

# Salt Speak

Salt plays an important part in people's diets throughout the world, and has done for thousands of years. Less well known is how liberally the word *salt*, in all its many guises, has influenced language.

The word *salt* came into the English language via Old Norse, appearing in Old English as "sealt". It is thought to have originated from the Indo-European root "sal", which eventually became: Latin *sal*; French *sel*; Spanish *sal*; Italian *sale*; Rumanian *sare*; German *salz*; Swedish *salt*; Danish *salt*; Dutch *zout*; Russian *sol*; Latvian *sals*, Polish *sól*; Serbo-Croat *so*; Irish *salann*; Welsh *halen*; and Greek *hals* (from which we get "halogen").

Salt has been a prized commodity since earliest times due to its ability to both preserve food and enhance its flavour. The process of gathering salt is referred to as "winning", a term also used for the extraction of coal and ore. The expression "salt of the earth", referring to someone of great value, comes from the Sermon on the Mount: "Ye are the salt of the earth." The Bible refers to "a covenant of salt" on a number of occasions, implying that the covenant is incorruptible and cannot be broken. Moses told the Israelites that if they did not add salt to their sacrifices they would not please God, and Homer described nations who did not use salt on their food as "poor".

In his work on the food of Africa, Laurens van der Post describes a very frightened native who was approaching his party, and his own realisation "of the overwhelming necessity which had overcome the native's fear of the strange men. He had come simply to ask for salt." Van der Post says that he

never took salt for granted from that day onwards.

Salt's value has led to it being associated with hospitality and friendship from the earliest of times. Many nationalities, including the Swiss, still offer salt and bread (the staff of life) as a traditional housewarming gift, invoking the hope that the new home will never be without either of these essential commodities. Breaking bread and sprinkling salt are signs of union, and the Russian word for hospitality, *khleb-sol*, literally means "bread-salt". Assyrians from four thousand years ago used the phrase "*amelu sa tabtiya*" (man of my salt) to denote a friend (as in a person with whom one shares valuable salt). To eat a man's salt in Arabic is to accept his hospitality. The Arabic greeting "Salaam", meaning "peace", certainly looks as if it may relate back to *sal*.

*Salumi*, *salame* and their masculine/English equivalent "salami" derive from the Latin *sal*, as do the small fresh or dried sausages known as *salsiccie*. "Sauce" comes from the Latin *salsus*, meaning "salted", as salt was always the most basic condiment. Salsa, Spanish and Italian for "sauce", has now entered the English culinary language to refer to a chunky sauce often with spicy ingredients. A saucer was originally a vessel that held sauce, from the Old French *saussier*. It didn't take on its modern meaning of "something to go underneath a cup" until the eighteenth century. "Salad" also derives from the ubiquitous use of salt as a seasoning, being an abbreviation of the Latin *herba salata*—"salted vegetables", the most basic of early salads.

Saltcellar is another interesting word. It is derived from the Anglo-Norman *saler* (which became *seler* in Old English), the name of a vessel that held salt. At some point the original "salt" meaning began to fade, so the prefix "salt" was added to *seler* to create "salt-seler", which was eventually spelt "saltcellar".

The Romans paid their soldiers an allowance with which to buy salt. This allowance was called a *salarium*, from which we derive the word *salary*.

"Silt" most likely came into English, via Scandinavian,

from an original reference to the mud in salt flats; it appears to be related to the Danish and Norwegian word *sylt*, meaning "salt marsh". Other possible salt-derived words are more dubious: Salute, salutations, salutary and salubrious come from the Latin *salus* meaning "safety" or "wellbeing"; perhaps from the Latin *sal* (salt), without which wellbeing would be impossible? (From *salus*, we also get "save", "safety", "salvage", "saviour" and "salvation".) Sale, sell and related words go back to the Gothic *saljan*, "to offer sacrifice", which, given salt's high esteem in ancient times, could derive from the Indo-European *sal*. Schott in his *Food & Drink Miscellany* suggests that our word *soldier* also has its origin in "salt", as does Mark Kurlansky in his work *Salt*. Other sources, however, suggest its origin may be in the gold coins used to pay soldiers, from the Latin *solidus* meaning "solid". It is tempting to attribute such words as salient, salacious and sauté (and the related assault, assail, desultory, insult, result and sally) to *sal*, but in fact these are all derived from *salire*, Latin for "leap".

