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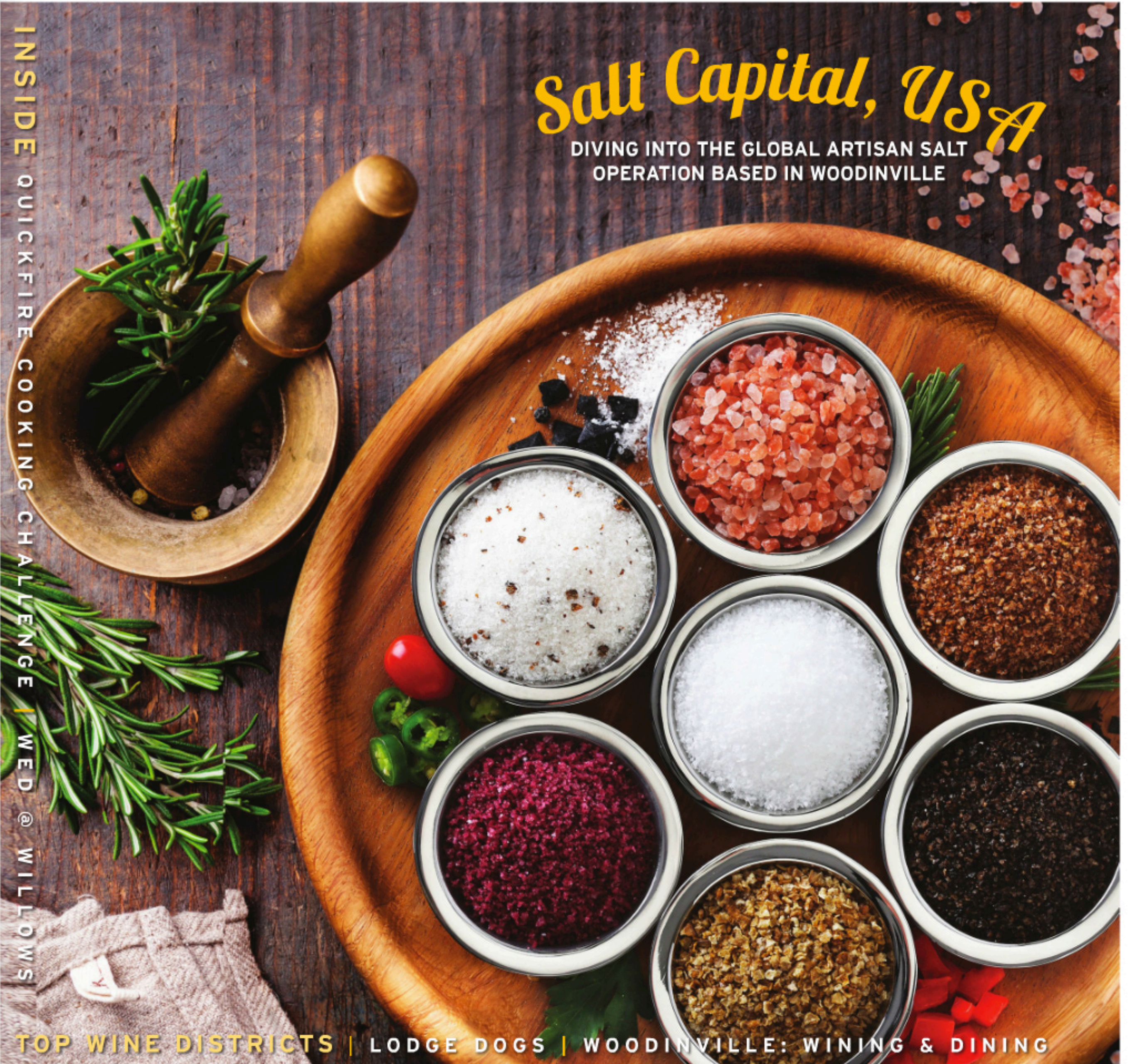
LODGE magazine

Salt Capital, USA

DIVING INTO THE GLOBAL ARTISAN SALT OPERATION BASED IN WOODINVILLE

INSIDE QUICKFIRE COOKING CHALLENGE | WED @ WILLOWS

TOP WINE DISTRICTS | LODGE DOGS | WOODINVILLE: WINING & DINING



20/THE BUSINESS OF SALT

It's a crystal palace, and founder Mark Zoske is king. Welcome to SaltWorks, a 130,000-square-foot gourmet salt factory that churns out big business in little Woodinville.

BY MEGAN HILL

27/BLOOD, SWEAT & BOBBY MOORE

On a summer Sunday afternoon at Willows Lodge, three teams each composed of a local chef and winemaker took to a cooking stage. What came next: mystery ingredients, a crowd watching their every move, a trash-talking hand puppet, and only one winning dish.

