

How humble salt became king of ingredients

By Maria Fitzpatrick, Wall Street Journal

You could say it all started with a deconstructed lasagna. When a small, century-old, family-run saltworks in Maldon, England, got a call from El Bulli, they couldn't have imagined what would happen next. Wanted: one case of their finest crystals, in perfectly uniform but oversize pyramid shapes, individually wrapped in cotton wool and dispatched in haste to Ferran Adrià—the finishing touch for his latest culinary creation.

It was the mid-1990s, and the revered Spanish chef's molecular gastronomy had yet to filter through to the masses; to anyone outside the business, treating salt crystals like precious jewels would have seemed like madness. Today? Not so much.

Thanks to the influence of tastemakers like Mr. Adrià, the humble substance has become a status ingredient not only in restaurants but in our own kitchens. We're taking everything with a pinch of the stuff, be it smoked and sultry, coarse and colorful, or delicately interlaced with celery, truffle, cumin or chili.

According to David Turner, global food and drink analyst at market-research firm Mintel, there's been a marked jump in premium salts coming to market worldwide – 22 percent more in 2014 compared with a year earlier.

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