

6.2

Seasoning & Flavoring Foods

READING PREVIEW

Key Concepts

- Understanding why foods are seasoned
- Identifying and using common seasoning ingredients
- Differentiating between seasoning and flavoring food

Vocabulary

- black pepper
- high-sodium food
- iodized salt
- kosher salt
- monosodium glutamate (MSG)
- rock salt
- sea salt
- seasonings
- sodium chloride
- table salt
- white pepper

“**W**here would we be without salt?”

— James Beard

Seasoning Foods

Seasonings are ingredients you add to a food to improve its flavor. Seasoning ingredients are added in such small quantities that you usually cannot taste the individual seasoning ingredients. If you add just enough seasoning, however, you will notice an improvement in the flavor of the food. Chefs season food to improve its flavor in one of the following ways:

- **Enhancing Natural Taste.** Sometimes, you add a seasoning to make the natural taste of the food more intense or noticeable. In other words, you are enhancing the food's taste. For example, if you cook pasta in plain water without any salt, the pasta won't have much flavor. But if you add just a little salt to the water, the pasta tastes more like pasta.
- **Balancing Tastes.** Sometimes, a seasoning helps to overcome very strong tastes, especially sour, sweet, or bitter tastes. This is sometimes referred to as balancing the tastes in a dish. Vegetables that are very bitter taste less bitter when you add some salt to them. Sour foods such as lemon juice taste less sour if you add a bit of sugar. Sweet foods taste less sweet if you add a bit of salt. Once the strong taste is reduced a little, it is easier to taste other ingredients or flavors in the dish.



James Beard
Food Critic, Cookbook Author

CHEF'S TIP

A PINCH OF SALT?

Learn the size of your pinch. Take a three- or four-finger pinch of salt. Measure it on a scale or in measuring spoons. That is the size of one of your pinches.

- **Cutting Richness.** Seasonings can also change the way a very rich or fatty food tastes. A little lemon juice or vinegar improves the taste of mayonnaise by making it taste less rich or oily. You may hear this referred to as cutting the richness or oiliness of a dish.



Reading Checkpoint

Why do chefs season food?

Types of Seasoning Ingredients

Seasoning starts with some basic ingredients. There are four basic types of seasoning ingredients:

- Salt
- Pepper
- Sugar and light-flavored sweeteners
- Acids

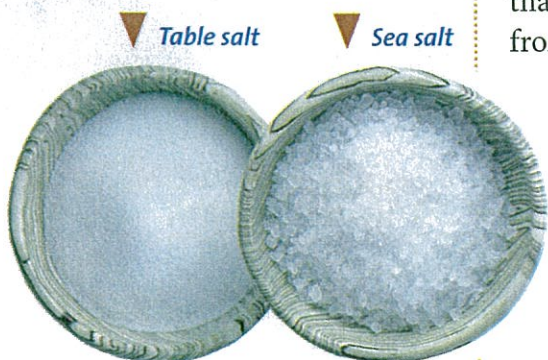
When you season a food, you add just enough of one or more of these ingredients to change the food's basic taste, but not enough to add a whole new taste.

Salt Salt is an important seasoning. Its chemical name is **sodium chloride** (SO-dee-um CHLOR-ide). It is used in all cuisines and in all countries. You can add it to foods before you cook them, as you cook them, or at the table. When salt is used in very small amounts, it enhances the flavor of a food. In addition to salt, you can also use very salty food, or **high-sodium food**, as a seasoning in a dish. Some high-sodium foods commonly used in the kitchen include soy sauce, Parmesan cheese, bacon, and olives.

Salt can be found underground, where it is mined. Some mines dissolve the salt with water and then pump the salt-saturated water out of the ground. The water is allowed to evaporate and the salt remains. Salt is also found in sea water. The water is allowed to evaporate, leaving behind grains or flakes of salt.

Salt lasts almost indefinitely in dry storage. The only real concern is that the salt may become damp and turn into a hard cake. To keep this from happening, store salt in a cool, dry place in a sealed container.

- **Table Salt.** Salt that is refined to remove other minerals or impurities is referred to as **table salt**. This type of salt is processed to give it a fine, even grain. A small amount of a starch is added to keep the salt from turning into clumps. Iodine may be added to table salt as a nutritional supplement. The salt is then called **iodized** (EYE-oh-dized) salt.
- **Sea Salt.** Made by evaporating seawater, **sea salt** is usually not significantly refined, which means it contains additional minerals and other elements found in seawater. This often



Osmosis

Salt changes food. It draws out water, blood, and other impurities and it kills pathogens. This preserves food by drying it out and makes it less susceptible to spoilage. To keep foods safe to eat when there was no refrigeration, our ancestors used salt to remove as much water as possible.

