[ON OUR LIST]

sea salt
True flavor in a pinch.

What it is: All salt of the earth—and of the kitchen—began with the sea. The most prized sea salts come from the Brittany coast of France and the Mediterranean (notably, Italy). A particular type's origin and method of processing affect its flavor, color, texture, and price.

Sea salt is basically what remains after ocean water has been evaporated, either by sunlight or by heating the water. Additional rinsing and drying will make the salt even whiter. Common table and kosher varieties start underground with rock salt. Table salt is dried into sugar-like grains that are usually mixed with additives to prevent clumping, plus iodine, which promotes thyroid health. Kosher salt is made into flakes, without additives or iodine. (“Kosher” indicates a rabbi has approved the process according to strict guidelines.)

Varieties: Salt gets its name and primary flavor from its main component, sodium chloride. The subtle flavors of sea salts—often described as briny, metallic, or earthy—come from trace minerals, magnesium, calcium, and potassium being the most common. The more trace minerals, the less sodium chloride; that’s why many sea salts don’t taste as salty as more common kinds.

Fleur de sel is a milky-white premium salt skimmed from the surfaces of specific pools along France’s northern Atlantic coast. Maldon sea salt, produced in England, is pressed into delicate flakes that melt on contact. Other types, such as red-orange Hawaiian alaea, grayish Celtic varieties, and black Indian salts, get their color and flavor nuances from the clay and soil surrounding their water sources.

Where to find it: Most supermarkets now carry at least one type of sea salt; specialty and gourmet grocers generally offer more choices. Online sources include www.chefshop.com and www.saltworks.us.

Health concerns: Most of the sodium in your diet comes from processed foods rather than added salt, says Mark Pecker, M.D., professor of clinical medicine at Weill Medical College of Cornell University.

People with a history of high blood pressure or heart disease should usually limit their salt intake.

How to use it: Think of the most precious sea salts as table condiments. Try one kind on simple foods like eggs and potatoes to see how it influences flavor, then build to pairing specific salts with your favorite dishes.

tips to make you a seasoned pro

• Lose the shaker. With your thumb and forefinger, grab a pinch of sea salt from a small dish or salt cellar, and sprinkle, rubbing between your fingers.
• Sea salt corrodes metal, so store in glass, wood, clay, or pottery containers.
• Don’t bake with sea salt. It won’t dissolve evenly, and its trace minerals might clash with sweet flavorings. But go ahead and top pizza crusts or other savory doughs with a dash before popping them in the oven. Kosher salt is fine for workhorse tasks like salting cooking water and making brines.
• Salt meat, fish, and poultry before cooking—on both sides—to help develop flavor. Then sprinkle with a little more to taste after cooking.
• Enhance your sea salt. Add a pinch of herbs or spices to your favorite salt. Blends like fennel seed and orange peel wake up seafood and veggies; a mix of chili powder, cumin, and garlic powder enhances beef and chicken stir-fries.
• Sprinkle fresh salad greens with sea salt just before tossing. The lettuce will taste so good, you’ll need less dressing.