

Salt: A World History by Mark Kurlansky

The following passage has been transcribed for academic purposes only, and is aimed at teaching reading comprehension skills necessary to perform well on the FCAT.

Please read the following passages, and answer the questions that follow in the packet. Please take as much time as is necessary to read, understand, and adequately answer the accompanying questions. Questions will be graded on the basis of correctness, response quality, and appropriateness to the required reading material. The questions from this packet are due at the end of class.

Chapter Fourteen: Liberté, Egalité, Tax Breaks

In 1875, a prominent German botanist named Matthais Jakob Schleiden wrote a book, *Das Salz*, which contended that there was a direct correlation between salt taxes and despots. He pointed out that neither ancient Athens nor Rome, while it remained a republic, taxed salt, but listed Mexico and China among the salt-taxing tyrannies of his day. It seems uncertain if salt taxes are always an accurate litmus test for democracy, but the French salt tax, the gabelle, clearly demonstrated what was wrong with the French monarchy.

The argument for the gabelle had been that since everyone, rich and poor, used salt more or less equally, a tax on salt would be in effect a poll tax, an equal tax per person. Throughout history, poll taxes, charging the same to the poorest peasant as the richest aristocrat, have been the most hated. The gabelle was not an exception. The tax performed the peculiar service of making a very common product seem rare because the complex rules of taxation inhibited trade. And even more infuriating, the gabelle made a basic product expensive for the profit of the Crown.

The gabelle, like France, was established piecemeal. The first attempt at a comprehensive salt administration occurred in the Berre saltworks near Marseilles in 1259, by Saint Louis's brother, Comte Charles de Provence. The following century, this administration was extended to Peccais, Aigues-Mortes, and the Camargue – an area that became known administratively as Pays de Petite Gabelle.

At first the gabelle imposed a modest 1.66 percent sales tax on salt. But each monarch eventually found himself in a crisis – a price to be ransomed, a war to be declared – that was resolved by an increase in the salt tax. By 1660, King Louis XIV regarded the gabelle as a leading source of state revenues.

One of the gabelle's most irritating inventions was the *sel du devoir*, the salt duty. Every person in the Grande Gabelle over the age of eight was required to purchase seven kilograms of salt each year at a fixed high government price. This was far more salt than could possibly be used, unless it was for making salt fish, sausages, hams, and other salt-cured goods. But using the sel du devoir to make salted products was illegal, and if caught, the perpetrator would be charged with the crime of salt fraud, which carried severe penalties. Many simple acts were grounds for a charge of salt fraud. In the Camargue, shepherds who let their flocks drink the salty pond water could be charged with avoiding the gabelle, or salt tax.

A 1670 revision of the criminal code found yet another use for salt in France. To enforce the law against suicide, it was ordered that the bodies of people who took their own lives were to be salted, brought before a judge, and sentenced to public display. Nor could the accused escape their day in court by dying in the often miserable conditions of the prisons. They too would be salted and put on trial. Before historians have discovered that in 1784 in the town of Cornouaille, Maurice LeCorre had died in prison and was ordered salted for trial. But due to some bureaucratic error, the corpse did not get a trial date and was found by a prison guard more than seven years later, not only salted but fermented in beer, at which point it was buried without trial.

By the late eighteenth century, more than 3,000 French men, women, and even children were sentenced to prison or death for crimes against the gabelle, or salt tax. The salt law in France, as would later happen in India, was not the singular cause of revolution, but it became a symbol for all the injustices of government.

In 1789, the French revolted, declaring the establishment of a National Assembly. When King Louis XVI tried to send troops against this revolutionary legislature, a mob attacked the Bastille and an armed revolution began. That same year, the revolutionary legislature repealed the gabelle. Some in the Assembly had argued for a low salt tax universally applied. But in the end the Assembly voted for no salt tax at all, not even bothering to replace this mainstay of state revenues with another source of income.

On March 22, 1790, the National Assembly, calling the salt tax "odious," annulled all trials for violation of the gabelle and ordered all those charged, on trial, or convicted to be set free.

