

OPITO BAY SALT

WORDS DAVID WRIGLEY | IMAGES BRYDIE THOMPSON



Salt has been a vital part of human civilization throughout history, valued as a means of preserving food and enhancing flavour. Like wine, it has long been associated with a sense of place. Solnitsata, the oldest known town in Europe, was built around a salt producing facility. The port of Liverpool grew from a sleepy village into a global powerhouse because of its proximity to the Cheshire salt mines. The Polish Empire rose and fell with the fortunes of the rock salt on which its wealth depended.

Today, salt is plentiful and cheap. It is a mass-produced product, usually iodized to prevent caking (thus Cerebos salt's famous 'see how it runs' slogan, reflecting the ease with which it could be poured). But not all salts are created equal, and the best salt today is capable of enhancing and elevating food with a near-magical alchemy. The best salt also speaks of the place from which it was harvested and the people who carefully extract it from the ocean or the earth.

Opito Bay is a special place. It lies 40kms from Whitianga on the east coast of the Coromandel Peninsula and 15km from the nearest shop. According to Sustainable Coastlines, Opito Bay is one of the three cleanest beaches in New Zealand. Perry Cornish, co-founder of the Opito Bay Salt Company, refers to it as his "happy hunting ground".

Perry and his business partner Erin Mone hatched the idea of starting a salt making venture in Perry's Grey Lynn kitchen while enthusing over an artisan salt that Erin had procured. Perry was already cooking with Himalayan salt at home, but he saw this artisanal sea salt as a step beyond that in terms of flavour and texture.

The Opito Bay Salt Company was born.



Erin, an Irish ex-pat, was working in corporate finance at the time having spent years operating a cinema chain in Ireland. Perry came from a marketing and advertising background and had lived in Europe for many years. At the time he was also working in finance in Auckland. His father was John Cornish, the well-known chef and charcutier, so Perry always had brine in the blood.

After several months experimenting with salt-making out the back of Perry's bach at Opito Bay, the pair packed in their corporate jobs and moved to the Coromandel fulltime. At which time the country went into its very first Covid lockdown.

During lockdown Erin and Perry continued to experiment with making salt and built their first full-sized greenhouse to aid with the evaporation of seawater. Using the sun to gently evaporate seawater (as opposed to boiling) was not only kind to the environment but also retained the trace minerals that are so integral to the salt's flavour and health benefits.

The pair discovered that their salt was made up of 6% trace minerals compared with only 1% in most sea salts. That meant less sodium (bad) and more flavour and health-giving minerals (good). This purity and mineral wealth sets Opito Bay Salt apart, not only from bog-standard table salt, but also the majority of artisan salt makers around the world.

