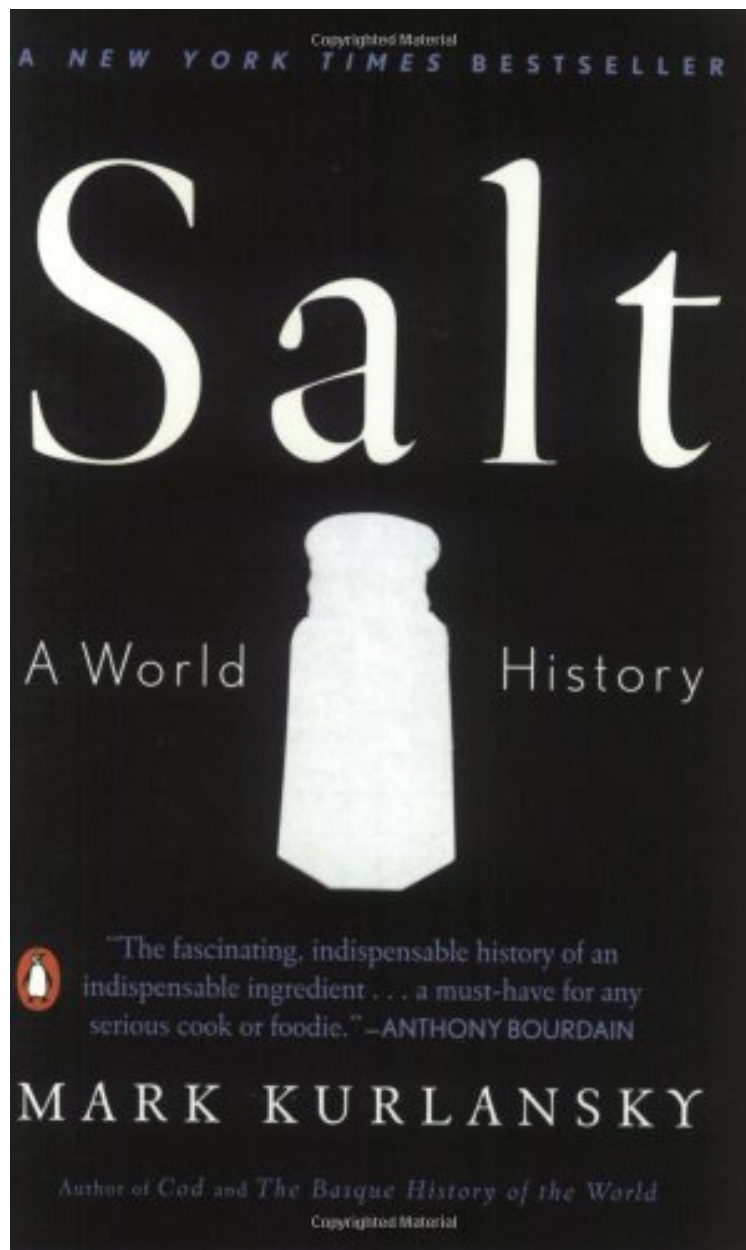


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## Salt: A World History

Mark Kurlansky

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**Mark Kurlansky : Salt: A World History** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Salt: A World History:

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An unlikely world history from the bestselling author of *Cod* and *The Basque History of the World* In his fifth work of nonfiction, Mark Kurlansky turns his attention to a common household item with a long and intriguing history: salt. The only rock we eat, salt has shaped civilization from the very beginning, and its story is a glittering, often surprising part of the history of humankind. A substance so valuable it served as currency, salt has influenced the establishment of trade routes and cities, provoked and financed wars, secured empires, and inspired revolutions. Populated by colorful characters and filled with an unending series of fascinating details, *Salt* is a supremely entertaining, multi-layered masterpiece.

From Publishers Weekly Only Kurlansky, winner of the James Beard Award for Excellence in Food Writing for *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World*, could woo readers toward such an off-beat topic. Yet salt, Kurlansky asserts, has "shaped civilization." Although now taken for granted, these square crystals are not only of practical use, but over the ages have symbolized fertility (it is, after all, the root of the word "salacious") and lasting covenants, and have been used in magical charms. Called a "divine substance" by Homer, salt is an essential part of the human body, was one of the first international commodities and was often used as currency throughout the developing world. Kurlansky traces the history of salt's influences from prehistoric China and ancient Africa (in Egypt they made mummies using salt) to Europe (in 12th-century Provence, France, salt merchants built "a system of solar evaporation ponds") and the Americas, through chapters with intriguing titles like "A Discourse on Salt, Cadavers and Pungent Sauces." The book is populated with characters as diverse as frozen-food giant Clarence Birdseye; Gandhi, who broke the British salt law that forbade salt production in India because it outdid the British salt trade; and New York City's sturgeon king, Barney Greengrass. Throughout his engaging, well-researched history, Kurlansky sprinkles witty asides and amusing anecdotes. A piquant blend of the historic, political, commercial, scientific and culinary, the book is sure to entertain as well as educate. Pierre Laszlo's *Salt: Grain of Life* (Forecasts, Aug. 6) got to the finish line first but doesn't compare to this artful narrative. 15 recipes, 40 illus., 7 maps. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal In his latest work, Kurlansky (*Cod*, *The Basque History of the World*) is in command of every facet of his topic, and he conveys his knowledge in a readable, easy style. Deftly leading readers around the world and across cultures and centuries, he takes an inexpensive, mundane item and shows how it has influenced and affected wars, cultures, governments, religions, societies, economies, cooking (there are a few recipes), and foods. In addition, he provides information on the chemistry, geology, mining, refining, and production of salt, again across cultures, continents, and time periods. The 26 chapters flow in chronological order, and the cast of characters includes fishermen, kings, Native Americans, and even Gandhi. An entertaining, informative read, this is highly recommended for all collections. [For another book on the topic, see Pierre Laszlo's more esoteric *Salt: Grain of Life*, LJ 7/01; other recent micro-histories include Joseph Amato's *Dust*, Mort Rosenblum's *Olive*, and Tom Vanderbilt's *The Sneaker Book*. Ed.] Michael D. Cramer, Raleigh, N.- Michael D. Cramer, Raleigh, NC Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist \*Starred\* Kurlansky thinks big. First, there was *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* (1997), then *The Basque History of the World* (1999), and now, the world history of a subject bigger than one of the most important food commodities in the West, bigger than the oldest extant European culture--that culinary sine qua non, salt. Of course, salt is necessary for life itself; living bodies eliminate it, and without replenishment by ingestion, humans and other animals soon die, which is why animal trails lead to salt licks, and the first human paths did, too. Moreover, salt is a dandy preservative of meat, vegetables, and, as the ancient Egyptians knew, corpses. Homo faber figured out how to get salt out of brine, a discovery that increased the number of places people could prosper. Still, though salt is a very common substance, it is not always easily accessible, and weather and climate can make extraction from brine impractical. Hence, salt became the basis of wealth for communities, principalities, and empires, even after the invention of refrigeration and the diagnosis of hypertension. This is the big story Kurlansky unfolds in chapters that proceed from time immemorial to the present and cover such specific topics as "Salt's Salad Days" in ancient Rome; the "Nordic Dream" of enough salt for all Scandinavia's herring, not to mention lakrits (salted licorice); how, just as oil won the Big One, salt largely won the War between the States; and why, when Gandhi really got down to persuading the British out of India, he started with a "salt march." Tasty, very tasty! Ray Olson Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved