Every now and then, Acadiana gets a taste of "Old Man Winter" - a little ice, an inch or two of snow - maybe - and temperatures near freezing.

Then as quickly as the cold temperatures arrive, they're gone and the sun comes out, melting away all signs of ice and the infrequent snow.

But salt miners at Avery Island keep grinding. They know up north where winter storms dump an abundance of ice and snow, the rock salt business is booming.

The northerners need the salt - tons of it. They scatter the mineral everywhere - sidewalks, city streets and railways - at the first hint of bad weather.

Why? Because salt is one of the few substances that can lower the freezing point and melt ice. Without salt, roads would be impassable and no one could go anywhere.

At Akzo's salt mine on Avery Island, more than 200 people work diligently to make sure northerners get their salt.

Salt of the earth

Although surrounded by water from the marsh and Bayou Petit Amie, Avery Island is technically not an island.

Sterling table salt, took over mine operations and extended the main shaft to 550 feet. By 1973, miners were using a 1000-foot shaft, according to company records.

In 1988, following the merger of International Salt and Diamond Crystal, Akzo Salt Inc. took over mine operations.

Today the mine yields 2.3 million tons of salt each year - 60 percent of which is sold for ice control.

1,300 feet down under

The Akzo mine is a highly mechanized workplace that descends into the earth 1,300 feet.

The overall appearance of the mine is similar to a huge cave. Openings, called rooms, are 100-feet wide. A carefully laid design of 200-square-foot pillars of salt provide support between the numerous levels. There are salt roads, built for mammoth equipment such as front-end loaders. These vehicles can hold up to 17 cubic yards of rock salt.

There is also drilling equipment in the mine, most of which has been adapted from Louisiana oilfields. All of the equipment is put together by mine mechanics. They take the equipment apart so they can send it down the narrow mine shaft. Then they reassemble it.

Akzo officials said this is more cost-effective than creating an opening large enough to accommodate the vehicles.

There is also an extensive conveyor belt system. It carries salt from the mine's deepest point to the surface. As one company official explained, "Gone are the days of picks and shovels, mine cars and mules, brute force and cramped surroundings."

Mining for salt

The actual process of salt mining consists of a series of steps: Drilling, blasting and scaling.

Miners (top) drill blasting holes in a mine wall. Above, Sam Duplantis inspects conveyed salt to insure it is in final form before transportation. Shown at left is the mine maintenance shop.

Miners use a claw-like attachment to scrape loose pieces of rock from the ceiling and sides. Huge bulldozers are then used to scoop up the rock and load it into fifty-ton trucks.
The trucks haul the rock from the newly created rooms to a machine called a feeder/crusher.

From here, the rocks are fed onto a conveyor belt which takes the pieces to the mine’s storage pile and eventually an underground screening plant.

Hoists take the final crushed product to the surface where it is bagged and prepared for its trip by truck, train or barge up north.

Future mining operations

With current technology, Akzo officials say the mine will continue to be cost-effective and productive for many more years.

“It takes us a couple of years to mine from one level to the next. So far, we’ve engineered through the 1,500 and 1,700-foot levels with the ‘room and pillar’ method.” General Mine Superintendent Daniel Woods said.

“Using current technology, we should be able to mine here for another 75 years, maybe more. Then we can rework areas for another 25,” Wood said.