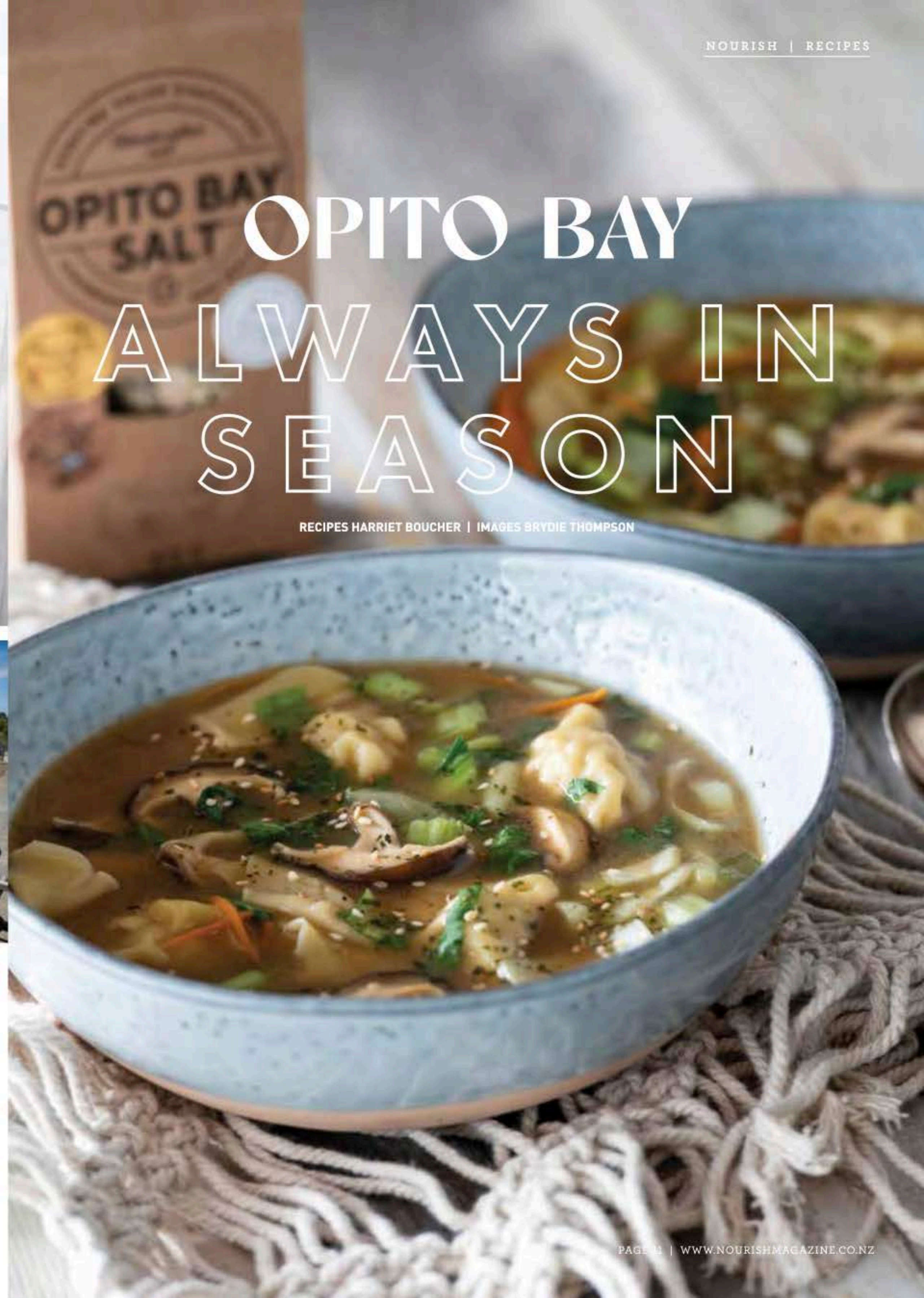
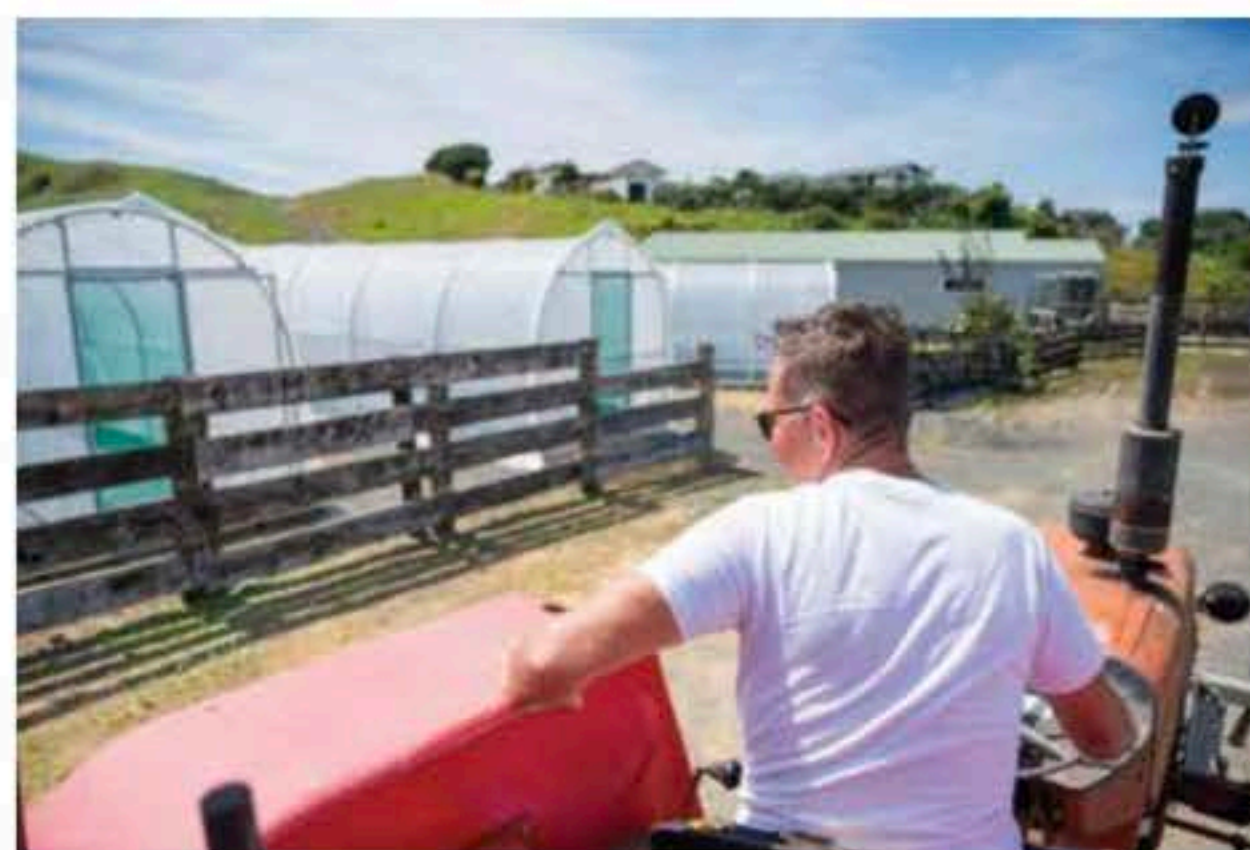
