Inviting some new and healthy varieties to your table

Salts of the earth

Matthew Kadey, MSc

Many chefs would claim that without salt there is no real cooking. As a magnificent multitasker, salt releases, elevates, melds, and seals in the flavours of a dish. So valued was rock salt in the past that Roman soldiers were often paid with it—they called this compensation a salarium, hence today's "salary." Salt was especially essential before the advent of refrigerators to draw the moisture out of food, curing it and creating an environment hostile to bacterial growth. >
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In modern times, this simple crystalline combination of sodium and chloride can’t get any respect. The onslaught of processed foods doused in heavily refined, cheap table salt has given rise to serious health problems.

Thankfully, the way to avoid consuming too much salt is not to banish it from cooking altogether, but to be smarter about what foods we eat and what salt we use.

SALT AND SODIUM

Sodium (Na) is one of the chemical elements found in table salt, also known as sodium chloride. One teaspoon (5 mL) contains about 6 g of table salt and 2,400 mg of sodium. However, kosher and sea salts are usually lower in sodium by volume because they contain other minerals, and the shape of the crystals makes them less compact.

UN SalT YOUR WAY TO HEALTH

Our bodies need some sodium to maintain fluid balance and proper nerve and muscle functioning, but just 500 mg a day is necessary for good health. Current recommendations from the US Institute of Medicine (commissioned jointly by the USA and Canada) suggest we cap our daily intake at 1,500 mg, with an upper limit of 2,300 mg.

According to Statistics Canada, 85 percent of Canadian males and 60 to 80 percent of females consume more than this upper limit on a daily basis. Average intake hovers around 3,100 mg.

Here’s why we should be trying to scale back our consumption.
Prevent cold & flu naturally!

It's good for your heart

We've heard for years that excessive sodium intake contributes to hypertension, and a 2009 meta-analysis of 13 studies involving 177,000 subjects published in the British Medical Journal has confirmed that a sodium-laden diet increases stroke and overall cardiovascular disease risk.

Some people can’t eliminate extra sodium from food through their kidneys, so it builds up in the blood. Because sodium attracts and holds water, blood volume increases, forcing the heart to work harder to move the extra volume through blood vessels, thus increasing pressure in the arteries. High blood pressure in turn increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes, two of the leading causes of mortality in Canada.

A report in the Canadian Journal of Cardiology suggests that reducing sodium intake to recommended levels would result in 8,300 to 17,000 fewer Canadians suffering from strokes, heart failure, and heart attacks each year.

It's good for your bones

It has been well established that excessive intake of sodium increases calcium loss from the body. This may adversely affect bone strength, raising the risk for osteoporosis—a disease that affects up to 2 million Canadians.

A 2009 study published in the British Journal of Nutrition discovered that subjects who followed a low-sodium diet (maximum of 1,500 mg per day) for 14 weeks experienced reductions in urinary calcium excretion.

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It’s good for your kidneys
Because your kidneys regulate sodium, it only makes sense that a chronically high-sodium diet which overworks this organ may speed up its functional decline. What’s more, a 2009 Harvard Medical School investigation concluded that a diet low in sodium (and high in fruits, veggies, whole grains, legumes, and low-fat dairy) protects against excruciating kidney stones.

Sodium overload increases the amount of calcium that you excrete in your urine, and approximately four out of five kidney stones are calcium stones.

It’s good for your stomach
Several studies have determined that consuming more than the recommended amount of salt increases the chance of developing stomach cancer. High salt intake and the presence of the bacteria known as Helicobacter pylori are associated with the majority of stomach ulcers and greatly increase a person’s stomach cancer risk.

SHAKING THE SALT HABIT
About 80 percent of the sodium in our diet comes from restaurant meals, fast food, and processed items on grocery shelves. The salt we add during cooking or at the table is minor by comparison.

Sodium is added capaciously to foods to give them a longer shelf life, enhance texture, and mask bitterness. Food manufacturers are well aware that we have developed a fondness for the taste of this omnipresent crystal.

The good news is that the less salt you consume over time, the less your palate will crave it, according to a study published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association.

Aside from not using the salt shaker like a hammer, there are some ways to cut back.

GO BACK TO NATURE
If your meals come from a box or can, you probably eat too much sodium. Switch to a diet based on whole foods.

[Continued page 118]
SEASONED EDAMAME AND BEANS

Edamame is a high-protein, iron-rich bean that can be found in the frozen food section of most supermarkets. Smoked salt is equally good with this recipe, which makes a great afternoon snack.

