

## Pass the Salt

Mark Bitterman is a selmelier—he knows salt. He and his wife, Jennifer, own a quaint shop called The Meadow on trendy Mississippi Avenue in North Portland. Word spread quickly among Portland’s serious foodies about the amazing selection of gourmet salts from around the world, as well as beautiful chocolates and flowers. For the “novice,” Mark assembles gourmet salt sets as an entry-level purchase, and then happily teaches the adventurous customer about the more esoteric and pungent varieties of smoked, flaked, or volcanic salts. But his Himalayan salt plates add a whole new dimension to the quest of seasoning food.

At a recent salt class taught in their shop, Mark and Jennifer shared the history and use of these salt blocks. Formed 600 million years ago, the salt plates are mined from the Himalayas in Pakistan. Marbled with shades from pale to salmon pink, translucent to opaque, a slab can be used in two ways: as an exquisite serving piece that never touches heat yet imparts a desirable saltiness to foods, or as a cooking medium.

To illustrate the use of the block as a serving piece, we were served slices of tart green apples arranged beside slices of fresh mozzarella—pure and simple elegance atop the block. Both foods provide the needed water content to absorb salt from the plate and, as a result, pick up a deliciously appealing saltiness. The salt block can be used as an attractive platter for sushi, as the rice-lined rolls will absorb no salt. In contrast, raw salmon sashimi will absorb the salt in a matter of moments. I learned that it is imperative that moist foods be placed on the block right before service, or you run the risk of over saturation.

As a cooking medium, the salt block can be placed directly on a gas burner or set on a metal ring base over an electric stove. The Bittermans have experimented with a wide variety of ingredients, learning what cooks best on the salt block. Jennifer’s favorite is eggs. Mark demonstrated a perfect, sunnyside-up fried egg, which obtains a subtle, nuanced salinity. The block, at a sweltering 500 degrees, seared the surface of thinly sliced beef, salmon, or scallops in seconds. My favorite was the dessert they served—a decadent fondue made from 67% wild-harvested Bolivian chocolate, whipping cream, and a splash of Fee Brothers’ Whiskey Barrel Aged Bitters. The three ingredients were melted and blended in a bowl-shaped block of salt. The salt seasons the chocolate and cream, highlighting the complex flavor of the bitters. The fondue was served with fresh strawberries and sliced bananas.

Mark is writing a book about salt that will be published in 2010. The book will include a history of this revered commodity, a variety of uses for gourmet finishing salts, and recipes utilizing the Himalayan salt blocks. Until then, I’m planning to continue experimenting with the salt block, creating my own unique recipes and amazing tastes.

The Meadow  
3731 N Mississippi Ave  
Portland, OR 97227  
1-888-388-4633  
[www.atthemeadow.com](http://www.atthemeadow.com)