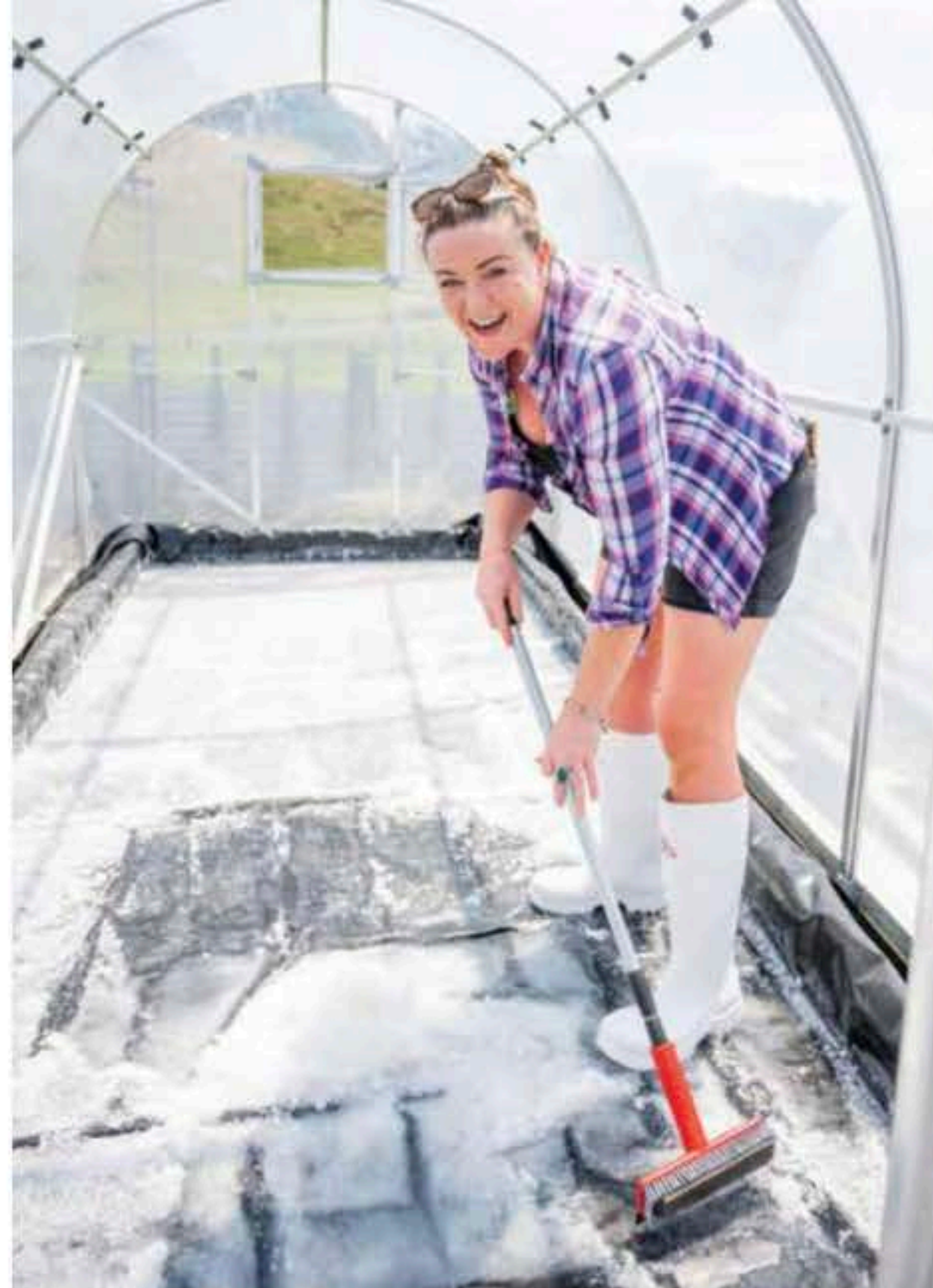
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OPITO BAY ALWAYS IN SEASON

