

THE SOUTHERN STAR

21 January 2012

THE SOUTHERN STAR SECTION 1
SATURDAY JANUARY 21, 2012

Sea salt from Beara is fit for a queen

The O'Neills, who set up Ireland's first sea salt company, extract the goodness of the ocean to add flavour to food



Food Culture Nora Strong

REPUBLICAN or royalist, you have to be impressed when you are told that the Queen of England was given Irish Atlantic Sea Salt, extracted and processed on the Beara Peninsula, to sprinkle on her spudeens during her visit to Ireland last year.

Sea salt is obtained by the evaporation of sea water. Most recipes, of course, calling for salt are referring to common table salt which has anti-caking agents added to prevent it becoming lumpy. Salt connoisseurs, however, often prefer sea salt. They claim that it has a softer flavour and you are delivered more taste for less salt. Most of all, they say it is purer and, because it is slowly evaporated from sea water, retains the minerals we need to live.

We depend on salt to enhance flavour. Bread made without salt will have a coarser texture and a blander taste than bread made with it. Even added to citrus fruit or melons, not to mention tomatoes and celery, salt enhances the flavour and you just cannot do without it when you have your boiled egg for breakfast. Moreover, how would you manage

without the rim of salt on your glass of margarita!

Salt has probably been used since before recorded time. Around 2,700 BC in China, the earliest known treatise on pharmacology devoted a whole section on the qualities of 40 different kinds of salt. Sales of salt financed the Great Wall of China and more 'recently' in 1,450 BC, Egyptians used salt for mummification.

Importance of salt

In the past, salt could often make the difference between living and dying of starvation as it was the means by which food was preserved during the hardship of the winter months. You would not be exaggerating to claim that the ability to preserve food with salt provided the very foundation of modern civilisation. Salt has long been used in pickling and in curing vegetables, meats, fish and cheese. It eliminated the total dependence on the seasonable vagaries of food availability and allowed travel over long distances as a result.

Salt rations given to Roman soldiers along with their wages were known as *salarium argentum*, their 'salt money', the term from which our word 'salary' is derived. And later in medieval France, this wage was called 'solde'. The word came to refer not only to a soldier's wage but to the soldier himself.

So highly prized was salt by the Romans that they built the Salt Road - *Via Salaria* - leading to Rome from the Adriatic Sea. Venice fought and won a war with Genoa over salt. Much later, Liverpool rose from being just a small English port to become the prime exporting city for the salt dug in the Cheshire

salt mines.

Here in Ireland, however, where cattle has been the chief currency throughout history, salt was essential to the processing of dairy products so it is strange to hear that the first sea salt company to start in Ireland was Irish Atlantic Salt Ltd, formed in 2009 by Michael O'Neill on Beara.

Nowhere is the water purer than off West Cork's remote rugged and unspoilt Beara Peninsula where Michael and Aileen O'Neill live. The prevailing south-westerly winds and strong tides bring clean, high salinity water which has been gently warmed by the Gulf Stream.

Aileen comes from Beara and has known the land and the sea all her life. Michael's parents' home is within sight of their house where he, Aileen and their four young children now live. Although Michael was fishing for years and has behind him qualifications in electronic engineering, Beara is where he is happy. 'This is always home,' he grinned.

It was Bernie, Michael's father, who first thought about what to do with sea salt. 'He came in one day with a handful of crystals wondering what we could do with them.' Having retired, Bernie, who sadly passed away in 2010, started experimenting to get the crystals of salt perfectly produced for sale.

Aileen is the managing director of Natural Irish Atlantic Sea Salt Ltd and is taking the business forward. She was explaining how there are over 50 natural trace elements in their sea salt, all of which are essential for good health, including magnesium, iron, calcium and potassium. The process is sim-



Irish Atlantic Sea Salt is extracted and processed on the Beara Peninsula.



ple. The salt content in sea water is 3.5% so they bring it up to 20% concentration and then gradually evaporate the water in a slow, natural, two-day crystallisation process. Fifty kg of salt are extracted from every 15,000 litres of sea water before it is returned back to the Atlantic Ocean. This is such a gentle approach that the minerals are kept intact, whereas in mined salt products it is extracted very quickly and the minerals are literally burnt away.

Once you start using sea salt, you just cannot return to any other. As Aileen says, 'taste the food, not the salt.'



Aileen O'Neill, who is managing director of Irish Atlantic Sea Salt.