Corned beef is so named because of the whole grains of salt, known as corns, which were used to preserve the beef. Souse, which now means to drench in any liquid, originally referred to soaking something in salted brine (from the Old German *sulza*: brine). The cooking term "marinate" also reflects the versatility of salt. It comes from the Spanish word *marinar*, "marine", indicating one of

the salt"; "salt away" or "salt down" was to hoard or save something valuable; "to be true to one's salt" was to stay loyal to your word; "to rub salt into the wound" means to cause further pain, from the practice of rubbing saltwater into wounds inflicted on sailors from floggings.

Spilling salt is considered unlucky: in Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, Judas is portrayed as having knocked over the saltcellar near his elbow. The devil is said to hate salt, and throwing a pinch of spilt salt over the left shoulder (into the devil's eyes) is said to prevent the misfortune that would otherwise ensue from its being spilt. Salt is also sometimes sprinkled over coffins. In the Shintô religion it is believed to have a cleansing or purifying quality and so it plays an important role at funerals, with small mounds often placed near wells and at the entrance to buildings.

Since the beginning of civilisation, centres of trade and commerce have grown around salt deposits. Rome's first major road, the Via Salaria (Salt Road), was built to transport salt across the Italian peninsula to Rome. The Celts were salt miners and salt traders; and their name, given to them by the Romans, means "the salt people". Jericho, established some twelve thousand years ago, was more than likely a salt trading centre because of its proximity to the very salty Dead Sea.

Throughout the world, many place names indicate a role in the salt trade. In Austria there is Salzburg (literally "salt town") and nearby Hallein (salt works) and Hallstatt

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the most ancient sources of salt: the ocean. Marinades were originally pickles whose primary purpose was to preserve, not flavour, raw or cooked fish, and were therefore very high in salt. Sallow, meaning "of an unhealthy colour", relates to the Old Norse word *sol*, meaning seaweed, another marine reference. Old sailors are often referred to as "old salts".

One meaning of "to salt" is to introduce valuable ore (gold especially) fraudulently into a mining sample as a way of falsely increasing its value. Other metaphors for salt include liveliness, youth, vigour or pungency, as in: "His wit added salt to the conversation." In *Othello*, Shakespeare uses "salt" adjectivally, as a metaphor for sexual passion, when Iago says: "Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, as salt as wolves in pride".

Other saline expressions include: "worth one's salt", from the practice of making payment in salt rather than cash; "below the salt", from the practice of placing a saltcellar midway down the table—the most important guests were seated near the head of a table, the less important "below

(salt town) where the bodies of Celtic miners from 400 BC have been found preserved in the salt mines. Others include Halle in Belgium; Tusla ("salty") in Bosnia; Droitwich in Worcestershire, England ("wich" is Anglo Saxon for "salt works"); also Northwich, Nantwich, and Middlewich in neighbouring Cheshire, the centre of British salt production since Celtic times. In Egypt there is Sabkhat al Bardawil (from the old Arabic word for saltworks: *sebkha*); in Italy, Salsomaggiore (the big salt place); Germany, Hallstadt (salt town) and Halle; Sweden, Hällstad (salt town); Ukraine, Halych (from Roman Galacia), and in France there is Salies-de-Béarn (the saltworks of Béarn), Hyères (flats referring to salt flats), and the place where Celtic grey sea salt is produced today, Guérande (the name comes from the Breton language and means "white country").

So next time you sprinkle some grains of sea salt over your salad, throw a handful of Celtic grey salt into your pasta water or grind some rock salt into your sauce, spare a thought for the important role salt has played throughout history—not just in our diet, but in our language. ☞☞