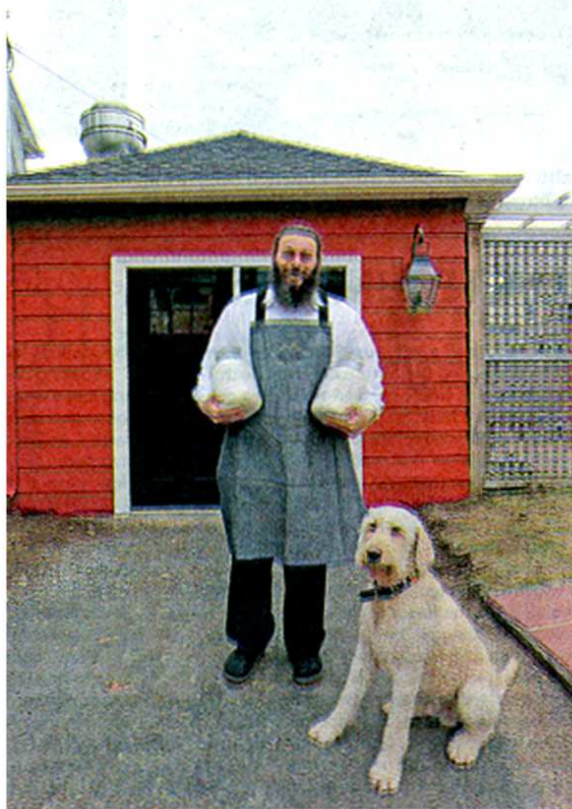
Maldon also appeals to Cassie Piuma, co-owner of Sarma. The Somerville chef adds it to nut and sesame crumbles that top a number of dishes at the Mediterranean tapas restaurant. "First for flavor, but also for texture. It elevates the crunch texture as well as adding seasoning."

Salt Traders in Ipswich, a retail shop that offers a wide range of natural salts, has products from local producers and others sourced across the globe. Manager Yvonne Marsh sets up tastings to help customers find just the right one. "Salt is a very personal choice," she says. "Each one has its own flavor and personality, and like clothes, you know when it fits you." During a sampling, she contrasts



PHOTOS BY BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Andrew Bushell (below) with his dog Theo, whose image is part of the label for Bushell's Marblehead Salt Co. Bushell collects seawater from 14 locations off the Marblehead coast to create his sea salt.



A SAMPLING OF SALT

Table salt is mechanically mined, refined salt, usually with added iodine.

The most common of the two types of **kosher salt** is mechanically mined and named for its use in preparing meats according to Jewish dietary laws. Less common are kosher-certified natural salts, such as the one made by Marblehead Salt Co., that meet Jewish dietary laws.

Flake sea salt comprises thin, light, dry, and crisp crystals that vary in size and shape. This variety, as Maldon Sea Salt, crumbles easily and adheres to cooked food.

Solar evaporated, unrefined **crystal sea salt** is milled to a fine, medium, or coarse grain. These are most of the sea salts in the world and range from dry to moist, white to gray.

Hard crystals with very little moisture, **mined sea salt** such as Himalayan and Peruvian pink salts, come from deposits on land rather than the ocean.

Flavored or blended sea salts contain herbs, spices, citrus, or other flavorings. Sea salt that is either cool- or warm-smoked over a fire to make **smoked sea salt** is usually brown in color, with the characteristic smoky taste.

GILLIAN O'CALLAGHAN

SOURCE: Salt Traders

the “gentle flavor with a firm crunch” of a coarse Himalayan pink salt with the “briny, but delicate texture” of a flaked Atlantic finishing salt.

Any conversation about salt invariably turns to health. Current government guidelines recommend less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium daily (about one scant teaspoon of table salt). Deborah Krivitsky, director of nutrition for the Cardiovascular Disease Prevention Center at Massachusetts General Hospital, says there are new findings regarding salt. A recent collaborative study between Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Copenhagen University Hospital found that some people can tolerate between 2,600 and 5,000 milligrams per day (1 to 2 teaspoons) without an increase in cardiovascular disease.

Krivitsky stresses that appropriate amounts of sodium for individuals depend on their health and lifestyle. She warns, “Many of us still eat too much salt . . . and most of that comes from processed foods.” She encourages cooking from scratch to control how much you consume.

Bitterman points out that the moment when salt is added to a dish is important. “Use less salt during your cooking and toward the end, ideally at your plate, sprinkle with finishing salt. Then you are putting the salt and the food and your mouth into interplay.”

His favorite way to finish a dish: Take salt and “sling it on top of your salad, and you’ll taste a crazy lacework of dancing salt crystals.”

ATLANTIC SALTWORKS (about \$6 for 1.5 ounces) is available at *Pamplemousse*, 26 Haven St., Reading, 781-872-1125; *The Cave*, 44 Main St., Gloucester, 978-283-0896; *Lula’s Pantry*, 5 Dock Square, Rockport, 978-546-0010, *The Picklepot*, 75 Wharf St., Salem, 978-744-6678; or go to www.atlanticsaltworks.com.

MARBLEHEAD SALT CO. (about \$5 per ounce) is available at *Shubie’s*, 16 Atlantic Ave., Marblehead, 781-631-0149; *Vinnin Square Liquors*, 371 Paradise Road, Swampscott, 781-598-4110, *Formaggio Kitchen South End*, 268 Shawmut Ave., Boston, 617-350-6996; or go to www.marbleheadsalt.com.

SALT TRADERS 18D Mitchell Road, Ipswich, 978-356-7258, www.salttraders.com.