

Back to Black: Kala Namak (<https://spoonfulmag.com/featured/black-salt-kala-namak/>)

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I'm a salt collector, but I never know where to use which salt. When, for instance, should I choose the gray salt? The truffle salt? The Himalayan pink salt? Even so, I always know how to use *kala namak*, black salt, the most distinctive in my collection. Not to be confused with Hawaiian black lava sea salt, this black salt is referred to by the Indian moniker *kala namak* or *sanchal*. It is a volcanic rock salt from India used in Southeast Asian and Indian cooking. It is truly black when mined, shining like shards of obsidian. Ground, the way you'll find it in most spice markets, its intense color is diffused; the result is a powdery, baby pink hue, slightly sparkling from

its mineral compounds. These compounds — iron sulfides and hydrogen sulfides — are responsible for giving black salt its distinctive color and sulfuric smell, respectively. Other trace minerals, including iron and magnesium, also make up the composition of true black salt. These characteristics make this particular mined salt different from Himalayan pink salt, which is primarily sodium chloride and tastes much more like regular table salt.

Kala namak has a reputation for its pungent aroma, which is similar to that of boiled eggs. The aroma might surprise at first, but *kala namak* is worthy of space in anyone's salt collection. When used in small amounts, as it should be, the salt renders an umami-like foundation to a dish. Truly, its absence from certain Indian dishes would be noticeable. It's a spice just like any other in Indian cooking: None is singly appreciated without the layering of others.



Black salt is ubiquitously used in an array of Indian dishes, often refreshing yogurt-based dishes like lassis and raitas, but also in lip-smacking street foods like *chaats*. The lingering finish of a dish with this salt beckons for a beverage to balance it!

Mineral and umami-rich black salt and tropical pineapple pair beautifully in this raita where salt and sweet meet to cool palates from spicy curries. Here, the voluptuous feel of good-quality plain yogurt allows the earthiness of the *kala namak* to shine through. Try this recipe for a quick and easy way to introduce this pungent salt into your cooking.

Pineapple Raita with Black Salt

Easy Kala nemak contributes its signature flavor and aroma to this raita recipe, bolstered by a pinch of a more neutrally flavored salt as well to season without overwhelming. It is very traditional and typical in India to eat at least a half cup to a cup of raita or yogurt per person. Instead of thinking of this as a dip or a condiment, think of it as a second dish, a cooling, pungent, tangy, sweet dish to provide balance alongside a spicy Indian curry.

Makes about 3½ cups, Serves 4

Recipe by Shefaly Ravula

Total Cooking Time: 15 minutes

Active Cooking Time: 15 minutes

— Ingredients:

- 3 cups plain unsweetened yogurt (preferably not Greek)
- ½ teaspoon ground black salt (which will look pink) (TIP: You can find ground *kala nemak* at kalustyans.com and other specialty spice merchants.)
- ¼ teaspoon sea salt
- 1 tablespoon finely minced shallot
- ½ cup diced fresh or drained canned pineapple
- 3 tablespoons finely chopped cilantro

— **Method:**

Scoop the yogurt into a medium-size mixing bowl and whisk to create an even texture. Whisk in both salts until completely blended and no large particles of the black salt are visible. The yogurt should be a pourable pancake batter–like consistency.

Stir in the shallot then fold in the pineapple. Stir in 2 tablespoons of the cilantro, setting aside the remaining 1 tablespoon for garnish. Refrigerate the raita until ready to serve.

To serve, strew the remaining 1 tablespoon of cilantro over the raita.

Photos by Rachel Bowman