Carr's of Carlisle: the bakery behind the table water biscuit

From the crackers.biz wiki

Carr's began in 1831, when Jonathan Dodgson Carr opened a small bakery and biscuit factory in Carlisle. It was a mill and a bakery in one, baking bread by night and biscuits by day, and it held a royal warrant from 1841. Its Table Water biscuits, a refined version of the hard rations sailors once carried, are still baked in Carlisle for the cheese board.

A mill and a bakery under one roof

Carr's began with a mill as well as an oven. The year was 1831, the town Carlisle, and Jonathan Dodgson Carr's venture was a small bakery with a biscuit factory attached, in what was then Cumberland, and he did something unusual for the time: he milled the flour as well as baking with it. Wikipedia describes the business as both a mill and a bakery, an early example of what economists now call vertical integration, and says it produced bread by night and biscuits by day.

That arrangement gave Carr control over the thing that matters most in a plain cracker, which is the flour. By 1836 he was milling wheat specifically for his Table Water biscuits. He cared enough about the price of wheat to protest against the Corn Laws, the steep tariffs on imported grain. For a man who milled and baked, the price of wheat was everything.

From ship's biscuit to the cheese board

The idea behind the water biscuit was not new. Wikipedia says the first Carr's biscuits took their cue from the dry biscuits carried by sailors on long voyages, the rock hard rations that kept navies fed for centuries. Our article on hardtack and ship's biscuit follows that older story.

What Carr did was refine it. A ship's biscuit had to survive months below deck; a table water biscuit had to be thin enough to snap cleanly and plain enough to sit quietly under a piece of cheese. The recipe stayed simple, essentially flour and water with very little else, and the bake produced something crisp, pale and brittle. Wikipedia's water biscuit article notes that the style is usually eaten with cheese or wine, and that is still how most people meet a Carr's Table Water today.

Growth, and a royal warrant

The business grew quickly. The royal warrant arrived in 1841, just ten years after the ovens were first lit, and within fifteen years of its founding Carr's had become the largest baking business in Britain. Jonathan Dodgson Carr died in 1884. A year later his company employed a thousand people and baked 128 different biscuits.

The royal connection lasted a long time, but not for ever. In March 2012 Carr's Table Water biscuits lost their royal warrant, which Wikipedia attributes to changing tastes in the Royal Households. The biscuits carried on regardless, and the name Carr's is still printed on the pack.

Owners, mergers and a factory under water

Ownership has moved on several times since the family years. Cavenham Foods took Carr's in 1964 and was sold to United Biscuits in 1972. The Carlisle works at Caldewgate is now officially a McVitie's factory, and in 2016 United Biscuits' brands were combined with others to form pladis, owned by the Turkish food group Y?ld?z Holding. Our article on United Biscuits and pladis explains how those companies fit together. In the United States, Carr's branded products are marketed by Kellogg's.

The Caldewgate factory has had two brushes with disaster. In 2005 it lost two months of production to flooding. Then, on 6 December 2015, during Storm Desmond, the water came back higher than five feet and damaged the brick ovens. The factory is still at work today, and Table Water biscuits are still baked in Carlisle.

How a cracker line works today

Carr's does not publish its own recipe or line settings, but BAKERpedia, the baking industry reference, describes how crackers are made in a modern bakery, and it is a useful picture of what happens between the flour and the packet. The dough is rolled out through a series of rollers until it is only two to four millimetres thick. Yeasted crackers are laminated first, folded into four to six layers so they bake up flaky, but a water biscuit, with no raising agent at all, can go straight to the cutter. A rotary or stamping cutter then shapes each cracker and punches the docking holes in the same movement.

The baking is fast and fierce. BAKERpedia gives a bake of two to four minutes in a gas fired oven with several heat zones, starting at around 300C and easing down to about 250C by the end of the tunnel. What comes out is extremely dry: crackers of every type are baked down to a moisture content of just 1.5 to 2.5 per cent. That dryness is the secret of the long shelf life, and it is why an open pack goes soft so quickly if the air can get at it.

The Carr's crackers we stock

Our Carr's shelf starts with the original, Carr's Table Water: thin, crisp and plain, made to carry cheese. Table Water Large is the same biscuit in a bigger size, useful for a party board or for anyone who likes a generous slice of Brie. The cracked black pepper version adds warmth that suits a mild, creamy cheese.

Beyond the table water family, Carr's also makes Melts crackers: Melts Original, Melts Cheese and Melts Caramelised Red Onion, which is lovely with a strong Cheddar. For a board where you want variety without the thinking, Carr's Cracker Selection brings several shapes and flavours in one box. Every water biscuit we sell is on the water biscuits shelf.

Serving a water biscuit

A water biscuit is at its best with cheeses that deserve not to be interrupted: a ripe Brie, a young goat's cheese, a nutty Comté, a buttery Wensleydale. Keep the biscuits on their own plate so they stay crisp, and let the cheese sit at room temperature for half an hour or so before you eat, so its flavour comes through.

Our guide to the best crackers for cheese goes cheese by cheese, and our wider guide to every kind of cracker shows where the water biscuit sits in the family.

The difference between a water biscuit and a cream cracker is worth knowing when you shop. The water biscuit is thin, hard and plain. The cream cracker, made from a fermented dough, is thicker and flakier, and our article on how cream crackers are made explains where those layers come from. Many cheese boards have room for both.

Quick facts

Started	1831, Carlisle, by Jonathan Dodgson Carr
Unusual set up	A flour mill and a bakery under one roof
Royal warrant	Granted 1841; Table Water lost it in March 2012
By 1885	128 varieties and 1,000 workers
Owned by	pladis, since 2016
The factory	Caldewgate, Carlisle; hit by floods in 2005 and again in 2015

Questions people ask

Who started Carr's?

Jonathan Dodgson Carr, who opened a small bakery and biscuit factory in Carlisle in 1831. He died in 1884.

Are Carr's crackers still made in Carlisle?

Yes. Wikipedia places production at the Caldewgate factory in Carlisle, which is now officially a McVitie's site within pladis.

Does Carr's still have a royal warrant?

Carr's won a royal warrant in 1841, but Wikipedia records that Carr's Table Water biscuits lost theirs in March 2012, put down to changing tastes in the Royal Households.

Who sells Carr's in America?

According to Wikipedia, Carr's branded products are marketed in the United States by Kellogg's.

What makes a water biscuit different from a cream cracker?

A water biscuit is thinner, harder and plainer, with no raising at all. A cream cracker starts as a yeasted dough, which is why it bakes up with light, flaky layers.

Sources

1. Carr's, Wikipedia
2. Jonathan Dodgson Carr, Wikipedia
3. Water biscuit, Wikipedia
4. Cracker (food), Wikipedia

5. Crackers, BAKERpedia

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