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MOLOKA'I SALT SHAKERS

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Hanapēpē salt ponds, Kaua'i

Two entrepreneurs find ways to commercialize traditional pa'akai

Distilling Secrets—Moloka'i Salt Goes Global

CHRISTOPHER PALA

In the 1990s, during a canoe race, Nancy Gove unthinkingly licked her arm, where an unusual amount of salt spray had dried. "It tasted better than any salt I'd ever tasted, so I decided to investigate why," she says.

Gove learned that real sea salt is only about 84 percent sodium chloride, with the rest made up of a brine containing trace elements of other minerals such as potassium, calcium and magnesium. She also discovered that what is commonly sold as table salt has had all of the other minerals removed, with iodine and anti-caking chemicals added, "for free flow when the air is moist—and it's 99 percent sodium chloride," Gove says.

Moloka'i, France

Then Gove read about how French gourmets, who had also noticed that the removed minerals give whole sea salt more flavor when they're left in, have been snapping up expensive whole salt when artisanal production resumed in the mid-1990s in the Guérande region of southern Brittany. It now produces 60,000 tons a year.

And so Gove, a slight woman with an easy laugh and a deep smoker's voice, set about learning how to make artisanal sea salt as a business in Moloka'i, where she has been living since the early 1980s.

Traditional pa'akai

Moloka'i, like all the Hawaiian Islands, has a long tradition of salt-making; many Hawaiians also continue to gather their own sea salt on the lava coastlines. In Hanapēpē, Kaua'i, 17 families operate clay salt pans that produce artisanal red salt, which they use themselves and give to their friends. The upper layer—the light, delicate fleur de sel that floats on the surface of the pond—is used for table salt; the middle layer in cooking, including barbecue rubs; and the lower, coarsest layer is used for blessings and traditional medicine.

Hand-made and gathered salt was never a commercial enterprise. "No one sells salt here," says Brandon Kansana, a 27-year-old Native Hawaiian fisherman on Moloka'i, who does his share of salt collecting. "You just give it away."

Adaptation

That was the culture in which Nancy Gove, a former wood sculptor who had once studied chemistry, began her attempts to produce and sell salt.

First, she learned that unlike in France, salt dried in the open air cannot be legally sold as food under US Department of Agriculture (USDA) guidelines because of the possibility of contamination by bird droppings and insects. Health regulations require that sea water be condensed under glass to extract the salt. That's why salt gathered on rocks can only be given away.

So Gove adapted glass-topped evaporation boxes, originally designed to make fresh water out of seawater, which she instead used to make salt. To her surprise, and that of this visitor, the crystals in the seemingly identical stills form in a strikingly broad variety of shapes, ranging from little cubes to fantastical sploches. "For me, salt is something that's alive," says Gove, as she lifts the glass cover of one of her wood boxes to peer at the salt below.

Gove mixed the salt evaporated in her trays with mineral clay found in certain cliffs to recreate the traditional, salt-pan product in a way that can legally be sold.

"This is a form of agriculture that's made for Moloka'i," she says, "because it can improve the island without changing it." Not only does it not use up any fresh water, which is in short supply in most of the island, but it actually produces tiny amounts of it. As for drought, a farmer's worst enemy: "Not a problem!" she says with a laugh.

Two commercial saltworks

The result is that today, Moloka'i has become the center of an extraordinary experiment in designing new salts. Two companies—Pacifica Hawaii, owned by Gove, and Hawaii Kai Salt, which grew out of the original business she founded and then sold—produce eight varieties now available on the market. All are made from salt condensed from water siphoned up from the coral reefs of Moloka'i's south shore. "The water we're getting doesn't have runoff from industry or other contaminants," Gove says. Ingredients added to different salt varieties for healthful benefits and striking color include charcoal and red clay, as well as flavors ranging from wine to rum and bamboo. Another nine varieties are in the final stages of preparation and will be commercialized soon.

The art in artisanal

The profusion of salts can be seen in Honolulu's gourmet outlets as well as in the stores catering to tourists, notably the ABC Stores chain, where veritable pyramids of specialty salt packages compete for attention with low-cost industrial salt that's blended with clay and sold as traditional Hawaiian salt. Moloka'i sea salts can also be found at Whole Foods, Food Pantry and in Foodland's R. Field's gourmet sections.

"As an artist, color and texture as well as flavor are important to me," Gove says. At first, Gove sold her salt in little plastic packets in stores around Hawai'i. In 1999, inspired by the black lava beaches of Big Island, she had the idea of blending medicinal-quality activated charcoal with sea salt; she calls this lava salt, though it contains no lava. "Lava can be too crunchy," Gove learned in her experiments. It also has nothing to do with Indian black salt, which has a high sulfur content and the smell of rotten eggs.

Trade secrets

In later years, using a method she won't discuss, Gove added three other flavors to her white, red and black salts: cabernet, balsamic and Koloa rum from Kaua'i, all commercialized by her company, Pacifica Hawaii.

Today, she produces up to 25 tons a year, with groups of condenser boxes, or stills, located in three locations on Moloka'i. "I want this business to grow slowly, in a manageable way," says Gove, sitting contentedly on the porch

Is sea salt healthier? What's the dif?

Salt is a mineral that is as essential to the life of the cell as water. While hunter-gatherers got enough of it from eating meat, there is little in grain, vegetables and fruit. Salt is so central to life that the word salary derives from it, along with salacious (the Romans called a man in love in a salted state). The USDA dietary guidelines recommend that adults consume less than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of salt per day, but that those over 50 consume no more than 1,500 mg of sodium, which is a factor in high blood pressure.