BY SARA JONES



FEATURES

THE BUSINESS OF



IF YOU'VE EVER BOUGHT ARTISAN SALT, CHANCES ARE, AT ONE POINT,
IT STOPPED THROUGH SALTWORKS, THE WORLD'S FIRST AND LARGEST GOURMET SALT FACTORY
THAT RESIDES IN LITTLE OLD WOODINVILLE.

by MEGAN HILL

Mark Zoske leads me up a staircase to get a closer look at a machine – what’s called an “optical color sorter” – that sits 10 feet in the air on a metal platform. Overhead, a “one-ton super sack,” as it’s known in salt factory parlance, is hanging from a ceiling beam. It’s big enough to fit several people in a potato sack race, and it’s pouring a steady stream of pink Himalayan salt crystals, mined from ancient sea deposits in the Himalayan Mountains, into a rectangular funnel, where they tumble into a collection of tubes that feed into one-ton bags resting on the floor. The stream is a study in pink – every shade imaginable is tumbling through, from coral to cotton candy to salmon, along with the occasional piece of white or brown.

Before the crystals land, this incredibly complex machine – which, to my untrained eyes, looks like a huge industrial printer – takes a picture of both sides of every single piece of salt running through its tracks. In a millisecond, it determines which crystals are subtly different in color from the final product and shoots a single jet of air to eject it from the stream and sort it into the discard bag.

Back downstairs, at the large bags where the salt falls, Zoske lifts up a handful from the discard pile, where those white, brown, and less-uniform pink pebbles rest. The perfect ones, the crystals made of pure salt with zero imperfections, wait in another bag, destined for packaging and shipping to hundreds of thousands of customers around the world.

This is just one of the machines that analyzes, sorts, and perfects the hundreds of thousands of pounds of salt crystals within SaltWorks, a state-



▲ This machine-operated fill line has the capacity to fill, cap, seal, and label one jar of SaltWorks' salt every two seconds – that's 10,000 jars a day.

of-the-art gourmet salt factory located in a nondescript industrial park nestled between Route 202 and the Sammamish River, about a mile north of Willows Lodge. Today, founder and CEO Zoske is playing the role of a Willy Wonka of sorts, taking me behind the curtain of his massive 130,000-square-foot steel facility. Instead of a top hat and cane, though, a set of industrial grade earmuffs is slung around his neck; no stiff suit CEO here – he wears the same casual clothing and steel-toed boots of his employees. And his machinery is certainly not as kooky as that of the chocolate factory, but it is every bit as futuristic and cutting edge.

But there was a time when Zoske had no idea there even was such a thing as gourmet salt.

“It was one of those aha discoveries,” says the former mechanical engineer for a waterski and wakeboard company of his introduction to the artisan product some 15 years ago. “Like most Americans, I didn’t know there was anything beyond Morton’s.” While traveling, he stumbled upon fleur de sel, a type of finishing sea salt collected by hand off the coast of France. Expecting it to be identical to typical table salt, instead what he tasted was





WHERE DOES SALT COME FROM?

Much of the world's salt is derived from evaporating salt water – commonly sold as “sea salt.” Large deposits of salt also lie deep underneath the earth's surface, deposited there by ancient seas. It's accessed through deep mine shafts, harvested, and brought to the surface for use as rock salt. Table salt is typically either created in a lab or harvested through a process called solution mining, which involves constructing wells over salt beds, injecting fresh water into the beds to dissolve the salt, and pumping out the brine for later evaporation to retrieve the dissolved salt.

flavor-packed, moist granules, turning his ordinary meal into a culinary experience. “I thought, ‘Where have you been all my life?’” After returning home, he tried to buy gourmet salts but only managed to find a few small purveyors who would sell him wholesale-sized quantities – far more than what even the biggest salt fan could utilize. It dawned on him to sell the surplus online.

“It grew crazy fast,” Zoske says. “As fast as we could bring money in, it would go back out to buy as much salt as we possibly could with it.” Recruiting his wife, Naomi Novotny, who was selling software at the time, they decided to open the factory in Woodinville in 2001 to be near the scores of industry peers – the location being something of the artisan food and beverage hub, home to the legendary Redhook Brewery, craft distilleries, like the Woodinville Whiskey Company, and, of course, winery after winery. “If you're a food company, this is where it's happening,” Zoske says.

This year, SaltWorks is projected to sell as much as \$25 million in gourmet salt, spanning 110 varieties, from pink Himalayan salt, black truffle salt, smoked salts, and more, with origins as far away as Brazil, New Zealand, and Sicily. In that same time frame, 30 to 35 million pounds of salt are expected to pour through the facility, bound for home cooks, restaurants, like Barking Frog at Willows Lodge, and food companies, like potato chip manufacturers.

Which is where the finely tuned operation comes in. Sitting in SaltWorks' conference room to muffle the din from the storm of rocks bouncing against metal, Zoske explains how he brings in salt from small and large artisanal companies and family-run operations all over the world. And when they arrive, the crystals are often mixed in with everything from metals to sand to stray bird feathers. “A lot of salt is made right on the ground, so birds do their thing in it, fish, whatever it may be. You don't want any of that weird



▲ Only the best of the best pink Himalayan salt crystals make it into one of these one-ton bags; (right) SaltWorks' signature line of Dead Sea Bath Salts is as big a seller as its gourmet flakes.



