

## Gareth Jones Food

*The Last of the Independents*

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### Salary Salt

Posted on [July 29, 2013](#) by [Gareth Jones](#)

Whatever's new to write about salt that's not been said. Well actually plenty for the serious student of salt. I've written about 'edible gold' (polenta) and now's the time for what they call 'white gold'.

My first lesson in high grade salt was from one of my early culinary mentors, Monsieur Merle, close to Guérande on the Brittany coast. The Merle family decamped from Montmartre to spent long summers at Pornichet – was it not the Maison des Violettes – and it was here I learned how to dig for cockles at low tide (*les cocques*), shop markets like the one at La Baule and buy bags of wet, grey sea salt at the roadside around Guérande.

One turned up with a plastic bag and the roadside vendors (let's call them salt 'sellers') would shovel in as much as you wanted or the bag would hold – either way it was salt for a year. Back then, explained M Merle, no self





respecting chef almost anywhere in France would be without Sel de Guérande in his kitchen. I was quick to adopt the habit and start appreciating good salt.

Later came learning about the now fashionable and expensive *Fleur de Sel* – the pure white 'cream' skimmed off the top of the salt pan that is said to contain all the minerals present in the sea from where it comes. One in Italy was labelled '*Profumo di Mare*' meaning, literally translated, 'perfume of the sea'.

A decade further on, then in Spain, I remember my first sighting of huge flocks of pink flamingoes rising off the salt pans outside Calpe, near Moraira when I was also a student of the local cooking under the wing of my brother-in-law, Agustin

Casanova.

In old Moraira's bijou fish market, we'd buy fish so fresh that it was still alive, then straight off the little boats and into the pan in the time it took to pay the fishermen – sometimes with pesetas, other times with jugs of cold white rustic wine made from the old vines above the port. Agustin had grown up around these brave men and they treated him as their own. For special occasions, we'd bake a large *Dorada* (bream) in a salt crust.

These days the salt can cost more than the fish. This is what they told me in Emilia-Romagna's famous salt town that now sits mid-way between Ravenna and Rimini on the Adriatic Coast.

The chance to visit Cervia was exciting. Scared to be lost in translation, standing beside the wide expanse of the ancient Camillone saltpans in the already hot mid-morning sun, I tried to not lose a word being spoken by Oscar Turrone. I gathered from him and the Slow Food sign, the saltpans of Cervia go way back to the Etruscan times. Imagining a Roman Legion marching by was entirely feasible.



Oscar is president of the Comune of Cervia's *Gruppo Culturale Civiltà Salinara* – the salt association - and he's a man who knows and loves his salt.

The secret, he says, is the local black clay which absorbs the maximum sun rays, sufficient to evaporate the sea water so damp, pure white salt crystals can be harvested in just 5 days for all but the winter months.

The saltpans lie about one kilometer inland as the crow flies and the sea water is let in through a man-made channel, complete with gates to best control the flow – the pans being slightly lower than sea level – like so much of Emilia-Romagna's rich agricultural lands where drainage channels have been the norm for centuries.

First we tasted the freshly harvested salt and like all good sea salt it had depth of flavour beyond being simply salty.



Salt is either rock salt or sea salt. Rock salt is vacuum extracted from below ground and sea salt is the sun's natural evaporation of sea water to produce salt crystals, as has gone on for millennia. I see no reason to use anything other than sea salt and celebrate history and taste together.



Cervia is now a heritage site, marked also by its Slow Food Presidia status since the mid-1990's. The Camillone salt pans link in with a salt museum (**Musa Cervia\***) now installed in the original salt warehouse building in the centre of the 'new' town. Everyone involved today gives their time for free and their famous salt is marketed like any other high end food product. But I rush ahead of myself in Cervia's big story.



The pans were originally on a far larger scale covering some 1,000 hectares surrounding the town of Cervia back in the Medieval period. Such a vast expanse of standing water under direct sun encouraged mosquitoes and worse. Life was hard enough without insanitary conditions in the mix for the local people.

