Not long ago, water came from a faucet, there were a few kinds of cheese and bread was white. Today all that has changed. Now salt is the latest staple food to be reinvented, with an array of exotic options turning up in stores. Choices include the snowflake-like fleur de sel, chunky sea salt and a palette that includes pink, red, gray and black.

As for taste, chefs say there is considerable difference between table salt and gourmet varieties. More important, health experts agree that the chemicals, additives and heat used in table salt's refining process are best avoided. As for the link between salt and high blood pressure, the jury is still out as to whether salt is the sole villain. A recent study from Spain observed that other measures (beyond salt reduction) are equally important for lowering blood pressure, including a diet high in fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products, along with weight management, aerobic exercise and fish oil.

Minerals Make the Difference
According to one expert, unrefined salt can actually correct problems caused by the overwhelming amounts of table salt. "When people use unrefined salt that contains minerals, there is no increase in blood pressure," notes David Brownstein, MD, author of *Salt Your Way to Health*. "Refined salt has 2 percent mineral content, and unrefined has 80-plus different kinds of minerals."

Even though unrefined salt contains only traces of these minerals, we need them to function properly, says Brownstein. Many of his patients with chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia or fatigue find relief by adding small amounts of unrefined salt to their diets. In his experience, deficiencies of good salt are a problem. "It stresses the adrenal glands, which control the fight/flight response. Without sufficient salt, these glands become ineffective and people become ill," says Brownstein, who recommends ½ tsp. of unrefined salt daily.

But you don't want to avoid refined salt entirely, as it's a source of iodine and helps prevent goiter. If you use only unrefined salt, you'll need to get iodine from another source, such as kelp, dulse seaweed or a supplement.

**Celtic salt:**
• Some of the best-known sea salts are harvested on the North Atlantic coasts of France and England. Celtic gray salt originates here, as does fleur de sel. The Celtic variety consists of large, pale grayish-purple crystals that are moist to the touch and have an earthy flavor. Use finely ground or as is.

**Fleur de sel:**
• The delicate fleur de sel ("flower of salt" in French) is harvested by hand as pools of saltwater evaporate. With an ocean scent, fresh taste and snowflake shapes, it is among the most coveted and costly of salts. A touch brings out the flavor of veggies, salad greens and meats.

**ARE YOU SALT SAVVY?**
• The next time you oversalt while cooking, try adding a pinch of sugar or even a splash of lemon juice.
• When cooking pasta, add salt just after the water starts boiling, not before, for best results. Be sure to also salt boiling water used to cook vegetables—it may help inhibit nutrient loss.
• Many cooks agree: In general, salt boosts flavor best when used toward the end of the cooking process.
• Using just a pinch of salt can enhance the flavor of many foods, including baked goods and brewed coffee.
• When cooking with coarser salts, adjust measurements accordingly. For example: 1 tsp. of table salt equals about 1 ½ tsp. of kosher salt.
Himalayan salt:
- Mined in the Himalaya Mountains, Himalayan salt is rich in trace minerals that give it a distinctive bite. The colors range from pure white to ruby, depending on mineral content. Because it's located deep within the mountain range, Himalayan salt is reportedly less affected by pollution and toxins than sea salts.

Peruvian pink salt:
- High in the Andes Mountains, terraced ponds are the source of Peruvian pink salt. These crystals are known for their uneven texture and distinctive mineral flavor.

Hawaiian sea salt:
- The red clay of the Hawaiian Islands gives alaea, or Hawaiian sea salt, its rich red color. The mild-flavored alaea has been used for centuries in Hawaiian cuisine, especially for seasoning roasted meats.

Bottom Line
If you have health problems or are being treated for high blood pressure, consult your physician before sampling new salts. And remember, you don’t have to consume salt to enjoy its benefits. German researchers recently found that subjects with rough, dry skin who bathed in a magnesium-rich Dead Sea salt solution had improved skin hydration, and less roughness and inflammation than those who soaked in ordinary water. Other research has shown that bathing in mineral-rich saltwater eases painful joints. So whether it’s on your table or in the tub, salt, it seems, can do a body good.

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