



Salty Fish Tales

Contrary to what most people think, creating a salt crust does not leave food salty. Rather, it keeps food moist and seals in flavors.

BY JOHN F. CARAFOLI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCINE ZASLOW

When Boston-based photographer and colleague Francine Zaslow chose salt as a concept for a food photo shoot, I immediately thought of something I had prepared recently—cooking whole fish encased in a salt crust.

I was curious to find out the history and provenance of this cooking method. Many nations have claimed this recipe as their own: the French, Portuguese, Chinese and Italians. One of the oldest sources I found was a Sicilian Greek poet and gourmand, Arcestratus, who lived in Sicily around 350 B.C. The recipe for cooking a whole white fish—such as sea bass, sea bream or snapper—encased in a salt crust (with salt, egg whites and water) came from his body of work, "The Life of Luxury." Another account dates to ancient Mongolian warriors who carried food preserved in salt on long journeys and cooked their food over open fires while it was still encased in moist salt.

There are many varieties and degrees of salt

coarseness available, including pink Himalayan, black and gray salt, and salt with herbs. Contrary to what most might think, the salt does not penetrate or leave food salty. The hermetic crust keeps food moist and seals in flavors, and allows for a shorter cooking time. Similar to the French cooking technique en papillote, the preparation involves wrapping and sealing seasoned food in parchment paper. A similar method is used in Mexico with banana leaves or corn husks.

On the Cape, there are a few local producers of sea salt, one of whom is Paul Shibles of 1830 Sea Salt. I visited Shibles in Chatham and observed his solar evaporation process. You can visit the plant, take a tour and buy some of his beautiful white salt—plain or infused with herbs. You may choose to buy a box of Kosher salt from your local grocery store, or if you want to be a purist, purchase real 100 percent Cape Cod sea salt for the recipes on the following pages.



Salt-Encrusted Fish

This is an easy recipe for cooking a delicious whole fish. You can use your favorite aromatics to fill the cavity, including thin slices of lemon and/or onion and sprigs of fresh or dried herbs like thyme, oregano and parsley. For a Mexican twist, try fresh cilantro, onion, sliced hot pepper, lime slices and a touch of ground cumin—then serve the fish with a spicy tomatillo sauce or fresh salsa on the side. For a French twist, try fresh sprigs of tarragon and bay leaves for the cavity and serve the fish with a lemon-dill beurre blanc. The choices for flavors are as limitless as your imagination. When it is brought to the table and the crust is cracked open exposing the beautiful cooked fish, it makes for a dramatic presentation. Order the fish in advance from your local seafood purveyor in case whole fish are not always available.

Ingredients:

- 6 cups Kosher salt
- 3 egg whites
- 1/4 cup water
- 2- to 3-pound red snapper, sea bass, or trout, scales removed, but leaving head and tail intact
- Aromatics of your choice for filling the cavity (slices of lemon, onion, dried herbs)
- 1 to 2 tablespoons olive oil

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Line a cookie sheet with parchment paper, large enough to hold the fish. In a large bowl, whisk and blend together egg white and water. Stir in the salt. The mixture should be evenly moistened. If too dry, add a little more water. Rinse the fish inside and out and pat dry with a paper towel. Stuff the cavity with desired aromatics. Lightly coat the outside of the fish with the olive oil. This will make it easier to remove the salt crust after roasting. Spread half of the salt mixture in the center of the baking sheet. Lay the fish on top of the salt. Option: If you are using fresh herbs in the cavity, like sprigs of thyme, tarragon, oregano or parsley, consider putting a few sprigs on top of the fish before adding more salt. This adds more visual interest when the crust is removed. With your hands, cover the fish with remaining salt mixture firmly packing it, about 1/4-inch thick. Bake for 30 minutes and let stand in crust 10 minutes before serving. To serve at the table, crack the crust with a large knife and remove the crust, brushing off the excess salt. Fillet the fish inside and serve right away. Drizzle with a little extra virgin olive oil, if desired, and a sauce of your choice.

Mignonette Sauce for Oysters

On the same photo shoot, I also brought fresh Barnstable oysters I had harvested the day before. After opening the shells, I laid them out on a distressed piece of white barn board and spread a base of large crystals of white salt (see photo). If you are serving fresh oysters this season, try the large pink Himalayan crystals. For this recipe, my favorite topping is a simple mignonette sauce. Make the mignonette a day or two ahead, or at least 4 hours, which allows for the flavors to blend and the shallots to mellow. Most people use white peppercorns, but I prefer the black variety.



Ingredients:

½ cup minced shallots
(about 2½ ounces)
¼ cup champagne vinegar
or rice vinegar*
1/8 teaspoon of sugar
1/8 teaspoon of salt
1-¼ teaspoons of finely
crushed black pepper-
corns (do not use
pre-ground or powdered
pepper). The back of a
knife works well for
crushing the pepper.

** If using seasoned rice vinegar,
omit sugar and salt.*

Peel and finely mince the shallots and place in a nonreactive small glass bowl. Add the champagne or rice vinegar, sugar, salt and freshly crushed pepper. Stir with a spoon to combine. Cover with plastic wrap and chill in the refrigerator for a minimum of four hours. The mignonette flavor will be better blended the longer it sits. The crushed black peppercorns may sink to the bottom of the bowl as the mignonette rests, so give it a little stir. This sauce will last up to a month in the refrigerator. 🍷