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Hardtack: the ship's biscuit that fed navies and armies, and gave us the cracker

From the crackers.biz wiki

Hardtack is a dense cracker of flour and a little water, sometimes salted, baked until hard and dry enough to last through a long voyage. The name comes from tack, British sailors' slang for food. Navies and armies lived on it for centuries, and the Royal Navy had fixed its ration at a pound of biscuit per man per day by 1731. It is still made, as Sailor Boy Pilot Bread for Alaska and as kanpan for Japan's ground forces.

Bread for a long voyage

Before refrigerators and tins, feeding a ship's crew for months at sea meant carrying food that would not rot. Bread went mouldy within days. The answer was to take the water out: mix flour with as little water as possible, perhaps add salt, and bake it until it was as hard and dry as a roof tile. The result was hardtack.

In Wikipedia's words it is a dense cracker, and its recipe is little more than flour with a splash of water, and salt in some versions; it costs little and lasts. The name is simple too. Tack was British sailors' slang for food, and this was the hard sort. It also went by ship's biscuit, pilot bread and cabin bread, among other names, and it is the ancestor of the thin, crisp crackers that sit on a cheese board today.

An idea as old as armies

Soldiers and sailors were eating dry biscuits long before anyone called them hardtack. Wikipedia notes a cracker called bucellatum from ancient Rome, and records that King Richard I of England set out on the Third Crusade, in the years 1189 to 1192, with "biskit of muslin". The logic never changed: a campaign or a voyage needed food that could be packed tight, carried far and eaten months later.

The Royal Navy's pound a day

Britain's navy made the ship's biscuit an institution. By 1731, according to Wikipedia, Royal Navy regulations had standardised the ration at one pound of biscuit, about 450g, per sailor per day. Feeding a fleet on that scale took an industry. In Queen Victoria's reign, Royal Navy hardtack was made by machine at the Royal Clarence Victualling Yard at Gosport.

The yard was set up in 1828 as one of the navy's two main purpose built victualling stations outside London, and named after the Duke of Clarence, later King William IV. Its bakery ran on steam, with machinery designed by the food technologist Sir Thomas Grant, and Wikipedia says it could turn out ten thousand biscuits an hour, with nine ovens working at once. The yard also had a brewery and a slaughterhouse. It

closed in 1991 and is now homes, workshops, galleries, restaurants and a marina.

Molar breakers and worm castles

The men who ate it had plenty to say about it. Among the names Wikipedia records are worm castles, sheet iron, tooth dullers and molar breakers. That last one was earned. Stored for long periods, biscuit was often infested by insects, and weevil larvae in particular made their homes in it.

Nobody ate hardtack dry if they could help it. It was soaked in water, tea, coffee, soup or stew until it softened, which is the old habit of the sop, bread softened in liquid; our article on crackers in soup follows that tradition to the present day.

Hardtack in the American Civil War

The American Civil War of 1861 to 1865 made hardtack famous in the United States. Wikipedia says three inch square biscuits were shipped to the armies in huge quantities, and soldiers learned to make the best of them. The usual trick was to drop the biscuit into the morning coffee, which softened it and brought any weevil larvae floating to the surface, where they could be skimmed off. Soldiers also fried hardtack, mixed it with sugar and water, broke it into a mush, or made it into a pudding for dessert with brown sugar, hot water and whiskey.

Still baked today

The ship's biscuit outlived the sailing ship. According to Wikipedia, Interbake Foods of Richmond, Virginia, produces most of the pilot bread sold in the United States under the Sailor Boy label, and that as of January 2015, 98 per cent of it went to Alaska, where it remains a staple.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, hard bread is the main ingredient of fish and brewis, a traditional meal. In Japan, a hardtack called kanpan is produced for the country's ground forces. And one historic example survives on show: a ship's biscuit at Kronborg in Denmark, dated to about 1852, is claimed to be the oldest in the world.

From hardtack to the cheese board

The crackers we sell grew out of this plain, practical food. Wikipedia's article on Carr's says the first Carr's biscuits took their cue from the dry biscuits carried by sailors on long voyages, and Carr's refined the idea into the thin table water biscuit; our article on Carr's water biscuits tells that story. In Jamaica, the tough Excelsior water cracker was made for travellers who needed food that would last, as our article on Jamaican water crackers explains.

To taste the bare recipe, reach for matzo. Rakusen's Matzos list just wheat flour and water, though they are baked thin and crisp rather than thick and rock hard; see our article on matzo. For a cracker made for the table rather than the sea chest, try Carr's Table Water, Jacob's Cream Crackers or Nairn's Rough Oatcakes, and for the whole family, our guide to every kind of cracker.

Quick facts

Recipe	Flour and a little water, sometimes salt
The name	From tack, British sailors' slang for food
Navy ration	One pound per man per day, fixed by 1731
Other names	Pilot bread, cabin bread or ship's biscuit
Soldiers' names for it	Worm castles, tooth dullers, molar breakers
Victorian navy bakery	Royal Clarence Victualling Yard, Gosport
Oldest claimed	About 1852, on show at Kronborg in Denmark
Made today by	Interbake Foods, as Sailor Boy Pilot Bread

Questions people ask

Why is it called hardtack?

Tack was British sailors' slang for food, Wikipedia explains, and this was the hard kind.

What goes into hardtack?

Just flour and a little water, with salt in some recipes. There is no fat, sugar or raising agent, and baked dry it outlasts a long voyage.

How did soldiers eat hardtack?

Softened, usually. In the American Civil War soldiers dunked it in coffee, which also sent any weevil larvae floating to the top to be skimmed off; they fried it too, mixed it with sugar and water, or broke it up into a mush.

Is hardtack still made?

Yes. Interbake Foods of Richmond, Virginia, makes most American pilot bread under the Sailor Boy label, and as of January 2015, 98 per cent of it went to Alaska. Newfoundland's fish and brewis is built on hard bread, and Japan makes kanpan for its ground forces.

What is the oldest ship's biscuit?

One on display at Kronborg in Denmark, dated to about 1852, is claimed to be the oldest in the world, Wikipedia says.

What is the nearest thing on your shelf?

Matzo. Rakusen's list just wheat flour and water, the same bare recipe, though baked thin and crisp for the table rather than thick for a sea chest.

Sources

1. Hardtack, Wikipedia
2. Carr's, Wikipedia
3. Royal Clarence Yard, Wikipedia

4. Matzo (5010112006161), Open Food Facts

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