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THREE WAYS

JUST A PINCH





**To understand salt's modern use in cocktails,
explore its history—starting with the Stone Age.**

**Story by CÉLINE BOSSART
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In the grand scheme of drinking culture, the use of salt as a modern cocktail ingredient is somewhat recent, having begun to take shape around 2006 when bartenders like Dave Arnold became one of the technique's early champions. Arnold, the founder of the Museum of Food and Drink (MOFAD) in Brooklyn, is certainly not alone in preaching salt's virtues in cocktails today—many bartenders swear by the compound's ability to temper “hard” flavors and qualities in a drink, such as bitterness, and bring out the best in other ingredients, like citrus.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a bartender or expert who doesn't agree that a pinch of salt can make a cocktail pop, and while the practice could be considered a relative novelty, there's some ancient history that's led us to this point—long before the Margarita and Salty Dog earned their iconic rims in the mid-20th century. In fact, to understand salt's role in cocktails, one must also explore salt's role in society, which is known to have begun as early as the Neolithic Period.

Thanks to the research team at the Archaeology Museum Piatra Neamț in Romania, we know that some of the earliest salt exploitation in Europe took place sometime between 6050 and 5500 BCE, based on evidence presented in 1984. (Salt harvesting was also being practiced in China around the same time.) It's also known that throughout history, salt was extremely valuable—it wasn't easy to come by, and it was essential to preserve food. Salt played a major role in trading across the globe throughout history, and it was of particular importance in Anatolian culture, as it was believed to protect against the evil eye (salt is said to have been used in rituals for new brides and newborn babies, for example). The practice of salting the earth as a “symbol of total destruction” in the ancient Near East and throughout the Middle Ages is also widely acknowledged, and as far as the Romans go, many experts say that soldiers were paid in salt (a likely etymological influence behind the term “salary”).

By all accounts, salt was king in many ancient civilizations, and we can even trace salt in alcoholic drinks to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Back then, wine was almost always diluted with water so as not to overly intoxicate (“merum,” or undiluted wine, was generally regarded as a drink for the lower classes). Sea water was used at times, both as a preservative and a means of cutting sweetness, as well as to mask flaws in the wines. It took a few thousand years for salt to appear in spirits, as far as we know, but this first took place well before the bartenders of the early aughts began their evangelism.

We can look to Mexico for a direct connection between salt and cocktails. “It seems that taking tequila with salt stems from a sudden boom in sales that correlates to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893,” says Beth Martini, a Chicago-based bar expert and artist who extensively researched the history of fish sauce as a form of salt during her culinary school studies. Martini notes that the Sauza family is credited with introducing tequila to the United States at this time and points out that the Sayula Basin in Jalisco—a significant salt-producing area in tequila's home state—indicates a natural marriage between the two. Following Sauza's Chicago debut, tequila producers began flooding the United States; according to University of Utah assistant professor Marie Sarita Gaytán, this surge in popularity was accompanied by an influx of poor-quality tequila.

It's likely that tequila began being served and consumed with salt in the U.S. mainly in order to make the spirit better suited to the American palate; however, this was an existing custom in Mexico, and not an entirely new concept. “Because of its artisanal nature—and most likely the person distilling it did it by eye—the high proof of alcohol could be a bit rough,” says Oaxaca-based food chemist and agave spirits expert Carmen Lopez Torres. “People would have some lime and salt to make it easier to drink [in towns around Jalisco].”

Although it's difficult to pinpoint the origin of this practice with hard data, Torres, whose father traveled around Mexico researching the tequila industry in the 1990s, believes that it's intrinsically Mexican. “Salt and lime are inherent to Mexican taste buds, and from there it spread into the consumption of agave spirits worldwide,” Lopez Torres says.

The exact reasons for the introduction of the salt rim are unknown, but most authorities on the subject attribute this to salt's ability to tame harshness in a drink, mirroring the approaches of distillers in Mexico and the wine-obsessed ancient Romans and Greeks (whether bartenders knew it or not). Then, of course, we have our classic savory cocktails, such as the Bloody Mary and its many variants—the antithesis of their historically sweeter counterparts, giving cocktail menus a broader appeal than before.

In Brooklyn, bartender and visual artist Stevie D. Gray has an intricate relationship with salt—so much so that a related health experience inspired her to go back to school in order to learn more about it. “I've always loved salt, but I didn't know how much my body needed it until I almost died without enough of it,” she says. “I got sick a few years ago and my [low] blood pressure was making it near impossible to live, let alone bartend. With a little pinch of salt in my water, my blood pressure elevates to more normal levels. Salt is literally saving my life every day.”

Before salt improved her health, Gray had already been working with it behind the bar at Barely Disfigured in Brooklyn's Carroll Gardens neighborhood, using saline drops as a go-to ingredient. But when it comes to flavor experimentation, Gray gravitates to more nuanced options like black lava, Himalayan pink, as well as a specialty Earl Grey salt. Tajín, a Mexican blend of chili peppers, lime, and sea salt, is her “party salt,” and when it comes to serving the country's diverse range of agave spirits, well, there are special salts for that, too. “[They can bring] out some of the smoky and earthy notes of good mezcals,” Gray says of Tajín and *sal de gusano*, or worm salt, a traditional Oaxacan salt made with dried chilies and ground toasted agave worms. “Some companies even sell salt tasting sets specifically to pair with mezcal,” she adds. “It's a lovely experience.” Most of world history would likely agree. ■

