

Flavourings



Voodoo Dance

FLEUR DE SEL, SALT SPRING STYLE

BY ELIZABETH NOLAN

Photos by Jen MacLellan

A HUMBLE ADDITION on the side of a house with beautiful views over Trincomali Channel is where the magic happens. Working with large metal vats kept over low heat on an electric range, this is where Philippe Marill and his wife Carolyn Kvajic transform regular Pacific sea water into a fleur de sel that rivals its French origins.

Marill jokes that the addition's small commercial kitchen is where he does his "voodoo dance . . . It's a process I searched for for a long time," he explains.

Salt Spring Sea Salt, it transpires, is more than just flavoured salt in nice packaging. Harvested by hand not far from Marill and Kvajic's front door, it is transformed through a specialized evaporation process that causes crystals with an inverted pyramid shape to form and collect in groupings resembling snowflakes. The flakes must be hand-skimmed from the water's surface.

"The fleur de sel is very special," Marill says. "It happens only a few places in the world because a lot of elements have to happen at the same time."

It took a year of trying for him to get those elements to align and perfect the process — hence the voodoo dance.

Marill, Kvajic and their son Theo moved to Salt Spring from California around two and a half years ago.

"When I came they told me, 'Oh, you'll reinvent yourself,'" Marill grins. He had spent most of his career in interior decorating, as a master of the beautiful but now little-

used Venetian plaster finishing technique. The move to Salt Spring and purchase of a property on Walker's Hook Road helped inspire the next phase of his journey.

Basic necessity was another driving force. Marill was raised in Montpellier, which is not far from the Camargue marshes, where a large portion of French fleur de sel is produced. He had run out of the personal stash he always used and decided to try making his own.

If anyone is tempted to cite the health problems associated with salt or criticize its role in flavouring good food, Mark Bitterman, author of *Salted: A Manifesto on the World's Most Essential Mineral*, can set them straight.

"Salt is absolutely essential to your nutrition and your flavour. You have to use salt, and you have to use it with love and happiness and delight," he writes. But using the right salt in the right way is paramount.

Bitterman explains that regular table salt is an industrial product made by injecting water into an underground salt deposit to form a brine.

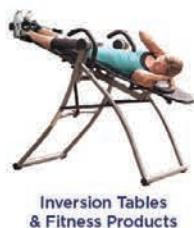
"That brine has what salt normally has — trace amounts



Statistics say:

60-80% of adults will suffer back pain.
We say 100% of them should know about us.

Stress, tension and pain can ruin any part of your day from the time you get up to the time you go to bed. The chair at your desk, the recliner in your den, even the bed you sleep in can all aggravate that discomfort, but they don't have to.



Prescription forms available for most products.
 Feel reassured that medical professionals send their patients to us for proven and effective solutions.



RELAX THE BACK®
 www.relaxtheback.com

774 Spruce Ave | 250-592-1974 | relaxtheback@shaw.ca

“MY GRANDMOTHER ALWAYS TOLD ME ALL YOU NEED IS THREE FLAVOURS AND A GOOD SALT. THAT’S MAGIC.”

— PHILIPPE MARILL

of magnesium, potassium and other minerals. But it is refined through added chemicals to form pure 99.99 per cent sodium chloride crystals . . . To talk about that as a norm, as the definition of salt — even as a food to be eaten — is crazy.”

New packaging for Salt Spring Sea Salt includes a short description of why fleur de sel is unique, since Marill has also found that not many people in North America really understand the difference: the French name is beautiful but is used mainly by necessity since no English translation exists.

“I love to cook and entertain quite a bit, but always with simple food, and not many flavours on the plate,” Marill says. “My grandmother always told me all you need is three flavours and a good salt. That’s magic.”

Marill and Kvajic personally harvest, evaporate, sift, prepare, pack and label all of their products by hand. Evaporation alone takes around a week. The lengthy process and rarity are part of the reason that fleur de sel commands a higher price than other salts — but even a small package should last the user for months. Fleur de sel is a finishing salt, which means it’s not to be wasted during the cooking process.

The way it should be used, Marill says, is to take the flakes and break the crystals, and then put just a bit on food to enhance the taste. Because the seasoning is uneven, the hits of salt activate individual taste buds, making every bite different and delicious.

“So obviously it’s better to put it on very good food, and here on Salt Spring it fits perfectly with all the beautiful vegetables,” Marill says.

This year marked Salt Spring Sea Salt’s second summer in operation, and business doubled from the first year. Marill and Kvajic hope to double or triple that again next year and perhaps even create a job or two for outside the immediate family. A new technical building is most likely coming to the property in the not-so-distant future. This is an impressive achievement, given the fact that fleur de sel is consumed so sparingly.

“I feel like our salt contributes to the good image of Salt Spring,” Marill says. “Local people are bringing their families to our stand — at that level it’s wonderful to be appreciated and supported. But it’s not like cheese that you buy every week.”

However, customers are coming back and the gift market has become a major source of sales, as the crowds at last year’s Fulford Hall Christmas craft fair proved. Priced under \$10, the packages make the perfect island memento.

Salt Spring Sea Salt has expanded from its base at the Saturday market into local stores and galleries, and recently picked up a B.C.-wide distributor. Online sales are meanwhile taking the attractive little packages all over the world.

“People are finding out about our product and they’re reordering,” Marill says.

In addition to the natural fleur de sel, the company also produces a line of flavour-infused variations that make use of local organic herbs, fruit and even alcohol. Their signature flavour is blackberry, an idea Marill dreamed up on his very first day of salt making since he happened to be picking fresh berries for himself at the time.

“Esthetic is always very important to me, and I’m very visual,” Marill

says, noting aside from the iconic island connection, blackberries produce a salt in a gorgeous shade of magenta.

Colour, taste and aroma are in fact all important components of the flavoured salts. Marill has tried around 40 combinations and currently offers about 10 for the market. There's the classic French flavour booster of rosemary and garlic, as well as salts featuring balsamic vinegar, lemon zest and smoked mesquite. A red wine infusion combines products from Salt Spring's Mistaken Identity Vineyards while Salt Spring Island Ales'

porter is showcased in another flavour.

Each infusion complements different types of food. Marill recommends using blackberry salt on sliced avocado, eggs, salad or appetizers. Balsamic perfectly complements a simple pasta with olive oil and parmesan. Wine-infused also goes wonderfully with salad or cold soup, while the rosemary-garlic suits roasted island lamb.

"Always used at the end and plated at the last minute, not mixed in," Marill emphasizes. "It looks so pretty, and each taste will be enhanced differently." ✨



Above: Skimming salt crystals that have formed after salt water sits at the perfect temperature on the stove.
At left: Five Salt Spring Sea Salt flavours.
Page 38: Philippe Marill and Carolyn Kvajic with trays of ready-to-package products.



210-3375 Whittier Ave.
Victoria, BC V8Z 3R1
Office: 250.475.2665
Fax: 250.475.1957
Email: info@accutemp.ca

WARM UP THIS WINTER WITH ACCUTEMP

The BC Government is giving \$1700 in rebates when you switch from an Oil Furnace to an Energy Star Rated Heat Pump & Fortis is giving \$1000 rebate when you switch from an Oil Furnace to a Natural Gas Furnace

Switch Now and Save with Accutemp

- Heat Pumps, Ductless Splits, Oil & Gas Furnaces
- Professional Installations
- Over 30 years experience
- Service & Maintenance on all Equipment
- Commercial & Residential
- Qualified Technicians
- Financing available

250-475-COOL (2665)

accutemp.ca