Oatcakes: Scotland's crisp oat cracker, and how to serve it

From the crackers.biz wiki

An oatcake is a flat, crisp bake made mainly from oats, a close relation of the cracker. It comes from Scotland, where it was cooked on a girdle, a flat iron griddle, and a round was often cut into four to make the triangles still sold today. Oatcakes suit cheese, soup, smoked fish and, in Scotland, breakfast in place of toast.

A cracker made from oats

Most crackers begin with wheat. The oatcake begins with oats, and you can taste the difference in the first bite: toasty, slightly sweet, a little crumbly, with a texture that ranges from smooth to properly rugged depending on how the oats were milled. Wikipedia's entry calls it a flatbread, much like a cracker or a biscuit, built on oatmeal, and points out that some versions are closer to a pancake. Everything we stock is the crisp kind, made to be eaten with cheese or spread with butter.

Oatcakes belong to Scotland first and foremost, although they have long been made in England, Wales and Ireland too. Their story is tied to the grain itself. Wikipedia explains that oats are one of the few grains that grow well in the north of Scotland, and that until the twentieth century they were the staple grain eaten there. Oatcakes were traditionally eaten with every meal, which made them one of the most important foods in the Scottish kitchen.

A very old bake

The oatcake has deep roots. Wikipedia traces the earliest references back to Roman times in Caledonia, the Roman name for the land north of their frontier, and to a fourteenth century account by the chronicler Jean Le Bel. It also records that Scottish soldiers marched with a flat iron plate and a bag of oatmeal, ready to bake their own rations on any campfire.

At home the tool was the girdle, a heavy flat iron griddle that hung over the fire. Oats, water and salt were mixed together, rolled out thin and cooked on the girdle, or baked in rounds on a tray. Large rounds were cut into wedges called farls before baking. Stockan's, the Orkney bakers, explain that the round oatcake would be divided into four, which is where the triangle shape comes from. It was practical, and it was made for sharing.

Rough, fine and everything in between

Walk along a shelf of oatcakes and the first thing you notice is texture. That comes down to how finely the oats are cut. Coarse oatmeal gives a rough oatcake, nubbly and rustic, with a satisfying crunch. Fine

oatmeal gives a smoother, neater oatcake that looks tidy on a party plate and snaps cleanly.

Nairn's Rough Oatcakes sit at the hearty end, and Nairn's Fine Oatcakes at the smooth end. Stockan's Thick Oatcakes are the chunky triangles from Orkney, sturdy enough for a thick slice of cheese. From there the range branches out. Nairn's Cheese Oatcakes bake the cheese right in, the Marmite and cheese version is exactly as bold as it sounds, and Nairn's Super Seeded Organic adds a scatter of seeds. For something slightly sweet, the fruit and seed oatcakes bring dried fruit into the mix. The whole family lives on our oatcakes shelf.

The bakers behind the oatcakes we sell

Two Scottish bakers make every oatcake on our shelf.

Nairn's dates from 1896 and a bakery in Strathaven, in Lanarkshire, run by John and Sarah Nairn. The business now bakes in Edinburgh, at two sites, sources its wholegrain oats from the Scottish Borders, and describes itself as Britain's biggest oatcake maker, selling in more than thirty countries. Our article on Nairn's tells the whole story.

Stockan's bakes in the Orkney port of Stromness and still makes the traditional triangle. It is a family business whose history runs back to the 1890s; you can read it in our piece on Stockan's oatcakes.

Toppings, from cheese to smoked salmon

Cheese is the obvious answer, and a good one. The toasted oat flavour and gentle sweetness of an oatcake flatter a mature Cheddar, and they balance the salt of a blue cheese such as Stilton. Our guide to the best crackers for cheese goes cheese by cheese, and oatcakes turn up again and again.

Beyond the cheese board, Wikipedia lists soups, meat and fish dishes as traditional partners, and oatcakes are a natural base for smoked salmon, a slice of ham or a spoonful of pâté. In Scotland they can stand in for toast at breakfast, spread with butter and marmalade or topped with a poached egg. Wikipedia notes that Queen Elizabeth II typically had Scottish oatcakes for breakfast. They also make an easy canapé: a fine oatcake, a curl of smoked salmon, a smear of soft cheese and a grind of pepper.

On 25 January oatcakes come into their own at Burns Night suppers, alongside the haggis and the cheese. Our article on Burns Night has ideas for the table, and our piece on crackers in soup covers the oatcake crumbled over a bowl of broth.

Oatcakes and gluten

People often assume oatcakes are gluten free because they are made from oats. Many are not. Plenty of recipes include some wheat flour, and oats are easily mixed with other grains in the field and the mill. Anyone who avoids gluten should pick packs that say gluten free, such as Nairn's gluten free oatcakes or the gluten free cheese oatcakes, and read the ingredients and allergy box every time they buy. Our guide to gluten free crackers lists everything we stock that is made without gluten.

Keeping them crisp

Oatcakes last well because there is so little moisture in them, but an open pack left on the side will slowly go limp. Roll the wrapper down, clip it, or move the oatcakes into a tin. Soft ones can be refreshed on a baking tray in a cool oven; give them time to go completely cold before they go on the plate. For more on the whole cracker family, see our guide to every kind of cracker.

Quick facts

Main ingredient	Oats, usually oatmeal
Home	Scotland, though made across Britain and Ireland
Old way of cooking	On a girdle, a flat iron griddle, over the fire
Why triangles	A round was cut into four pieces, called sectors or farls
Good with	Cheese, soup, meat and fish, and at breakfast
Gluten	Choose packs labelled gluten free if you avoid it

Questions people ask

Are oatcakes crackers or biscuits?

Both words fit. Wikipedia files the oatcake under flatbreads, a close cousin of both. The savoury kinds we sell are eaten like crackers, with cheese or something on top.

What is the difference between rough and fine oatcakes?

The size of the oatmeal. Rough oatcakes use a coarser cut, so they are nubbly and rustic; fine oatcakes use a smaller grind and bake up smoother and neater.

Why are some oatcakes triangles?

The old way was to roll one thin round, bake it on a hot griddle and cut it into quarters. Stockan's of Orkney still bakes that triangle shape today.

Are oatcakes gluten free?

Not all of them. Many recipes include wheat flour, and oats easily pick up other grains on the farm or at the mill. Pick a pack that says gluten free on the front, and read the allergy advice every time.

What goes on an oatcake?

Mature Cheddar, blue cheese, smoked salmon, a slice of ham or just butter. They are also very good crumbled into soup or served alongside it.

Sources

1. Oatcake, Wikipedia
2. About us, Nairn's
3. Our triangle oatcake story, Stockan's Oatcakes
4. Our story, Stockan's Oatcakes

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