This was not an Italy as we know it as the country was not unified until 1861. Cervia had been variously ruled through the centuries - these included the

Venetians, famous for their trading in salt and spices, then later the powerful and wealthy Papal State.

History was made when the Holy See granted unprecedented permission for a 'new' Cervia. Between 1698-1740, the citizens dismantled their old city and, using the original materials where they could, re-built a 'new' Cervia on the site we find it today – with the salt warehouse as good as plumb centre, alongside the canal. The new Cervia was a city designed to a grand urban plan largely in place for the visitor to enjoy today.



Such was the value and currency of salt, the new Cervia had a look-out and defence in the form of a large, square 4 storey tower dedicated to St Michael.

To emphasise the point of salt's value, all around the saltpans at 300m intervals, we find the original stone boxes (*Gareta*) where an armed *Guardia di Finanza* would stand sentry day and night.



The canal, wide enough to allow traffic in either direction, cuts through the town to the saltpan one way and the other out to sea. Heavy iron, flat-bottomed barges, known as *Burchielle*, moved the salt from pan to the secure warehouse. This was tough men's work, with one labourer pulling the *burchielle* along from the bank attached by rope and another on board steering with an oar much like a gondolier.

On the industrial canals of England and my home town in Wales, heavy horses were employed. In Cervia it was strong men.

Loving and careful restoration of the museum – still operational as recently as 1960 - has assured Cervia Salt's place in history. There is another example of Emilia-Romagna's 'museums without walls' – meaning the buildings inter-act 'inside-out' with their outdoor 'living' exhibits – here the saltpan which is still very actively harvested.



As if to stress the family connection with sea salt production, Oscar Turrone explained how some 80 families were engaged in Gu erande which he'd visited. In the past there were 149 families in Cervia, each with one salt pan to work and harvest.

Cervia salt was traded across the Adriatic and beyond, carried in stout wood sail boats called ***Bragozzo's***\*\*. Each one family owned and identified by a large heavy-duty painted canvas sail. Across these flat lands top portion was first to come into view as it sailed up the canal and the unique family emblem would tell everyone that the boat was safely home as it steered in from the perils of often rough seas and even rougher pirates.

Each boat carried 8-10 tonnes of salt and at its height, Cervia had a fleet of 72 boats - or around half the number of families working the Camillone saltpan.



We might all know ‘salary’ comes from the Latin and means being paid in salt, but what of having ‘salt in one’s head’? In Emilia-Romagna this would mean someone who shows good judgement.



One eats well in Cervia - mostly from the sea – and eels were also once a local speciality, fished from around the canal sluice gates in big numbers – or by the fork full judging by this exhibit below. Samphire still grows along the water channels – we saw plenty as we walked the historic banks to the outskirts of town.

The world famous food writer, Marcella Hazan comes from nearby Cesenatico, now home to the Museo della Marineria, where still today fish are caught in huge nets along the canal.

At No 19, a sea salt collection is building and *Sale di Cervia* is my latest fond discovery. Make it yours too and whilst on a salty note, remember that excess salt comes from sneakily hidden rock salt in prepared foods and ready meals. Blue Collar Gastronomy© sees no point in such foods. It is near impossible to consume too much good salt, whether via the kitchen or at table.



Cervia is remarkable. Slow Food’s involvement underpins a rich, colourful history not ever be taken with a pinch of salt.

\***Musa Cervia and Camillone Saltplan:** [www.turismo.comunecervia.it](http://www.turismo.comunecervia.it)

\*\* **Museo della Marineria – Cesanatico (FC)** [www.museomarineria.eu](http://www.museomarineria.eu)

**Cesenatico has the remarkable 1502 Porto Canale designed by Leonardo da Vinci where Bragozza in their proud and splendid sail are moored – by special request they still go to sea.**



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**Adri** says:

August 3, 2013 at 4:55 am

Thanks, Gareth! What a wonderful article!

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