

A Pinch of Salt

Too much salt isn't good for you, but too little makes for a bland meal. Here's how to strike the right balance. BY ELLIE KRIEGER

"DEAR ELLIE, I'VE BEEN TRYING to cut back on sodium, so I made my favorite vegetable soup without salt, and it tasted terrible. Please help." So went an email I received from a reader not too long ago. My response: Add some salt—just not too much.

Truthfully, my answer wasn't quite so brief, but that was the essence of it. It was a little e-conversation that underscored a big issue: Most of us should be reducing the salt in our diets, but salt is critical to flavor. The trick is striking a balance that's both healthy and tasty.

Salt has been making headlines lately with some pretty startling numbers. On average, we take in 50 percent more than the daily recommended 2300 mg of sodium (which equals about 1 teaspoon of table salt). And because sodium increases blood pressure, which in turn contributes to stroke and heart and kidney disease, the impact of our salt habit has profound consequences. According to the experts at the Institute of Medicine, cutting back could prevent more than 100,000 deaths a year in the United States and save a lot more people from illness.

But salt's role in taste is profound, too—it does so much more than simply make food taste salty. It enhances sweetness and balances flavors by tempering bitterness. For example, salt in a cake erases the bitter undertones in the flour and leavening agents, allowing the sweetness and the nuances of spices and extracts to come through. Salt modulates moisture, drawing it into food (in a brine, for example), or pulling it out to concentrate flavor and texture. And at its most basic—as the emailer learned from her soup

experiment—salt combats blandness by enlivening flavor.

By removing salt from her soup entirely, the emailer was left with a bad-tasting dish, which is not only unacceptable to any food lover but also totally unnecessary. For most people, cutting back on salt by making little tweaks throughout the day—just enough to get down to that 2300 mg mark—could make a tremendous health difference, and if done right, allows for fabulous flavor (see Good To Know, at right). In fact, since about 70 percent of the sodium we get comes from processed, prepared, and restaurant food, simply cooking at home with fresh ingredients gives us a running start at cutting back on salt.

This Chili Con Carne is a perfect example of the additive power of these small changes. By starting with high-impact flavor elements—pure ground chile and freshly toasted and ground coriander and cumin seeds—you get maximum flavor and avoid the salt that's often added to packaged chili powder blends. Using aromatics, herbs, and citrus also punches up flavor, and convenient no-salt-added canned tomatoes and low-sodium beans let you maintain control over the salt level. To put it in perspective, compare this chili, which has around 900 mg of sodium in a generous serving, to the same amount of canned chili, which can have 2100 mg—nearly a day's worth. The numbers reveal the dramatic difference it makes to focus on robust flavor elements instead of leaning heavily on salt for taste. Less salt and more flavor—that's the kind of change you can live with.



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chili con carne

For the best flavor, plan to make this chili at least 1 day and up to 3 days ahead.

Serves 4

- 1 Tbs. whole cumin seeds
- 2 tsp. whole coriander seeds
- 1 Tbs. ground ancho chile
- 1 tsp. ground chipotle chile
- 1½ tsp. dried oregano, preferably Mexican
- 2 lb. boneless beef chuck, trimmed of all visible fat and cut into ½-inch cubes
- Fine sea salt
- 2 Tbs. canola oil
- 1 medium yellow onion, chopped
- 1 medium poblano, seeded and chopped
- 1 large jalapeño, seeded and finely chopped
- 3 medium cloves garlic, minced
- 1 14½-oz. can no-salt-added diced tomatoes
- 2 Tbs. fresh lime juice
- 1 15-oz. can low-sodium pinto beans, drained and rinsed

Good to Know

To cut the salt but keep the flavor, follow these four simple rules:

Get fresh Processed, packaged, and prepared foods are often high in salt, so opt for fresh ingredients and cook from scratch as much as possible.

Amp up other seasonings Don't lean on salt for flavor—look toward other seasonings. Try citrus and citrus zest, fresh and dried herbs, ground spices, ground chile peppers, vinegars, and aromatics like onions, garlic, and ginger.

Buy low-sodium With canned staples like beans, tomatoes, and broth, look for low-sodium options and check the labels; often a natural or organic brand will have considerably less sodium than conventional brands.

Add salt sparingly You need some salt for a delicious dish, but you probably need less than you're used to (especially if you're using salty ingredients like mustard, soy sauce, olives, capers, or cheese). Your taste buds will adjust over time to less salt, so start with three-quarters of the amount you usually use and reduce gradually from there.

- 1 avocado, cut into medium dice
- ¼ cup finely diced red onion
- ¼ cup coarsely chopped fresh cilantro

Toast the cumin and coriander in a small dry skillet over medium heat, stirring frequently until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer to a spice grinder and grind into a powder. Transfer to a small bowl and add the ancho, chipotle, and oregano.

Season the meat with ¼ tsp. salt. Heat 2 tsp. of the oil in a 6-quart pot or Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add half of the meat and cook until well browned on all sides, about 5 minutes total.

Transfer the meat to a plate. Repeat with

another 2 tsp. oil and the remaining meat. After transferring the second batch of meat to the plate, add the remaining 2 tsp. oil to the pot. Add the onion, poblano, and jalapeño and cook, stirring, until softened, about 4 minutes. Add the garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute more. Add the spice mixture and cook until fragrant and well blended, 1 to 2 minutes more.

Return the beef to the pot, along with any accumulated juice. Add 2½ cups

water, the tomatoes and their juice, 1 Tbs. of the lime juice, and 1 tsp. salt. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat; then reduce the heat to low and simmer, covered, for 1½ hours. Remove the lid and simmer until the meat is tender, about 30 minutes more. Add the beans, raise the heat to medium high, and stir until the beans are heated through, about 5 minutes. Add the remaining 1 Tbs. lime juice and season to taste with additional salt.

Serve the chili garnished with the avocado, red onion, and cilantro.

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