

Mark Zoske and Naomi Novotny, founders of Woodinville's SaltWorks, show off some of their "white gold." (Sea salt, that is.)



Salty Obsession

How Mark Zoske turned a salt addiction into a budding business empire. **BY ZACHARY D. LYONS**

THE GOURMET FOOD explosion began in the 1970s with Chef Alice Waters' emphasis on local and fresh foods, Ben & Jerry's ice cream and the rebirth of farmers' markets. It has since spread to microbreweries, wine, artisan bread, cheese, chocolate and now... salt?

Yes, the ubiquitous mineral is getting an artisan makeover. And one of the people helping spice up salt's rather bland image is Mark Zoske, founder of the Woodinville-based gourmet salt company, SaltWorks.

In 2001, Zoske was a 30-something extreme sports equipment designer with a fixation. He was also a budding salt-aholic in love with a unique French salt called "Fleur de Sel," which means flower of salt.

"I kept seeing all these articles about artisan salts and sea salts," Zoske says of his developing obsession. "Somehow, I had made it through my whole life without knowing about sea salt. I tracked down the French salt everyone was raving about, and I couldn't believe the difference."

When Zoske was unable to find more of the savory mineral he craved, he decided to launch

his own web-based gourmet salt business. Of course, Zoske's friends thought the idea was, well, not worth its salt.

But little did they know that Zoske had joined what would soon become one of the next great gourmet food trends. Right as Zoske launched SaltWorks, the Food Network began discussing sea salt, and business boomed. Between 2003 and 2006, SaltWorks' sales grew 2,000 percent, reaching \$5 million last year. Zoske expects sales to double again this year.

Initially, Zoske focused on the individual customer, but he quickly discovered that the lone buyer was not going to pay the bills. Instead, he grew his sales through wholesale orders with spice companies and large grocery chains. One of the keys to the company's success is that SaltWorks provides one-stop shopping for some of the most recognizable brands on the spice aisle, handling everything from the sourcing to the importing of the salts from locations around the globe.

For the company's crew, gourmet salt is more than a business—it's a passion. Zoske's 14 employees, who work at a new 30,000-square-foot Woodinville warehouse, are obsessed with finding exotic salt from all over the world—including varieties such as Himalayan Jurassic salt and Bolivian Rose from the Andes. In all, the company offers more than 100 types of gourmet salt, each with a distinct flavor. SaltWorks also offers an extensive line of bath and spa salts, including Dead Sea salt.

In addition, salt lovers will find plenty of interesting tidbits about the fabled spice on the company's websites (artisansalt.com and sea-salt.com), including the fact that it was once used to preserve Egyptian mummies. Also, the word "salary" is derived from salt, and Roman soldiers were paid with coins made from pressed salt cakes, leading to the term, "He is worth his salt."

While Zoske's firm is a favorite for many top spice brands, he still stays in touch with the individual consumer. In fact, when customers call, Zoske or his business partner, Naomi Novotny, will often answer the telephone.

"We treat all our customers the same, whether they place a \$9 or a \$9,000 order," he says. "Often, we spend more time on the phone handling small orders, answering questions and explaining about the salts than we do with the larger orders. I was that \$9 order five years ago." 