

SALT OF THE EARTH

KHOISAN TRADING ON THE WEST COAST BELONGS TO AN ELITE GROUP OF SALT PRODUCERS WHO CONTINUE TO HAND HARVEST SEA SALT ACCORDING TO METHODS PERFECTED BY THE EGYPTIANS AND VENETIANS THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO



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This page: Shimmering beauty on a harsh salt pan: the harvested salt crystals emit a rosy glow before time in the sun renders them a pure white. Opposite page: A reminder of all that is inherent to the process of producing hand-harvested Khoisan sea salt: sunshine, sea and precious minerals.



LOCAL HERO

"People don't understand why we make such a fuss about our salt. Until they've tasted it..." says Joan Schrauwen.

Seventeen years ago, when her husband Yntze started a pilot mini-works model to test brine flow and salt-production theory just outside Velddrif, it was the unique taste of Khoisan hand-harvested sea salt that made the couple realise just how special their salt really is. When an international company's plans to mine minerals on a west-coast farm fell through, Yntze, a retired civil engineer, saw the potential for a sea-saltworks. After the test project delivered good results, he designed and laid out both the saltworks and a system of evaporation ponds, the original intention being to produce salt only for industrial purposes. But it was Joan who looked at the salt crystals through the eyes of an artist: "I saw the beautiful salt flakes drifting on top of the water like dragonfly wings. Then I tasted them."

The couple soon realised that they'd managed to produce something similar to the prized *fleur de sel*, a traditional French hand-harvested sea salt. Along with pink Himalayan rock salt, oak-smoked salt and Hawaiian red sea salt, *fleur de sel* is one of a handful of artisan salts that has garnered a following among foodies and celebrity chefs over the last decade. Serious gourmands

“WHEN THE OCEAN PULLED BACK IT LEFT BEHIND A GIGANTIC UNDERGROUND SALT LAKE”

have even been known to take their favourite salt with them wherever they dine.

But, despite the fact that Yntze sprinkles hand-harvested seaweed salt over his eggs in the morning and Joan garnishes their evening meal with natural sea-salt flakes, these are not faddish people. They have, however, come to discover not only the superior taste and flavour of natural hand-harvested salt, but its health benefits too.

Before refrigeration revolutionised food storage, salt was literally the lifeblood of civilisation. Its benefits, from both a food-preservation and nutritional point of view, saw it cause wars, become the economic and political power bedrock behind great empires, and lead to the first form of tax. But the mechanisation of its production resulted in the decline of the mineral's power to steer world politics, and diminished its nutritional value and flavour. Industrialisation changed

the way salt is harvested and, today, heavy-duty machinery is used to harvest the larger salt crystallisers, after which it is washed several times then baked and milled. The elements and minerals are removed from this industrial salt (also sold as ordinary table salt when mixed with chemical anti-caking agents) during the process.

The reasons for Khoisan salt being literally "salt of the earth" are twofold. The first is the source, a four-hundred-year-old brine. The second is the harvesting method. "Thousands of years ago, most of this farm was covered by sea. When the ocean pulled back it left behind a gigantic underground salt lake. We found that this underground brine is three times stronger than sea water," explains Yntze.

Unlike other commercially available "sea salts", this sea brine is high in calcium and lower in magnesium due to it flowing through ancient shell beds, which also contributes to its unique taste.

After the brine has been pumped to the surface from the aquifer (as the underground lake is known), it takes another six weeks in the height of the summer evaporation season to reach its final destination, as it is passed through a system of 14 evaporation pans. It travels a painstaking six kilometres while evaporating to a third of its original volume and doubling the ratio of solid particles to water. The brine is originally the colour of weak tea when it reaches the surface, but, as the salinity and purity increase, it becomes deep pink or red. "The pink colour is caused by the presence of brine shrimp, as well as halophilic organisms, that subsist almost solely in salt," says Yntze, explaining that the colour is an indication that the pans are almost ready to produce salt. It is this colour that caused the ancients to refer to the red brine in the salt pans as the "blood of life".

And then a little magic happens. One morning, when the salinity and weather conditions are just right, the first flakes of salt form slowly on the surface of specially designed small crystallisers. When harvesting *fleur de sel*, this layer of flakes is gently scooped out. To create thicker crystals that can be used in salt grinders or bath salts, the flakes are left to settle on the bottom of the harvesting pan where they will quickly grow in size.

The process is entirely organic, the only mechanised part being the truck that drives the salt to the factory where it is sifted and packed by hand. The pan's yield is influenced by many factors, such as the intensity of the sun and the speed of the wind. "It's like farming, except your crops don't get sick," laughs Yntze. **W**



This page: Yntze Schrauwen (left), who started Khoisan Trading, and manager Isak Adams, who has been working for the company for 15 years. Khoisan Trading has an active policy of investing in the community and provides adult education for many of its employees, as well as contributing towards the schooling of their children.



SALT-CRUSTED WHOLE TROUT

Serves 2 • Preparation time: 5 minutes • Cooking time: 20 minutes • 1kg salt • 3 egg whites • 15g flat-leaf parsley, chopped • olive oil, for greasing • 1 whole trout • fresh greens, for serving • lemon wedges, for serving

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Place the salt, egg whites and parsley in a bowl then mix until soft. Lightly oil a baking tray with olive oil then spread half the salt mixture onto the pan. Place the trout on top then cover with the remaining salt to create a crust. Place in the oven for 20 minutes. Crack the salt crust then remove the excess salt and skin. Serve warm with crisp greens and lemon wedges.