(FACTORY - PRODUCT PACKAGING) SALTWORKS, INC.

stuff in your salt," he says.

Zoske's bevy of machines analyzes and perfects the salt. One "massages" the product, breaking any clumped particles without breaking the crystals. An aspirator sucks up anything lighter than the salt crystals, including "fibers, hair, wood, bird feathers – the unmentionables," Zoske says as we breeze past the machine. "We find things that are frankly kind of terrifying. Bugs exist in nature, but you don't want them to exist in your food."

He shows me the powerful rare-earth magnet that pulls off any ferrous fragments and a sifter that grades the salt, pulling out crystals that are larger or smaller than what's ideal for consumption to arrive at the "Goldilocks, the 'just-right' pieces of salt." There's also the aforementioned optical color sorter and an enormous pharmaceutical-grade grinder that is incredibly accurate to grind salt to the customer's exact specifications. If a potato chip company

wants salt flakes that measure eighteen one-hundredths of an inch across, for example, Zoske's your man.

Most of these machines are built in house, completely crafted start to finish based on Zoske's specifications. Working closely with an engineer, Zoske is constantly tweaking them, making improvements to perfect the process. He shows me the machine shop, where six-foot-high piles of metal are being welded together to form new machine housing and where engineers are programming new systems. It looks like a futuristic blacksmith shop.

We trot past row upon row of one-ton super sacks and aisles of pallets loaded with the packaged products ready to go out to customers. They're stacked on industrial shelves that make the place look like the Lowe's of salt. Just past the 6,000-gallon "pond" that crystallizes salt from clean, concentrated sea water, Zoske shows me the sealed smoking room next to enormous piles of logs of



SOME GOURMET SALT TYPES



FLEUR DE SEL

The *crème de la crème* of finishing salts; made up of only "young" crystals that form naturally on the surface of salt evaporation ponds from France's Guérande region.



HAWAIIAN RED SALT

More mellow and earthy in flavor than regular sea salt owed to a natural mineral called "Alae" (volcanic baked red clay) that is added to enrich the salt with iron oxide.



SMOKED SEA SALT

Naturally smoked (at SaltWorks) with wood to impart a range of flavors, from mesquite to applewood.



KALA NAMAK

A type of unrefined mineral salt from India that has a strong, sulfuric flavor, imparting a subtle egg flavor to chutneys, raitas, and hummus.



ITALIAN SEA SALT

Mined from the low waters of the Mediterranean along the coast of Sicily; rich in minerals with plenty of flavor yet not too strong or salty.



▲ Inside these 12-foot-tall steel smokers, you'll find a Ferris wheel of salt, slowly rotating the crystals as they naturally absorb flavors from Yakima applewood, mesquite, and hickory.

every wood imaginable – pecan, alderwood, oak, hickory, and applewood, to name a few – ready to naturally impart flavor to SaltWorks' line of smoked salts. There's also a mixing area where all-natural scents are added to the company's line of Dead Sea Bath Salts. As Zoske points out, his salt contains no coloring or artificial scents. There's not a single chemical involved. Even the air inside the building is filtered, certified as "food grade" and able to come in contact with the salt without tainting it.

As Zoske continues to zoom through the warehouse with a caffeinated intensity and wild-eyed enthusiasm, he tells me how, at any given time, SaltWorks has about 150 ocean containers with 44,000 pounds of salt on it somewhere en route to his Woodinville warehouse. On-site, there's about three-and-a-half million pounds of salt being stored, both pre-

and post-purification. That means there's not a quiet space in the factory – everywhere, someone is operating a machine, driving a forklift, preparing orders to go out, or adding flavors to the product. It's a veritable sensory overload to an outsider, but one that seems to fit Zoske's high-energy personality.

I ask him if his schedule allows him any time for reflection. He halts. It's the first time I've seen him do so, and I imagine the cartoonish screech of breaks, like when the Road Runner stops on the edge of a cliff. "When I walk through here on the weekends when it's dark, I still can't quite believe it," he says. "And my recurring nightmare is I'll wake up and none of this is real. And I'll have to start all over again." Then he takes a step, off again at his breakneck clip, as if trying to leave the thought in the dust. ▲



A BRIEF HISTORY OF SALT

Before humans could easily access salt, the mineral was traded heavily, a much-sought-after commodity that, in the sixth century, commanded its weight in gold. Salt was also used as currency, and Roman soldiers who marched along the Via Salaria, or "salt route," were paid partly in salt, a system referred to as *salarium argentum*, the origin of the term "salary." Soldiers suffered pay cuts if they were not "worth their salt." Salt has been a symbol for permanence, infidelity, purification, bad luck, social rank, and skepticism.

