How are cream crackers made? A slow ferment, thin layers and a fast bake

From the crackers.biz wiki

Cream crackers start as a simple dough of wheat flour, vegetable oil, salt, yeast and a little bicarbonate of soda. In a typical cracker bakery the dough ferments for 16 to 20 hours, is rolled thin and laminated into four to six layers, embossed, cut and docked with holes, then baked for two to four minutes at up to 300C. The layers make them flaky; the long ferment gives the flavour.

A plain cracker with a long story

A cream cracker looks like the simplest thing in the cupboard: a pale square, a scatter of holes, a snap when you break it. Behind it sits one of the slowest and most careful processes in baking. The dough is left to ferment for most of a day, then rolled out thin, folded into layers, and finally baked in a few minutes flat.

It is also a cracker with a clear birthplace. Wikipedia credits Joseph Haughton, working in his own Dublin home, with the invention, and William Jacob with turning it into a product from about 1885. Jacob's still makes the cracker most of us know, and the whole Jacob's range is on our cream crackers shelf.

What goes into the dough

The ingredient list is short. The Open Food Facts record for Jacob's Original Cream Crackers reads: wheat flour, with thiamin, niacin, iron and calcium added to it; oil from palm fruit; salt; sodium bicarbonate as a raising agent; and yeast. Nothing else goes in. You will not find cream, butter or milk on the list.

Yeast and bicarbonate of soda side by side is typical of the soda cracker family, which, as Wikipedia explains, is made from a dough fermented with yeast. The cream cracker belongs to that family. The high fibre version follows the same pattern with wheat bran and added fibre from inulin and pea, and its record carries a vegan label.

So why the name? Wikipedia's answer is that it describes a step in the making, when the mixture is creamed, rather than anything from a dairy. It is a baker's word, not an ingredient.

A long, slow ferment

Fermentation is where the flavour comes from. BAKERpedia, the industry reference, describes the classic soda cracker method: the ingredients are mixed gently at low speed for two or three minutes, then the dough rests and ferments in warm, humid air, around 27C, for somewhere between sixteen and twenty hours. Over that time the yeast feeds on the flour, produces gas and a faint tang, and slowly softens the gluten so the

dough rolls out thin without fighting back.

It is the same principle as a sourdough loaf or a slow proved pizza base: time does work that no machine can hurry. It is also the reason a cream cracker tastes of something even when it is eaten plain.

Rolling, folding and layering

Once fermented, the dough is sheeted: passed through pairs of rollers that squeeze it thinner and thinner. Then comes lamination, the step that gives a cream cracker its flaky interior. BAKERpedia describes four to six layers being built up, and the stack then being squeezed down until it is only two or three millimetres thick, four at most.

Baker Perkins, which builds cracker lines for bakeries around the world, says laminating is the usual way to form crackers, since it delivers a light texture and a clean snap at the same time. To keep the layers from fusing back together, bakers can spread a mixture of fat and flour, or fine crumb, between them. In the oven that thin barrier lets each layer lift away from its neighbour, which is why a cream cracker breaks into shards and flakes rather than crumbs.

Cutting and docking

The long ribbon of layered dough then runs under engraved rollers that emboss the pattern and cut out each cracker. The holes are pressed in at the same time. They are called docking holes, and their job is to let the cracker bake flat: without them the dough would rise into blisters and pillows in the heat. Our article on why crackers have holes looks at docking in more detail.

A very fast bake

After all that waiting, the bake is over almost before it starts. BAKERpedia gives a baking time of two to four minutes in a gas fired oven with several heat zones, running at about 300C at the start and falling to around 250C at the end. The crackers come out astonishingly dry, with a moisture content of just 1.5 to 2.5 per cent. That dryness is what lets a sealed pack keep so long, and why an opened one softens if the air gets in.

From Dublin to Aintree

The Jacob story starts in Waterford, in the south of Ireland, where William Beale Jacob ran a modest bakery making bread and biscuits for ships. Robert Jacob came into the business in 1851, and two years later the brothers moved up to steam power with a biscuit factory in Dublin. Dublin is where the cream cracker was first made.

Jacob's opened its first English factory at Aintree, in Liverpool, in 1914, and Wikipedia says it is still the main UK producer of Jacob's Cream Crackers and Twiglets. In 2022 the Liverpool factory reported making 4,000 tonnes of crackers a year. The Irish and British businesses went their separate ways in 2004, and the UK brand is now part of pladis. Our article on Jacob's crackers tells the story of the company and its other famous names, including Twiglets.

Eating them

Wikipedia lists the usual partners: cheese, corned beef, or a savoury spread such as Marmite, and plenty of people eat them simply with butter. A cream cracker is sturdier than a water biscuit, so it copes well with a thick slice of Cheddar or a spoonful of chutney. Its sturdy layers also hold up well crumbled into a bowl of soup; our piece on crackers in soup has more.

Our cream cracker shelf holds the 200g pack, the 300g pack, the twin pack and the multipack of snack packs for lunchboxes. For choosing a cracker to suit each cheese, see our guide to the best crackers for cheese, and for the whole family, our guide to every kind of cracker.

Quick facts

Where it began	A Dublin kitchen (Joseph Haughton); Jacob's baked it from about 1885
On the Jacob's label	Wheat flour, palm oil, salt, bicarbonate of soda, yeast
Ferment	16 to 20 hours at about 27C (BAKERpedia, soda crackers)
Layers	Four to six, rolled to 2 to 4mm
Bake	Two to four minutes, about 300C falling to 250C
Made in	Aintree, Liverpool, since the factory opened in 1914

Questions people ask

Is there any cream in a cream cracker?

No. According to Wikipedia the word describes how the dough is creamed at the factory, not an ingredient. The Jacob's ingredient list has no dairy in it, though the multipack warns it may contain milk.

What makes a cream cracker flaky?

Lamination. The dough is rolled thin and stacked into several layers, often with a dusting of fat and flour between them, so the layers separate a little as they bake.

Why does the dough ferment for so long?

The slow ferment builds flavour and loosens the dough, which helps give the finished cracker its light, crisp snap. BAKERpedia gives 16 to 20 hours for soda crackers.

Are cream crackers vegan?

The standard Jacob's ingredient list contains no animal ingredients, and the high fibre version is labelled vegan, but some packs warn of traces of milk and egg. Check the pack if it matters to you.

Which factory bakes Jacob's cream crackers?

Aintree, in Liverpool. Wikipedia says the factory, opened in 1914, is still the main UK producer of Jacob's Cream Crackers.

Sources

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