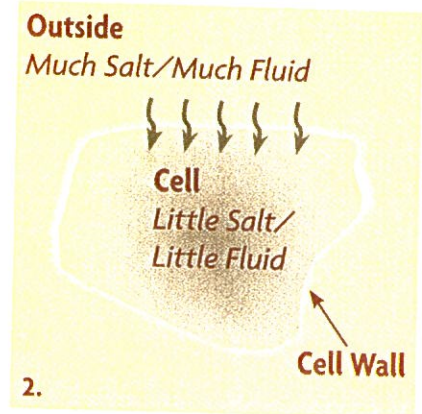
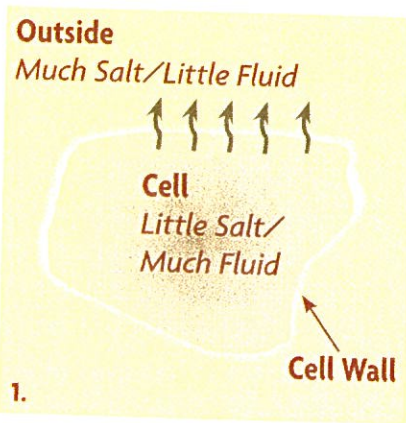
The process by which salt accomplishes these changes is known as osmosis. Osmosis is the movement of water through a cell wall to equalize the concentration of salt on both sides of the wall. For example, when you salt a piece of meat, the fluid inside the meat travels through the meat's cell wall in an effort to dilute the salt on the other side of the cell wall. So the meat loses fluid.

However, osmosis occurs in both directions. First it draws fluid out of the cell. But when there is more fluid outside the cell than inside it, the fluid flows back into the cell, taking along the dissolved salt. Getting the salt inside the cell, where it can kill

harmful pathogens, is the essence of salt-curing foods. That is how foods such as ham, bacon, and dry sausages are preserved. Because of osmosis, salt often meant the difference between life and death for our ancestors.

Research

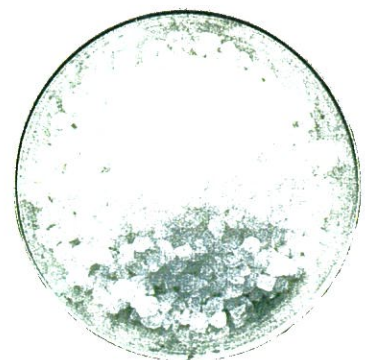
Research the process of osmosis as it applies to salting food. In your report, relate osmosis, FAT TOM, water activity (A_w), potentially hazardous foods, and pathogen growth.



1. Fluid moves through cell wall diluting salt outside cell.
2. Fluid, with dissolved salt, moves back into cell, equalizing fluid on both sides of wall.

gives sea salt a slight color. Sea salt is available in grains of varying sizes, from extremely coarse crystals to flakes to a fine grain.

- **Kosher Salt.** A salt made without any additives, **kosher** (KOH-shure) **salt** is sold in coarse or fine grain styles. Kosher salt is typically flakier than table salt. Many chefs like to use kosher salt for general cooking purposes because it is additive-free. To substitute kosher salt for table salt, use twice the volume of kosher salt as called for in the recipe.
- **Rock Salt.** Less refined than table salt, **rock salt** is generally not used for consumption. Its most common use in the kitchen is in ice cream makers or as a bed for certain items, especially oysters or clams that are served on their shells.
- **Monosodium Glutamate (MSG).** Although not actually a salt, **monosodium glutamate** (mon-oh-SO-dee-um GLUTE-ah-mate), abbreviated as **MSG**, is used in much the same way as salt. MSG provides the umami taste rather than the salty taste and is often associated with Chinese or Japanese food.

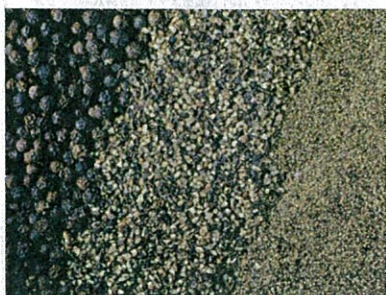


▲ Rock salt

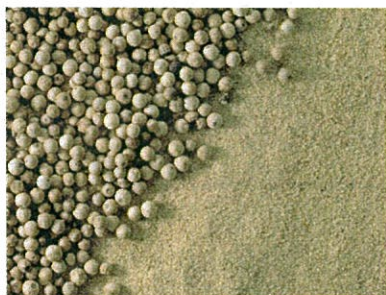
CHEF'S TIP

ADDING SALT

Be careful when adding salt. You can always add more salt, but you can't remove it.



