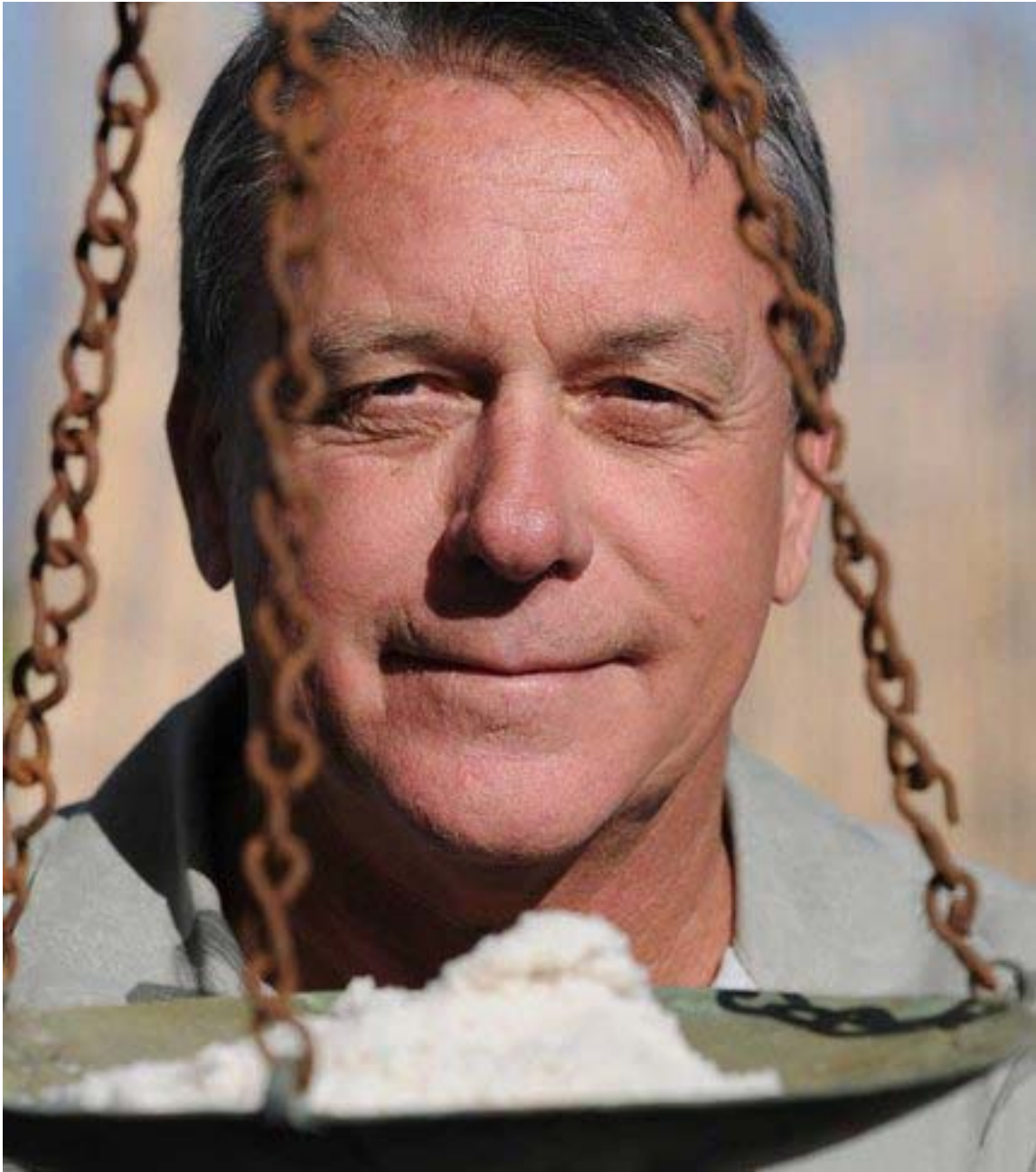


MONTEREY COUNTY **WEEKLY**

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HABIT FORMING: Robert Kirkland has to drive his salt around the county in big quantities. "I get a little nervous," he says, "that I'll be pulled over and have to explain it's just salt." Photo by Nic Coury

Behind the sudden DIY rise of Monterey Bay Salt Company.

By Adam Joseph

Monterey's Robert Kirkland made a bet with one of his surf buddies about a year ago after an early morning session in Moss Landing. The inspiration: The waves had left his wetsuit heavily encrusted with sea salt. The bet: That he couldn't find a use for that salt.