1/2 cup (125 mL) frozen, shelled edamame
1/2 cup (125 mL) yellow beans, quartered
Juice of 1/2 lemon
1/4 teaspoon (2 mL) fleur de sel or other coarse salt
1/8 teaspoon (0.5 mL) cayenne pepper
1 tsp (5 mL) dried oregano

Prepare edamame according to package directions. Meanwhile, steam yellow beans until tender. Drain edamame and mix with beans, lemon juice, salt, cayenne, and oregano.

Serves 1.

EACH SERVING CONTAINS: 117 calories; 10 g protein; 4 g total fat (0 g sat. fat, 0 g trans fat); 14 g carbohydrates; 6 g fibre; 486 mg sodium
While few would claim salt is a health food the way blueberries are, many are surprised to learn that unrefined and additive-free salts actually have nutrients such as magnesium, potassium, and calcium.

On the flipside, plain-Jane table salt, ubiquitous in packaged and fast food, is stripped of those minerals as it’s refined. Some health experts believe that when you take away the minerals and produce such a sodium-dense product, health consequences occur.

Because of the heightened flavour and textural nuances of fancy salts, you can often get away with using much less on your food. Shake up your cooking with these colourful guises.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SALT</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>USES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KOSHER SALT</td>
<td>• additive- and iodine-free • may or may not be sea salt • saltier and brighter flavour than table salt</td>
<td>• relatively inexpensive • its moderately coarse texture makes it an excellent pinching salt for brines and general use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLEUR DE SEL</td>
<td>• widely considered one of the best finishing salts • young salt crystals are skimmed from the surface of salt ponds in Brittany, France • delicately crunchy, mild tasting, snowy white</td>
<td>• sprinkle lightly on scrambled eggs, grilled fish and poultry, diced melon, cooked greens, roasted root vegetables, and chocolate ice cream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMOKED SALT</td>
<td>• sea salt that has been cold-smoked with hardwood for a woody scent and smoky scent and flavour • great finishing salt</td>
<td>• sprinkle over popcorn, corn on the cob, chocolate mousse, baked potatoes, or anything that comes off the barbecue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAWAIIAN BLACK SALT</td>
<td>• brilliant ebony colour comes from its fusion with activated charcoal, said to bind toxins and flush them from the body • moist, silky texture • full-bodied, ocean-fresh flavour</td>
<td>• works well with asparagus, scallops, fruits, Asian-inspired dishes, and salad dressings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GREY SALT</td>
<td>• also known as sel gris, it’s harvested from coastal sea beds</td>
<td>• hefty, moist crystals with sweet, briny notes substitute nicely for kosher salt in cooking and baking; finer grinds work well for finishing dishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAKE SALT</td>
<td>• comes in the form of dry pyramid flakes instead of crystals • two popular types are Cyprus, harvested from the Mediterranean, and Maldon, gleaned from England’s south coast • more intense flavour than others—a little goes a long way</td>
<td>• use on sliced tomatoes, cooked meats, grilled tofu, or any chocolatey dessert</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| HIMALAYAN PINK SALT | • mined from ancient salt beds in the Himalayas, it gets its rosy hue from trace amounts of iron • comes in fine grind suitable for regular salt shakers or larger, super-hard crystals that can be ground or shaved • Peruvian pink salt has an even more pronounced taste—an excellent addition to bruschetta | • pairs well with curries, soups, pasta, rice, and seafood >
which are naturally low in sodium—even when you salt them to taste.

**COMPARE LABELS**

When looking over the nutrition information on a label, don't forget to peek at the sodium numbers as well as fat and calories. Compare a few brands and make sodium level one of the factors that determines what will end up in your grocery cart. Some very similar products have very different sodium levels.

**KNOW THE LINGO**

A product claiming to be salt-free must have less than 5 mg of sodium per serving, and low-in-sodium items are required to have 140 mg of sodium or less per serving. A product labelled reduced-in-sodium means it has at least 25 percent less than the regular product, but it is not necessarily low in sodium overall.

**WATCH OUT FOR LOW-FAT PRODUCTS**

Reducing the salt affects the flavour of low-fat foods more than it affects regular fat foods. It seems that the absence of fat makes us more sensitive to the absence of salt. This means that low-fat versions of products such as cheese could have higher sodium levels than their fattier brethren.

**GO FANCY**

A little goes a long way when using nutritionally superior artisanal salts such as fleur de sel (see sidebar, “The new grind”).

