

meet the sea salt makers of anglesey

Harvesting white gold

Alison and David Lea-Wilson craft a unique natural sea salt that's impressing chefs and home cooks alike

Words: **Clare Hargreaves**

Most women carry a tube of lipstick in their handbag, but if you peek inside Alison Lea-Wilson's, you'll find a small phial of crunchy, glistening white salt. "I always take my own to restaurants," she laughs. "Otherwise, I might be forced to eat that stuff they call table salt. And I wouldn't want to ruin my meal."

And when Alison says "her own" salt, she means just that. For the past 13 years, Alison and her husband David have harvested salt from the waters around Anglesey, one of just three companies in Britain doing so commercially. Their delicate flakes, they say, are a very different seasoning from the fine, free-running substance that most of us call salt. At around 300 times the price, some would say it had better be.

Take its nutrition, for instance. "Sea salt, because it comes from the living sea, contains over 75 trace elements needed by the body," says Alison. "Table salt comes from mines, and all the minerals in it get removed during processing. Anti-caking agents are added to make it flow smoothly."

Then there's the taste. Not only does sea salt taste much stronger than table salt, so you need far less, but Alison and David claim that each sea salt tastes totally different, depending on where it's from. "Just as wines reflect the soil – or *terroir* – they are grown in, so sea salts vary in flavour according to which sea they're harvested from," says Alison. To underline its uniqueness to this corner of Wales, the couple call their salt Halen Môn, Welsh for Anglesey salt.

Pure beginnings

We're on the beach just in front of the portable buildings housing the Halen Môn plant. Across the glistening Menai Strait, the silhouettes of Snowdon and Caernarfon castle are etched on the horizon.

"We have a clean Gulf Stream washing around Anglesey with a double tide," says David. "There are no large cities or polluting

industries near here, so the water is extremely pure."

It's made still purer by the mussels whose shells cobble the shore beneath our feet; each mussel filters five litres of seawater every hour. A natural sandbank then acts as a second filter, before water is pumped through two pipes up to the plant. "We write a cheque every year to the Queen for that seawater," laughs David. "She owns it."

Inside the plant, seawater is heated in a vacuum, then the concentrate is placed in shallow crystallisation tanks. Once snow-white

crystals have formed, they are rinsed in brine, then placed in ovens to dry. "The flake – or shard as we call it – must be the right shape," says David. "If it isn't, we dissolve it again. This is a craft, not a science."

A job that entails a five-minute daily commute from their farmhouse home to one of the country's most beautiful beaches with

breathtaking views of Snowdonia might seem like a pretty nifty number. But Alison and David admit it's taken a while to achieve their position as a commercial salt producer supplying some of the world's top chefs and exporting to 22 countries.

Both laugh when they remember their early efforts. At that time, they ran an aquarium and oyster hatchery on a site next

to the current plant, so they already had salt in the veins – as well as a licence to extract seawater. Because their business flourished mainly in summer, they needed

something to keep them going through the winter months too.

"I'd spent holidays on Ile de Re off the western coast of France, and watched the making of fleur de sel [one of the world's top sea salts], so I knew it could be done," says Alison. Degrees in English (Alison) and Financial Economics (David) from nearby »

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David and Alison have lived on the shores of Anglesey for 34 years

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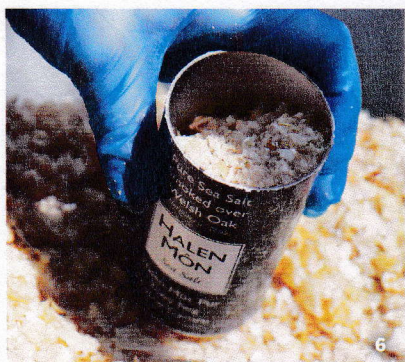
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alison and david lea-wilson



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» Bangor may not seem the obvious training for becoming salt makers – but then such training doesn't exist, so trial and error was the only option.

Kitchen experiments

"We started experimenting in the kitchen, then progressed to evaporating seawater in a bath wrapped with space blankets and powered with Bunsen burners underneath," Alison recalls. "We hit a bit of a hiccup when one day David fell into the boiling salt water and had to be hospitalised for 10 percent burns."

Despite the setbacks and scepticism from business experts, the couple persevered, eventually constructing a plant on the shore, which now employs 16 full-time staff. Alison remembers their first tubes of salt, packed and labelled by hand, which they took to a London trade fair. To their amazement, they secured two very attractive orders.

Then they were spotted by the Two Fat Ladies (Clarissa Dickson Wright and Jennifer Paterson), who featured them on one of their early TV series. "Demand rocketed," says David. "We couldn't make salt fast enough. Other chefs then started to shout about us, such as Stephen Terry in Monmouthshire, who used Halen Môn on *Great British Menu*."

Over the years, flavours were added, including spices (great with roast spuds or barbecued chicken), Tahitian vanilla, and organic celery. The Lea-Wilsons also produce a smoked version by cold-smoking salt over Welsh oak, which has proved a hit with chefs, including Heston Blumenthal. "We bumped into Heston at a reception in Italy and he told us he enjoyed using our smoked salt on pizzas and steaks," says David.

Then, in April last year, he and Alison heard that a US chocolatier, who uses Halen Môn in her smoked salt caramels, had discovered that her chocolates were President Obama's favourites. "We were pretty chuffed," smiles David with characteristic modesty. "It's not every salt maker that gets presidential approval."

Today, though, there's work to be done. A large order has just come from Italy so it's all hands on deck to get the white stuff packaged, labelled and off. David has had to get up in the wee hours to attend to a snag – salt has corroded one of the pumps. "The plant is David's mistress," laughs Alison. "He's often slipping off to see her in the night. That's something we have to live with. No one ever said salt making was easy. If it was, everyone would be doing it."



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