CUCINARE NELLA PREISTORIA

by

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An invisible treasure. A journey into the archaeology of salt

Salt, so common on our tables today, is actually a precious resource and far from easy to be traced in archaeological evidence. Despite the few material traces that survive, we know salt has been essential since prehistoric times: it was used not only to flavor food, but above all to preserve it for longer.

Let's think about daily life in **prehistory**. A lot of food was perishable: bread, flatbread, and dairy products didn't last long, so they had to be eaten right away. But it wasn't always possible to produce and consume everything at the same time. During the **Winter months**, for example, or in times of starvation, having supplies could make all the difference. So communities soon developed clever preservation techniques: they dried fruit and meat, smoked fish, fermented drinks, and dipped food in honey.

Of all these methods, **salting** was the most effective and versatile. Salt not only improved the flavor of food, but above all, it inhibited the growth of bacteria and prevented spoilage. Thanks to it, meat, fish, and cheese could be preserved for weeks or months, making it possible to store food reserves and perhaps even transport them over long distances.

The importance of salt went far beyond cooking. Artisans used it to tan animal skins, preventing them from rotting, and weavers used it to better fix colors on fabrics.
In recent decades, "**salt archaeology**" has gained increasing attention, revealing how widespread and important salt was in ancient economies.

The archaeologists issue is that salt, being soluble, does not preserve **easily**. Therefore, evidence comes more from structures and production residues than from the resource itself. We do not find fossilized salt lumps in excavations, except in very rare cases, such as that of the **Ourania** cave in **Crete**, where large fragments of salt were found during **Bronze Age excavations**.

Most often, we have to settle for "**indirect clues**"! Remains of production facilities, pottery used in extraction processes, or traces of hearths. Thanks to these traces, we can now reconstruct a history that is much richer and more widespread than was once thought.

There were two main methods for producing salt. The first was the direct extraction of rock salt, as was done in the **Hallstatt** mines in **Austria** as early as the **Bronze Age**, where tunnels were dug with pickaxes to extract blocks of salt. The second method involved producing salt from salt water through natural evaporation or, using the briquetage technique, artificial evaporation in pottery vessels placed on hearths. The heat helped the salt to crystallize, which was then collected by breaking the pots or scraping their surfaces. Pottery fragments, small pillars used to support the pots, and traces of burnt earth are now the main archaeological "signatures" of this practice.
In **Italy**, some of the oldest evidence comes from the fortified settlement of Elleri, near **Muggia**, close to **Trieste**. Dating back to the **Late Bronze Age**, it was located in a strategic position overlooking the valley and the coast, probably to control the local salt pans. Among the artifacts unearthed are numerous truncated cone-shaped vessels similar to those found at sites in central **Europe**, such as **Halle** an **der Saale** in **Germany**.

These vessels had a very specific function: they served as molds for standardized salt loaves, with a diameter of **20-25** centimeters. In other words, salt was not only consumed but also produced in regular shapes that facilitated its transport and perhaps even its trade. This is an extraordinary evidence of how, even in protohistoric times, salt could circulate as a kind of "**currency**," just like other valuable goods.
It was during the **Iron Age**, especially in coastal areas, that a great number of salt pans developed, exploiting the natural evaporation of sea water. Some archaeological evidence comes from **Lazio** and **Etruria**, where the **Etruscan** and **Latin** populations managed salt pans that were fundamental to the local economy. During this period, the "**salt roads**" became veritable trade corridors. The salt extracted along the **Adriatic** and **Tyrrhenian coasts** or near inland salt springs was transported inland to the **Apennine** and **Alpine communities**.

The salt history is therefore much more than a gastronomic curiosity. Today we take it for granted, but for millennia salt was a treasure to be guarded, defended, and traded: a white thread that links our **modern kitchens** to the tables and lives of prehistoric communities.

Preisto-ricetta

Who doesn't love salt? It's that simple but priceless ingredient that brings out flavors and makes even the most basic dish special. But have you ever wondered how they used it thousands of years ago? Even back in the Bronze Age, we can imagine that a pinch of salt ended up on many dishes, maybe kept in little clay pots and mixed with herbs picked nearby.
Today, I would suggest you a recipe inspired by those ancient atmospheres: salt flavoured with ***prehistoric herbs****, aromatic and very easy to be made.*

Ingredients

20 g dried aromatic herbs: rosemary, sage, thyme, oregano
200 g natural coarse salt
a stone or wooden mortar (the coffee grinder performs well, if you want be faster!)

Pick up fresh herbs and leave them to dry for a couple of days in a fresh and dark place. When completely dried, crush them in the mortar until they become small fragrant crumbs. Add salt and keep crushing, so that all the aromas are perfectly mixed. Keep your salt in a clean and dry pot.
And that's it: a natural and historical seasoning, ready to flavour roast meat, grilled veggies or even a bruschetta with a little olive oil. A small journey through time, that you can directly bring in your own kitchen!

Curiosita'

Did you know **Salina di Cervia** (Salt pans in Cervia) is worldly well-known for its unique *Sweet Salt*? It is a whole sea salt, which is directly obtained from sea water. As a matter of fact, water is channeled in the salt pans basins and, thanks to natural evaporation, it turns into the precious white crystal we all know.
It has a peculiar taste, which is less bitter than other sea salt ones, and this is the reason why it is known as "sweet". Unsurprisingly, it has been appreciated for centuries not only for cooking, but also for its natural properties.
And if you want to live a very unique experience, you can visit the **Salina di Cervia Park**: an enchanted place where nature and minerals are intertwined. Suggestive walks, sunsets on the water and sea perfumes make it the perfect spot to literally "dive"in the salt world.

Would you like to learn more about this topic?

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