"Try sprinkling a dish with coarse salt only at the very end."
CHIA-CRUSTED TOFU WITH LIME SALT

Chia seeds lend tofu a crunchy crust that is packed with fibre and omega fats. Serve with steamed kale sprinkled with fleur de sel.

3 Tbsp [45 mL] chia seeds
2/3 tsp (4 mL) kosher, grey, or pink salt
1/2 tsp [2 mL] ground black pepper
1/8 teaspoon [0.5 mL] cayenne pepper
Zest of 1 lime
1 package [375 g] firm tofu, drained
1 Tbsp [15 mL] toasted sesame oil
2 tsp [10 mL] extra-virgin olive oil

On a plate, spread out chia seeds. Add salt, pepper, cayenne, and lime zest to small bowl and combine well. Mix salt mixture with chia seeds on plate.

Pat tofu dry with paper towel; slice in half lengthwise then into halves crosswise, so you have 4 pieces of tofu. Brush each side with sesame oil. Press each side into chia mixture to coat thoroughly.

Heat oil in skillet over medium heat and sear tofu blocks until crisp and golden brown, about 5 minutes on each side. Serves 4.

EACH SERVING CONTAINS: 199 calories; 16 g protein; 15 g total fat (2 g sat. fat, 0 g trans fat); 6 g carbohydrates; 4 g fibre; 200 mg sodium
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BE THE CHEF
Most fast-food joints and family-style restaurants apply processed salt liberally to a wide range of dishes. Preparing most of your own meals is a surefire way to keep your sodium intake in check. Homemade broths and sauces often contain much less sodium than store-bought versions.

GET DRIED UP
Packed with a wealth of nutrients and fibre, beans and lentils are bona fide superfoods. But canned versions can be sodium heavy. So, scoop up their sodium-free dried counterparts.

SPICE IT UP
Spices such as cumin, cayenne, and curry can make food explode with flavour, allowing you to cut back on the amount of salt needed. Plus, they're excellent sources of disease-thwarting antioxidants.

BE PATIENT
Instead of adding salt at every step in a recipe, try sprinkling a dish with coarse salt only at the very end. This puts the salt granules on the surface of food, heightening that sense of flavour and boosting aroma.

DON'T FORGET POTASSIUM
Potassium, which encourages the kidneys to excrete sodium, can counter some of the harmful effects of sodium overload. A study of more than 17,000 adults in the Archives of Internal Medicine reported that higher dietary potassium intake was associated with significantly lower blood pressure. You can load up on potassium by noshing on plenty of fruits, vegetables, and legumes.
SALT ASSAULT

With the ubiquity of table salt in the food system, you can see it’s not hard to shoot past the 1,500 mg recommendation for most Canadians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOOD ITEM</th>
<th>SODIUM LEVEL [MG]*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 slices whole wheat bread</td>
<td>218</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 packet instant oatmeal</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tbsp [30 mL] peanut butter</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup [125 mL] low-fat cottage cheese</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup [125 mL] vegetable broth</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 wheat crackers</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 oz [28 g] cheddar cheese</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 can of tuna</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Tbsp [15 mL] low-sodium soy sauce</td>
<td>533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 oz [55 g] deli turkey meat</td>
<td>668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/3 cup [80 mL] tomato sauce</td>
<td>428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sodium</td>
<td>3,728</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Levels will fluctuate depending on brands.

COOKING WITH SPECIALTY SALTS

Unlike some spices and herbs, the taste of coarse salt does not diminish during cooking. Add it gradually and carefully so as not to oversalt your food. Salt measurements in recipes are standardized for fine table salt, so if you’re using salt with larger crystals or flakes, make sure to adjust the measurements.

Rule of thumb: if 1 tsp (5 mL) fine salt is required, use about 1 1/2 tsp (7 mL) coarse salt. Often, though, you can add less salt than called for, especially if using highly flavoured types.

The best way to enjoy gourmet salts is freshly ground. A simple spice grinder or mortar and pestle often work well.

THE WORD ON IODINE

Potassium iodide is commonly added to table salt as a preventive measure against goiter, which was once a problem for those living far from the ocean. But these days, if you eat a healthy diet (seafood is a natural iodine source), you’ll consume enough iodine whether you use table salt or not. So don’t be put off by artisanal salts that lack iodine.

Matthew Kadey, MSc, is an Ontario-based dietician and food writer. wellfedman.com or mattkadey.ca.