



SALT, THAT LITTLE WHITE GRAIN, WAS IN USE LONG before recorded history. As far back as the Bronze Age, salt roads were being developed. Civilization was dependent on what scientists today call sodium chloride. Important as a preservative, it allowed ancient peoples to exist by maintaining a food supply in times of frost or drought.

In our own history, salt was a key factor in battles of both the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Union forces raged a 36-hour battle to capture Saltville, Va. It was not a strategic location, but rather the salt that was so important to both the Union and Confederate sides.

Salt is an essential element in the diets of plants, animals and humans. In 1911, a certain Joy Morton added an anti-clumping agent to salt which allowed it to pour out of salt shakers. The little yellow umbrella showed up in every home, on every table. We became so used to the taste of salt that we upped the ante by consuming tons of processed foods ... foods dependent on salt for its preserving properties.

For cooking, salt is essential. The trick is to use small amounts of salt throughout the cooking process. Salt doesn't like to be rushed. Like a protagonist in a good novel, its character has to be developed. Sprinkle a little salt on a tough piece of meat, and let that meat marinate. The salt begins to break down the proteins around the muscle, and with a nice, slow braise, that jaw-breaking beef can be turned into a rich, unctuous stew.

It's essential to taste as you go. Palates differ, and only by checking as you go along can you tell what will be pleasing to you. Using a little salt as you cook prevents using a lot of salt at the table. I know this firsthand.

In one of my husband's adaptations of the way we eat, he decided salt was taboo. We were going to become healthy by what we gave up. "Giving up" is not exactly a comfort inducing term. My husband reasoned that anyone could add salt to the finished product. I made soup using the requisite onions, carrots, and celery and slowly

sweated them. I added some fresh herbs and some freshly ground pepper. I simmered, both figuratively and literally, then served this broth at a dinner party. The guests were maniacally shaking salt into their bowls. People were holding onto the salt shaker, loathe to let it go. I read somewhere that the average American consumes approximately 7 pounds of salt per year. I think my friends were proving that statistic with my first course. Dishes were coming back to the kitchen mostly full. "This is delicious, but I want to save my appetite for what's coming next." Ha! Luckily, what came next did not have my husband's imprimatur on it.

Confusion arises when recipes call for different types of salt. What's a cook to do? Basically, salt comes in three forms: table salt, kosher salt and sea salt.

Table salt and kosher salt come from underground salt deposits. Table salt has calcium silicate, an anti-caking agent added to it. Kosher salt has coarser, flakier grains, and is generally preferred by most cooks. It's easy to use in recipes because it dissolves quickly and is convenient to store next to the stove in a small container, ready to take a pinch or be used in a pinch. Although table salt and kosher salt have the same sodium content, you get more salt in a single teaspoon of table salt than you do in a teaspoon of kosher salt.

Sea salt, available in both coarse and fine crystals, is harvested from evaporated sea water. Since it is not subjected to chemical processing, the minerals from the water are intact. Depending on the source of the water, the salt has slightly different flavors or colors. One type preferred by chefs for its clean taste is Fleur de sel from Brittany's Isle of Ré. Another is Maldon sea salt from England, characterized by its flaky, snowflake like crystals. Both are pricey, but add a wonderful texture and taste to finished dishes. Extravagant, but a beautiful indulgence. U



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Warm and Comforting Celery Root Soup

• SERVES 4 •

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 pound celery root, peeled and cut into • 1-inch pieces
- 1 large potato, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 med. onions, chopped
- 1 cup chopped celery
- 1 leek, white part only, chopped
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- 1 bay leaf
- 5 cups chicken stock
- 1/4 cup olive oil, plus more as needed
- Celery leaves for garnish
- Lemon juice, as needed
- Olive oil to drizzle

• DIRECTIONS •

Melt butter in a heavy saucepan over medium heat. Add celery root, potato, onions, celery and leek. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cover and cook until tender, stirring frequently, about 20 minutes.

Add garlic and thyme and cook for a minute. Add wine and bay leaf; increase the heat and bring mixture to a boil. Cook until most of the liquid evaporates, about 8 minutes.

Add stock to the pot and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer until vegetables are very tender, about 15 minutes. Remove bay leaf and let soup cool for a few minutes. Puree in batches until smooth.

Return soup to saucepan. Blend in olive oil and reheat. Taste and season with additional salt and pepper, to taste. Ladle soup into bowls. Garnish with extra olive oil and celery leaves tossed in lemon juice.

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