▲ Black pepper
Whole, cracked, and ground



▲ White pepper
Whole and ground

MSG enhances the meaty or brothy flavor in meat, poultry, fish, and vegetables. The source of MSG is seaweed.

Pepper In most people's mind, salt and pepper go together. They are the most widely used seasonings in the world. Pepper is actually a spice that is often used in small amounts as a seasoning. Typically only black pepper and white pepper are used as seasonings. (Other types of pepper are discussed in the next section, "Herbs, Spices, & Aromatics.") Pepper is slightly hot and brings out the flavor in food.

- **Black Pepper.** From the dried, unripe berries of the pepper vine, **black pepper** is available as whole berries, cracked, or ground. Grinding pepper as it is needed is preferable because the taste is fresher and more aromatic.
- **White Pepper.** When the ripe pepper berries are allowed to dry and their husks are removed, you have **white pepper**. Usually, white pepper is used for light-colored sauces. White pepper is available in the same forms as black pepper, and, just as with black pepper, grinding pepper fresh is always preferred.

Sugar and Light-Flavored Sweeteners Sugar enhances the flavor of dishes—from salad dressings, to tomato sauce, to vegetables and even meat. As a seasoning, you should add only a small amount of sugar to a dish. Sugar with distinctive flavor (such as brown sugar) is used as a flavoring agent, not as a seasoning. Sometimes a light-flavored liquid sweetener, such as light corn syrup, light honey, or light maple syrup, is used rather than sugar.

Acids Lemon or orange juice, vinegar, and wine are all examples of acids you can use to season food. Acids have a sour or tart flavor. In addition to seasoning food, acids can also improve the appearance and texture of food. For example, adding lemon juice when you cook an artichoke keeps it from turning brown. Adding vinegar to the water when you poach an egg gives the egg a better shape.



Name four types of seasonings.

Flavoring Foods

When you season a food, you try to improve the food's unique flavor without changing it significantly. When you flavor a food, you change the food's flavor. You add other flavors to the food's original flavor. Some chefs refer to the process of flavoring foods as "layering flavors," adding flavor on top of other flavors to create a new pleasing combination of flavors.

Here's an example that demonstrates the difference between seasoning and flavoring. If you add a small amount of salt to the water you use to cook rice, the cooked rice will simply taste like cooked rice. That means it has been properly seasoned. However, if you add a lot of salt, the cooked rice will take on the distinct and easy-to-identify flavor of salt. Salt has become a flavoring in the dish, not a seasoning. In this case, the difference between an ingredient used as a seasoning and one used as a flavoring is a question of how much you use.

Many ingredients or combinations of ingredients can be used to flavor foods. Each flavoring ingredient is added to a dish at a specific time and in a specific manner to develop a desired flavor in the dish. Some of the basic guidelines for using flavorings are discussed in the next section.



FIGURE 6-4
Salting Water

Adding salt to water prior to cooking pasta

Applying Concepts How can adding salt to water change the flavor of pasta?



Reading Checkpoint

What is the difference between seasoning a food and flavoring a food?

6.2 ASSESSMENT

Reviewing Concepts

1. What are three reasons chefs season foods?
2. What are the four basic types of seasoning ingredients?
3. What is the difference between seasoning a food and flavoring a food?

Critical Thinking

4. **Comparing/Contrasting** Describe the differences between table salt, kosher salt, and sea salt.
5. **Inferring** Why would only light-flavored sweeteners be used as seasonings?
6. **Classifying** Which type of pepper would you typically use for a light-colored sauce? Why?
7. **Predicting** Will there be times when a chef might want an unbalanced taste or very rich dish? Explain your answer.

Test Kitchen

Divide into four teams. Teams will make a salsa of a medium dice of tomatoes and a fine dice of onions, with three times as much tomato as onion. Then they will divide the salsa into two portions. Teams will focus on one type of seasoning ingredient. Use the seasoning ingredient only to season the first portion, but then use it to flavor the second portion. Evaluate the amounts required for seasoning versus flavoring.

SCIENCE

Iodized Salt

Research the history of iodized salt. When was iodine first added to salt? Why was this done? Are there any problems associated with the use of iodized salt?