As for claims that natural sea salts contain more trace minerals than industrial salts, "In my estimation, sea salts (whether by color or harvesting location) vary so much that it would be hard to indicate that one salt really provides significantly more trace minerals than others," says Dr. Joannie Dobbs, clinical nutritionist at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Ironically, Dobbs notes,"sea salt is very low in iodine." Get yours from seafood and seaweeds, or iodized industrial salt.

This is a form of agriculture that's made for Moloka'i because it can improve the island without changing it.

—Nancy Gove

of her house in Kaunakakai, which has a dozen black stills in the front yard.

Moloka'i, California

The other Moloka'i salt company, Hawaii Kai, is now owned by George Joseph, who comes from Kerala, in southwest India, and has lived in California for 29 years, where the salt blending takes place. When he first came to Hawai'i, Joseph recalls, he felt at home. "Kerala is at the same latitude [as Hawai'i], [and the province lies] between the mountains and the ocean, with the same sort of terrain and vegetation—coconut, banana, mango trees and taro."

Working with Moloka'i salt farmer Cameron Hiro, who owns "Salty Acres" and the 400-odd stills that produce Hawai'i Kai's salt, Joseph developed a process to accelerate the creation of brine, which is then dried in stills. On a recent afternoon at the salt farm, Joseph sprinkles tiny amounts of different salts on pineapples, mangoes and papayas. The differences are sometimes hard to discern, because the added flavor quickly gives way to the saltiness, but the overall effect is delicious.

Hawai'i Kai, which produces about 60 tons of salt a year, all from Moloka'i, sells pure white sea salt, salt mixed with red clay, black salt and salt with green bamboo extracts from China. But Joseph says he has no intention of stopping there. He has introduced salt cold-smoked in alder and hickory and is preparing others flavored in garlic, Maui onion, vanilla, lemon pepper and kaffir lime leaf. In addition, there are plans to make paniolo barbecue rub, cajun seasoning, seasoning salt and balsamic. All the additives, except the clay in the traditional Hawaiian red salt, come from elsewhere.

"I want to be the number one artisanal salt-maker in the world," says Joseph cheerfully.

A French-Hawaiian chef's take

George Mavrothalassitis, chef and owner of Chez Mavro on King Street, Hawai'i's most highly rated French restaurant, happens to be as passionate about salt as Gove and Joseph. "I keep about a dozen in the restaurant," he says. "They're all whole sea salts. Compared to whole salt, industrial salt is bitter and aggressive: instead of improving a dish, it damages it," he says.

Because the crystals are larger, whole evaporated salt dissolves faster than regular salt when used in cooking, Mavrothalassitis explains. Hence, it is best used as a finishing salt, sprinkling it over food just before serving. The crystals are also more irregularly sized, giving several phases of salting as they dissolve on the tongue.

He keeps industrial salt around for non-food purposes only: adding it to ice buckets cools wine faster by making the ice melt; and it does a good job of absorbing oil spilled on the kitchen floor.

"I love Moloka'i salt," he says. "I use the white for foie gras, the pink on fish, the bamboo on certain rice and the black is perfect on chocolate."

But the best salt of all, he avers with a sigh, he's not allowed to sell: is the white salt from Hanapēpē on Kauai. "It's too bad," he says. "It's even better than the French salt because the air and the sea are purer here." ■

Salting Moloka'i's economy

"This company's making it happen with all local labor in our yards," Gove says. The handful of local people growing salt for Pacifica includes Julie Patton, who runs Kamakana Country Store. In addition to visitors, "local people buy the salt," Patton says.

Cameron Hiro, a pastor, says that salt farming's slow pace fits in well with the diversity of livelihoods, along with hunting, gathering and giving, that help Moloka'i residents like himself make ends meet. "Every little bit helps," says Rob Stevenson, president of the Moloka'i Chamber of Commerce, who encourages everyone to taste the salt and other Maui County fare at the Molokai Business and Food Festival on Nov. 5. *—Mindy Pennybacker*

History of pa'akai

Hawaiians, who call it pa'akai, have been gathering salt since they landed here over 1,000 years ago. When they arrived, the Islands had no fruit, no vegetables and no land mammals, except the ones they brought with them, so salt was used to preserve food when it was in season.

After he first came to the Islands in 1778, Captain James Cook wrote, "Among their arts, we must not forget that of making of salt, with which we were amply supplied and which was perfectly good."

Salt was gathered in the crevices of the lava coastlines, where the black rock heats up and evaporates the salt deposited by giant waves during storms. Some appeared naturally in salt lakes. And salt ponds were created, notably at Pearl Harbor, as well as in Kaua'i and Moloka'i, where the red clay dyed the salt. "Hawaiians used the red salt for religious ceremonies and also medicinally for its mineral qualities," says Arleone Debben-Young, an amateur historian from Moloka'i.

Demand for salt from visiting ships (Cook left Hawai'i on his first voyage with 16 60-gallon barrels of the stuff) increased local production. It often was traded for nails and tools. Salt was required to preserve fish caught by ships on long expeditions, as well as to cure fur trapped in Alaska and traded all over the world. By 1846, "All deposits and crystallization of salt, not the result of private enterprise, shall belong to the government," read the tax law. In 1910, documents found by Debben-Young show that, Hawai'i exported 1,600 tons of salt.

But Hawai'i's vibrant salt economy was defeated by the arrival of industrial salt, most of it from salt mines, and eventually all closed.

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