



PANACHE

Salt of the Earth

by Sharon Olson

The color, the texture, the romance, what is it that turns simple salt into a precious, pricy, sought-after seasoning? Patty and Tom Erd took us on a taste tour at Shelley Young's The Chopping Block on April 7, 2008, at the Salting and Brining event sponsored by the Chicago chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier. A wine and appetizer reception preceded the class. On the recommendation of Cleveland Dame, Carol Hacker, we sampled championship cheeses supplied by Annie Watts for the Cabot Creamery Cooperative, a cooperative of New England dairy farm families.

When the class began, we sampled four different types of salt from around the globe and compared them to a control sample of kosher salt. We imagined the subtleties and the differences as Patty read some of the most exquisite stories about every color and variety sold at The Spice House in Chicago, and Tom shared some of his insights on the harvesting techniques used around the world. Yet, we learned there is no science to support the differences between the most exotic varieties of sodium chloride other than color and texture.

Before Shelley began her demonstration on brining she asked the group why they did not brine more often. The common refrain was time and adding another step to recipes. By the end of the evening after tasting salmon, chicken, and pork loin, that extra step seemed like a small trade off for the exquisite taste and texture.

Shelley's basic brine is water and salt – one gallon of water to one cup of kosher

salt. The differences are in the seasonings. She added shallots, tarragon and lemon for salmon, created her own version of chili enojada for the pork that included some allspice, one of her favorites. The chicken was flavorful and juicy, and the brining leads to a softer pale color that can easily be browned with butter or a brush of pomegranate molasses. Sugar was added to the chicken and pork brines to enhance tenderness and add a touch of sweet.

We also picked up a quick and easy tip on brining – use a garbage bag. If a large plastic container is not available, it works just fine. A special treat was the walnut sauce for the pork that Shelley whipped up in the blender – walnuts, crème fraîche, a little red wine vinegar and few drops of water.

Patty and Shelley told us their customers simply cannot get enough salt – it is a great seller at The Chopping Block's retail store, and Patty has decided to say "enough" with 20 varieties for sale at The Spice House. Even though there is no more mystery to even the most exotic salts, there are still some fabulous stories to share.



Dame Patty Erd, Dame Shelley Young and Tom Erd