"Later that day, we were hanging out, having a few beers and watching the Food Network," he says. "Alton Brown was doing this special on salt and I became really intrigued with it."

For the next two months, the Hawaiian shirt-wearing carpenter – an avid cook who grew up watching Galloping Gourmet Graham Kerr religiously – was inspired to leap face first into the world of sodium. He began by researching how to harvest sea salt online, which led him to the grassroots Maine Salt Company. He flew to northern Maine and stayed with the salt makers for three weeks to learn the ins and outs of the entire process.

After watching a couple of harvests in a controlled environment, Kirkland returned to Monterey, dipped into his savings and ventured onto the bay on a friend's boat, scooping up his first hundred gallons of water with super-durable plastic containers used for carrying drinking water. Using a makeshift greenhouse in the back of his house, he let the water evaporate.

Before approaching any area businesses with his salt, he had it tested for E. coli, salmonella and heavy metals by both the Monterey Health Department and the State Health Department.

"Nothing was detected so I took it to a couple chefs," Kirkland says. One of the first local chefs to embrace it was Craig von Foerster of the coveted Sierra Mar at Post Ranch. From that point on, everything moved quickly for Kirkland and his home-processed salt. Soon the Pebble Beach Company contacted Kirkland to participate in the high-profile 2010 Pebble Beach Food and Wine.

"I had great success with all the chefs," he says. "Everything began to escalate."

Retail response has also been good: "I took it to a couple of stores and everybody got really excited when I said it was made from the Monterey Bay," he says. Hence, not even a year since MBSC launched, its sea salt is available at For Garlic Lovers on Cannery Row, Bruno's Market in Carmel, Grove Market in Pacific Grove and Carmel Valley Market. Last week, Kirkland's salt became an approved vendor for Whole Foods.

In addition to von Foerster, the chefs at The Fish Hopper and Sardine Factory swear by the salt. Montrio executive chef Tony Baker has been using it ever since Kirkland provided him with some samples several months ago.

"It tastes great," Baker says. "The natural sea salt is perfect for crusting our sardines and we have also been using it as a finishing salt."

But before the salt is ready for Baker's sardines, it goes through a lengthy procedure. First, Kirkland harvests about 1,500-2,000 gallons of water from the bay. Then, the water is taken to one of his two greenhouses located in Moss Landing and Lockwood. Moss Landing is closer but the water evaporates at a rate of a quarter-inch per week while down south the rate is a quarter-inch per hour. After the water is evaporated, the raw salt is laid out on fine mesh and thoroughly washed with water several times. Lastly, it's left to dry.

Kirkland transfers the dried salt to what he calls his "play area," a small guesthouse near a peak in the Pasadera area off Highway 68. The main room of the house looks like a cross between a hangout and a chemistry lab: Alongside surfboards sit different-sized glass jars, mixing bowls, plastic baggies and giant vats of raw salt. It's here that Kirkland develops his specially flavored salts with classic rock playing. The five varieties currently on the market are original sea salt, Thai dragon chili, garlic, rosemary-sage and lemon zest and pepper (\$5.95/2 ounce jar; \$8.95/6 ounce jar; \$20/1 pound resealable bag).

"I experiment with any kind of herbs that I can find," Kirkland says. "Some don't turn out that great, others have been really nice."

Some other flavors he's toying with include mesquite, chipotle, agave and "ghost pepper," with help from the hottest chili on earth (at a million Scovilles). A sample of one granule left a scalding after-bite on my tongue for more than 20 minutes.

"I blend everything and let it sit for a couple days and see how the salt will absorb the flavor from the herbs," Kirkland says. "I use organic freeze-dried garlic; I find that any fresh or wet herb almost taints the salt."

Monterey Bay Salt Company's plain old sea salt works on just about anything and really unleashes the freshness of the bay. The garlic salt is my favorite of the flavored salts, and would be a great addition to almost any pasta dish.

Kirkland is also working on a curry salt. A recent trial using merlot, meanwhile, resulted in a nice rose colored salt, but he says it didn't retain the flavor and smell of the wine.

The salt master is weighing other possibilities besides flavors: He's working out a deal with the Cal Am desal plant in Sand City that will allow him to retrieve and use the salt that they extract for a line of bath salts.

"It's a product made from Monterey," Kirkland says. "It's clean and renewable and the possibilities are endless."

And it's a safe bet it will be blessing local food stuffs for some time to come.