Louis, accused of conspiring with Austrians and Prussians to overthrow the revolution, was beheaded. His wife, Marie Antoinette, who loved choucroute (extra salty sauerkraut), was also beheaded, as were many of the Swiss soldiers of the Garde Royale. They also had acquired the court taste for choucroute and numerous inns had sprung up near the Palais Royal, where they had spent their meal breaks, feasting on choucroute with sausages and salted meats. The tradition of restaurants serving midday choucroute in the part of Paris continues to this day.

In 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte, who had risen to the head of the revolutionary army and then rose to first consul, became emperor of the French. He reinstated the gabelle, but without any of the exemptions present in the original law. This had an effect on one region in particular: Brittany.

Their salt no longer having a competitive advantage, the paludiers, instead of being slightly better off than the average French peasant, were now among the poorest. They continued to wear large, floppy, three-cornered hats in the style of the eighteenth-century peasants. Visitors found this a picturesque part of Brittany. Novelists described the *paludiers*, peasants in their treeless salt marshes, as something to be seen nowhere else in France.

The salt cuisine of Brittany showed its poverty. Breton cooking was based on the few simple crops that paludiers could grow in their clay-bound soil, mostly potatoes and onions, which absorbed a salty taste from the seaweed in the soil. *Ragout de berniques*, literally a stew made of nothing, was in fact a stew made of potatoes, carrots, and onions. While France was one of the last European nations to accept the eating of potatoes, Brittany was one of the first potato-eating parts of France. Almost forty years earlier Antoine-Augustin Parmentier had persuaded the royal family to promote the eating of potatoes, and a man named Blanchet launched a potato eating campaign in Brittany. Soon after that, a cleric named de la Marche distributed potatoes to poor parishioners and was nicknamed *d'eskop ar patatez*, or the potato bishop.

After the Revolution, paludiers supplemented their diminished income by growing potatoes, which were boiled in a brine that left a fine salt powder on their skin.

A Breton expression was “*Kement a zo fall, a gar ar sall*” – or “Everything that is not good asks to be salted.” Everything from meat to butter to potatoes was salted. Salt was Brittany’s cheapest product, the one everyone could afford. Another Breton proverb was “Advice and salt are available to anyone who wants it.”

Kig-sall – salted pig, was usually made with the ears, tail, and feet – sometimes better cuts if they could be afforded – put into a barrel with lard and salt, and kept for two or three months until preserved like ham. And there was *oing*, which was nothing more than pork fat rendered with salt and pepper, dried in the open air on paper, and then smoked in a fireplace. A slice of *oing* was added to a vegetable soup as a substitute for meat.

In the 1870s, when the area was connected to the national railway system, the floppy, three-cornered hats vanished. The same railroad system favored eastern France, where the new industries such as steel were, and made the salt of Lorraine more accessible than sea salt. The gabelle remained a part of French administration until it was finally abolished in the newly liberated France of 1946.

Directions

Each of the following questions is a sample short response question. You should aim to provide a minimum of three to five sentences answering each question. Simple, one sentences responses will not count towards the completion of this activity. The difficulty level of the question is listed following each response prompt. Observe the following tips when formulating a response:

- Using a quote from the reading to support your answer will ***always*** help your score!
- Spelling does ***NOT*** count; try to use advanced vocabulary, even if you cannot spell the word properly!
- Do ***NOT*** rephrase the question in your response.

Response Prompts

1. What were some of the reasons that the French salt tax, the gabelle, was unpopular? (medium difficulty)
2. In addition to the basic tax on salt, what other ways did the French attempt to tax their peasantry using salt? (medium difficulty)
3. What strange custom did the French impose on those who had died in prison or who had taken their own lives? What do you think the purpose of this custom was? (high difficulty)
4. In what way did the salt tax, or gabelle, contribute to revolution in France? (low difficulty)
5. In what way did King Louis, Marie Antoinette, and their Garde Royale, influence Paris cuisine in an especially salty way? (medium difficulty)
6. How did Napoleon's changes to the salt laws affect Brittany's citizens' lifestyle? What kind of foods did they eat, and how would you describe their way of life? (medium difficulty)
7. What development lead to the changing of lifestyles to impoverished areas such as Brittany? (medium difficulty)
8. How do you think this development changed the government of France's income? (medium difficulty, comprehensive reading question)