RECIPES HARRIET BOUCHER | IMAGES BRYDIE THOMPSON

With the importance of the ocean and the beach to the business, Perry sees it as vital to look after their environment as much as possible. With the sun doing most of the work, the business is mostly carbon neutral. Their pumps are electric to minimise fuel usage. They have worked hard to make sure their packaging is as sustainable as possible and have installed permeable weed matting on the floors of their greenhouses so that the main by-product of the salt-making process, pure water, is returned to the earth.

Perry and Erin are enthusiastic about blending their sea salt with the finest ingredients New Zealand (and ideally Coromandel) has to offer. Their range has featured black garlic, smoked chilli, black truffle, rosemary, dry gin (for all your venison needs), as well as seasoning blends like furikake (with Coromandel kelp) and a delicious sazón. Wherever possible they will use local products and even, in the case of the rosemary salt, grow the produce themselves, with the help of a homemade seaweed fertiliser from the same beach they draw their seawater.

Artisan salt is still a fairly new concept to many New Zealanders, and it can be a challenge to convince people that it is worth the extra money to go beyond the see-how-it-runs blandness of iodized table salt. That's why you can find Erin and Perry at farmer's markets around the upper North Island most weekends.

For Perry, getting people to try the product is the best marketing available.

"It's a different experience to whatever salt you may have had before," he says. It's not just the flavour of the salt but also the texture. When seasoning a steak, for example, a finer marine salt will quickly be absorbed into the meat, but "different sized particles give you a crunch," says Perry. "A flavour explosion."

Numerous gold medals from the Outstanding New Zealand Food Producer Awards and Artisan Food Awards confirm what Perry and Erin already know: that Opito Bay Salt is a special product that will enhance the cooking of any home chef. The challenge now is to get their salt into New Zealand kitchens and eventually, to the kitchens of the world.

www.opitobaysalt.co.nz



DAVID WRIGLEY
David is a freelance writer based in Cambridge. His work has appeared in publications such as *The Guardian* and *Noble Rot*. He is a veteran of over 20 years in the London restaurant scene.

PORK AND FURIKAKE WONTON SOUP

SERVES 3-4

This punchy winter broth is both quick and easy to make. The use of Opito Bay Salt Co's furikake rounds out the Japanese inspired soup and you'll finish the bowl feeling nourished and warm.

FOR THE BROTH

2 litres of good quality chicken stock/broth
¼ cup miso (available at Vetro)
5cm thumb ginger, sliced
1 tbsp soy sauce
10 shiitake mushrooms, sliced

FOR THE WONTONS

200g pork mince
1 tbsp Opito Bay furikake
1cm ginger, finely grated
1 tsp soy sauce
15-20 large wonton pastry sheets (available from Vetro)

TO FINISH

1-2 carrots, julienned
2 bok choy, sliced
extra furikake to garnish

Place the chicken stock, miso, ginger, soy sauce, and shiitake mushrooms in a large pot. Very slowly bring the mix to the boil while you make the wontons. Don't rush this, allow the flavours to infuse.

To make the wontons, mix the mince, furikake, grated ginger and soy sauce together. Lay a piece of wonton pastry out, then add a small spoonful of mince in the middle. Brush 2 edges with water, then fold the unbrushed edges over to match the brushed edges. Pinch the pastry together to ensure its airtight. At this point you can pinch the pastry in a concertina fashion to create a bunched look, using a little water to help seal it, or leave them as is.

Once the broth is boiling, discard the ginger slices, then add the wontons and boil for 5 minutes. After 5 minutes, add the carrot and bok choy and bring back to the boil, before dividing amongst bowls. Garnish the soup with extra furikake before serving.



OPITO BAY SAZÓN WEDGES

Opito Bay Salt Co's sazón is a taste of Mexico and Central America. We love using it on wedges, so the flavour shines through. Serve with a dollop of sour cream.

⅓ cup plain flour
3 tbsp Opito Bay sazón
2 tsp Opito Bay Sea Salt
1kg of scrubbed Agria potatoes, cut into wedges.
neutral oil (rice bran, sunflower etc)
1 tbsp sazón

Par boil the wedges in salted water until they are just starting to soften, but not fully cooked. Strain in a colander and allow to drain thoroughly. You want them to be as dry as possible.

Mix the flour, 3 tbsp of sazón and salt together. Tip the wedges back into the pot they were cooked in, sprinkle over the sazón/flour mix, put the lid on and shake the pot gently to coat the wedges and rough up the edges.

Arrange on a tray in one layer (use two trays if needed - don't over crowd them). Sparingly drizzle with a neutral oil. You don't want to overdo it, or they will be soggy. Bake in a preheated oven at 220°C for 30 minutes or until crispy. Turn the wedges halfway through. Sprinkle with the remaining 1 tbsp of sazón when they come out of the oven and toss to coat before serving.



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