

Flavor crystals: love salt but hate the sodium? Try seasoned salt. It has less sodium than table salt—and adds a new dimension of taste and texture to any dish

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SALT IS a surprisingly versatile seasoning: It brings out the flavor of any food, whether sweet or savory, and suppresses the natural bitterness in many fruits and vegetables. Sodium, which makes up 40 percent of the sodium chloride we use to salt our food, is an essential electrolyte that regulates your body's fluid levels--and it may even help quell appetite, according to a 1998 study by researchers at the University of Sussex in the U.K.

Despite all these positive attributes, salt still gets a bad rap because sodium can raise blood pressure. That's why most scientists and nutritionists recommend limiting sodium intake, particularly if you're obese, elderly, or at risk for hypertension. But the problem may lie with regular table salt. Not only does one teaspoon contain nearly the entire recommended daily intake of sodium, table salt is also so highly processed that it's stripped of potentially beneficial trace minerals.

Fortunately for salt lovers, there are plenty of alternatives including specialty and artisanal salts like Kosher, sea, and the unique clay- and mineral-infused Indian and Hawaiian varieties. These salts have crystals that are larger than those of table salt, so each teaspoon has less sodium. Moreover, most of them are sprinkled on food just before it's served--not added throughout the cooking process--which nutritionists say may reduce your sodium intake.

But healthier salt seasoning doesn't stop here. More and more chefs are experimenting with flavored salts, in which they mix specialty and artisanal salt crystals with spices, herbs, seeds, and even flowers, fruits, and vegetables (like violets, lemon, and dried mushrooms) to jazz up their dishes. The finishing dash of these salts adds an element the flavoring agent alone cannot give.

Walter Pisano, executive chef at Tulio in Seattle, says that while he could add whole basil leaves to

a dish, using a basil-flavored sea salt creates an unexpected texture the herb lacks on its own. Other chefs agree that this new melding of flavor and texture excites the palate and makes a dish more vibrant.

For all their sophistication, flavored salts are easy to make and use. Try one of these four ways.

Grind it

The simplest and most common way to make flavored salt is to mix a ground flavoring ingredient (herb, spice, seed, fruit, vegetable, or flower) with your chosen salt. If you're using a regular sea salt, combine it with the flavor and grind them together in a food processor. If you're using a salt with a unique crystalline structure, like Maldon or fleur de sel (see Salt Glossary on page 42), grind the flavoring separately in a spice grinder then toss it with the salt so the crystals remain intact.

In a recipe inspired by his mother-in-law, Chad Galiano, chef de cuisine at Neomi's Grill in Trump International Sonesta Beach Resort in Sunny Isles Beach, Fla., created an anise-seed salt by adding ground anise seed to flaky Maldon, which he sprinkles on blanched soybeans (see page 45 for the recipe). Pisano makes porcini salt, which he uses on potatoes, by combining dried porcini and sea salt in a food processor. He makes basil salt using the same method, pulsing sea salt with equal parts basil.

The secret to a successful salt is the quality of the herb, says Pisano. "The basil has to be very fresh and green, with no black on the leaves anywhere."

Flavored salts are most commonly sprinkled on finished food but some chefs do use it before-hand. Husband-and-wife team H. Alexander Talbot and Aki Kamoizawa--Ideas in Food bloggers and former co-executive chefs of Keyah Grande restaurant in Pagosa Springs, Colo.--occasionally use their signature herb salt to season fish or vegetables before cooking. Pisano does the same with salmon: "I use a little truffle salt and sear the salmon on one side," he explains. "It seals in the salt, like a [spice] rub."

Smoke it

Making smoked salt is a cinch during barbecue season. If you use a charcoal-burning, dome-lid grill, like a Weber, Galiano suggests placing a layer of sea salt on a metal tray and leaving it on the grill after cooking your food. Cover the grill and let the salt sit in the smoke and absorb it until the next morning.

You can tweak the flavor by placing wood chips on the hot coals; Galiano is partial to Welsh oak and pecan woods. "Mesquite is probably the most pronounced flavor," he says, while hickory is milder. Or, add herbs or spices-like whole lavender or ground coriander seed--and let their aromas seep into the salt as it smokes.

With its robust, hearty flavor, smoked salt is best used on meat, fish, or other proteins, though some chefs use it on baked goods, such as homemade crackers or chocolate desserts, to add a more complex and unusual flavor.

Infuse it

In this method, an ingredient is allowed to "steep" so its essence soaks into the salt. Simply place a strong-flavored ingredient into an airtight container with the salt crystals, shake to mix, and let it sit for a few days--or up to a month.

Vanilla beans and truffles are expensive but their powerful flavors make them good infusers. To make his vanilla salt, Talbot cuts a whole bean in half and scrapes out the seeds in the center, then tosses it with the salt and the rest of the bean. After several days he removes the seeds (the bean is kept with the salt to continue flavoring).

Truffle salt can be made the same way, providing a less expensive alternative to the grinding method that many chefs and artisan food makers use. To infuse, cut one truffle into several pieces and place in a jar of salt until the salt reaches the desired level of pungency. Remove the truffle and use immediately. Eggs, risotto, and root-vegetable soups are all good partners for truffles.

Roast it

Roasting is the preferred method of Noriaki Yasutake, the sushi chef at Perrys in Washington, D.C.: Moisten Kosher salt with water so it flavors evenly, mix the moist salt with a powdered flavoring, like green-tea powder, then slowly roast the mixture in a skillet until it dries.

Green-tea salt is an ideal match for many types of fish, whether raw, seared, tempura-battered, or grilled (see recipe on page 38). In Japan, it's traditionally eaten with a rice dish that includes nori seaweed and dried salmon flakes.