

VIEW FROM THE SALT BOX - #33

Every so often we see an article about open salts in a magazine, written by someone who has a nice collection. They usually show pictures of the collection and tell about the history of salt use as well as the dishes they have accumulated. In the process we often see what we call "Salt Legends", that we disagree with. We're not always right, but there are several that we would like to find some authoritative source to prove or disprove.

The first one coming to mind is the use of double salts. We first heard they were placed between two diners with one person using each bowl. We also heard they were used for two different kinds of salt, though what the two kinds were was left to the imagination. We firmly believe that the two sides were for salt and pepper. We have seen a few old catalogs that list them as such, this and have seen a covered double with the letter "S" on one lid and the letter "P" on the other. We've also talked with people who have used doubles in restaurants in Europe with salt in one bowl and pepper in the other. Elmer Guilmartin reported that in Hungary the second side contained paprika instead of pepper.

Another story is that Roman soldiers were paid with salt instead of money. It's possible, but we prefer the Encyclopedia Britannica version. It says that they first received a salt allowance as part of their rations. They evidently sold it or used it for barter rather than eat it because it was so valuable. When the army stopped giving it to them, they had received money in its place (an increase in pay?), which was called the "salarium", the predecessor of our word "salary".

A recent article talked about Master Salts being made for refilling individual ones set at each place. No question but this could be done, but the Masters preceded individuals by more than half a century. We believe that either Masters or Individuals were used, but seldom both. We wish we could find written confirmation of this, but books on dining practice all seem to ignore the lowly salt cellar. There is an 18th century reference that says children should be taught to use a clean knife for taking salt. It also says they should not throw bones to the dogs under the table, should eat only what they are given, should not speak unless spoken to, and should leave the room as soon as they are finished. Ah, the good old days!

One point of confusion is the background on non-caking salt. There are two things that made 19th century salt cake – the uneven size of the particles and impurities. Much of the early salt came from evaporation of sea water, which yields a mixture of sodium chloride with calcium chloride and other salts dissolved there. This mixture picks up water from the air during damp weather, and glues the salt into a solid lump when it dries out. While it is damp it is sticky and doesn't flow well at all. Even when the salt comes from deposits in the earth which have fewer impurities, grinding it produces lots of fine particles which will help cement things together. Modern salt that we get in the grocery store is recrystallized to get almost pure sodium chloride with every grain the same size. These can be coated with an inert material to keep them from picking up moisture, but we're not sure it is really necessary. It's the purification and crystal size control that stops caking and makes shakers practical.

One final disagreement with some writers, including our own Salty Comments years ago. In 1985 when we saw the Cambridge CAPRICE salt advertised as an ash tray, we boldly proclaimed, "That isn't an open salt at all". We've changed our minds since then, because a year later saw the same "ash tray" pictured on a page of nut dishes and on another page of open salts. The maker wanted to sell his product, so he advertised them for every use he could think of. Now the only time we say, "That's not a salt", is when there is another shape in the catalog of particular pattern that is clearly labeled as a salt. Even then the ash tray, jam dish or whatever could have been used by the consumer for salt if she thought it was better than others offered in the line.

The stories that go with open salts are fascinating and varied. It would be nice to have verification for all of them, from the Roman Legions on. It's doubtful this can be done in most cases, so when you read them, remember to take them with (OH NO! NOT THAT!)

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