

Salt of the Earth



One of popcorn's more endearing qualities is its ability to pair up with a vast range of flavors, yet one of the most popular popcorn toppings is common, everyday salt. Just a dash and you're ready to munch. We think of salt primarily for its ability to enhance the flavor of food. But in the culinary world, salt is far from your basic, ordinary run of the mill condiment. Salt comes from many sources

and is highly regarded by gourmet chefs who appreciate and distinguish these varieties.

Table salt is the most common kind of salt found in the average kitchen. It comes from salt deposits and is harvested by forcing water into a mine to create brine. The brine is then evaporated leaving cubes of salt. Popcorn salt is a super fine table salt, created to better adhere to popcorn kernels. Kosher salt is like

table salt, but is raked during the evaporation process making a courser, flakier grain. And sea salt is harvested from seawater through evaporation. *How* and *where* the seawater is harvested will affect its taste; thus, there are many types of sea salt including: Black, Celtic, Coarse, Flake, Fleur De Sel, French, Grey, Hawaiian, Italian and Smoked.

And if you think salt is just for the dinner table, think again. This ubiquitous little substance apparently knows no bounds. It is said there are more than 14,000 uses for salt. Centuries ago, salt was used for currency, literally worth its weight in gold. We use salt to ward off bad luck, as a compliment, and to clean, cure and heal. It repels ants, maintains personal hygiene, softens water, preserves food and sustains life. It can be found on the rim of a glass, in a luxurious spa, on an icy highway, and even on the planet Mars. Who knew those tiny crystalline cubes of sodium chloride were so multi-faceted?

The next time you grab the shaker for your popcorn, remember the versatility of salt. And if you feel like taking a culinary adventure to the high seas, try the following recipe for Sea Salt Caramel Popcorn, courtesy of the Popcorn Board (www.popcorn.org).

Sea Salt Caramel Popcorn

A sprinkling of coarse sea salt gives this caramel corn a flavor boost.

Makes: 3 quarts, 24 servings (1/2 cup each)

Preparation time: 25 minutes

2 quarts popped popcorn
 1 1/2 cups pecan halves
 1/2 cup almonds
 1 1/3 cups granulated sugar
 1 cup (2 sticks) butter or margarine
 1/2 cup light corn syrup
 1 teaspoon vanilla
 1 teaspoon coarse sea salt

- Line a large, rimmed baking pan (17x12-inch) with foil and spray lightly with cooking spray; set aside.
- Spray a large bowl (not plastic) with cooking spray and place popcorn and nuts inside.
- In a medium saucepan, combine granulated sugar, butter and corn syrup. Bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly. Clip on a candy thermometer and boil, stirring occasionally, until temperature reaches 290 degrees F. (about 15 minutes).
- Remove candy thermometer and stir in vanilla. Pour mixture over popcorn and stir to coat well. Spread popcorn mixture in an even layer into prepared baking pan. Sprinkle with sea salt and allow to cool completely before breaking into pieces to serve. Store in an airtight container.

Clean-up tip: Soak saucepan before cleaning.

