Crispbread: Sweden's rye cracker, and how it reached British tables

From the crackers.biz wiki

Crispbread is a thin, bone dry bread from Sweden. The old recipe needs only three things, wholemeal rye flour, water and salt, and Swedes have baked it for at least fourteen centuries. With so little moisture left in it, it stays fresh far longer than a loaf. Ryvita began importing it to Britain in 1925 and has baked it here since 1932; Peter's Yard makes a Swedish style sourdough version.

Bread that decided to become a cracker

Crispbread sits right on the line between bread and cracker. Wikipedia files it under bread: a flat, dry loaf, mostly rye. But nobody in Britain eats it like a sandwich loaf. It snaps, it crunches, and it sits on the cheese board next to the water biscuits, so on our shelf it lives with the crackers.

The traditional Swedish recipe could hardly be simpler. Wholemeal rye flour, salt and water, rolled thin and baked until every last trace of softness has gone. Rye gives it a deep, slightly sour, earthy flavour, quite different from the neutral taste of a wheat cracker, and that flavour is exactly why crispbread works so well with strong cheese.

Fourteen centuries of Swedish baking

Crispbread is old. Wikipedia dates it to central Sweden in the sixth century at the latest, so few things on our shelf can claim a longer history. Traditionally it was baked only twice a year: once after the harvest, and once in spring, when the frozen rivers began to run again. Whatever came out of the oven had to last until the next baking day, and crispbread did. It was a staple, and for a long time it was seen as a poor man's food; by 2003, as the figures below show, most Swedish homes kept some.

In Sweden and western Finland the traditional loaf was a large flat round, pierced through the centre. The hole was for storage: the rounds were slid onto long poles hung up near the ceiling, out of the way until they were wanted. With only two baking days a year, those poles had to carry a lot of bread. Round crispbread with a hole is still made in that tradition, but the rectangles on our shelf fit a cupboard far better.

Factories came late: AU Bergmans enka, the first industrial crispbread bakery in Sweden, only started up in Stockholm in 1850, Wikipedia notes. Sweden, Finland and Norway all have long crispbread traditions, and the 2003 figures show it is still most at home in Sweden: 85 per cent of Swedish households had some in the house. The German figure was 45 per cent, and the French just 8.

Why it lasts so long

Crispbread is a lesson in how drying preserves food. Once almost all the water has been baked out, there is very little for moulds and bacteria to live on, and nothing left to go stale in the way a soft loaf does. That is why the Swedes could keep it from one baking day to the next, and why a sealed pack keeps so well in your cupboard today. The only thing it fears is damp air, which it drinks up eagerly once the packet is open.

How crispbread came to Britain

In Britain the name that goes with crispbread is Ryvita. Wikipedia tells the story. John Edwin Garratt founded the company in 1925, at first importing rye crispbread from Scandinavia. In 1932 he began making it himself, in Birmingham. The Second World War destroyed the Birmingham works, and in 1949 production moved to a new bakery at Poole, on the Dorset coast. That was also the year Associated British Foods bought the company, and Ryvita is still made by a business within that group. In its time it was granted royal warrants by George VI and by Elizabeth II.

Plain rye is now only the start. Ryvita's range runs to crispbreads, crackerbreads and thins, some with seeds or dried fruit, some made with wheat and other grains. You will find Ryvita Original and Ryvita Dark Rye for the classic rye taste, Sesame and Multigrain for something nuttier, and Crackerbread, a lighter cousin. Our article on Ryvita covers the brand in depth.

A Swedish recipe baked in England

At the posher end of the shelf is Peter's Yard. Its own story begins with Peter Ljungquist, a Swede who turned his back on commercial yeast and opened a small sourdough bakery in a Skåne farmhouse, deep in the countryside. Ian and Wendy heard about him from another baker while on a research trip to Sweden, went to meet him, and came away convinced his crispbread was too good for one small bakery. At first they imported it from Sweden. Later John Lister, a friend who owns Shipton Mill, joined the business, and the range is now baked at his bakery in the UK to the original Swedish recipe.

What makes it different is the sourdough. Peter's Yard says its crispbread is made with a sourdough starter that is 45 years old and fermented for 16 hours. The result is thin, delicate and gently tangy. Peter's Yard Original Sourdough Crispbreads are the classic, and our article on Peter's Yard has the full story and ingredients.

Other crispbreads on our shelf

If you need to avoid gluten, Schar Crispbread is made without it; see our guide to gluten free crackers and always check the pack. The shelf also holds crispbakes from Trimlyne and Bakery Delights, and Jacob's chive crispbreads come in handy snack packs. Everything is on our crispbreads shelf.

How to eat crispbread

With cheese first. The earthy tang of rye flatters strong, mature and pungent cheeses that would overwhelm a delicate water biscuit, and a dark rye crispbread with a slice of aged Cheddar or a blue is hard to fault. Our guide to the best crackers for cheese suggests which crispbread goes with which cheese.

Crispbread also makes a good base for open sandwiches, the Scandinavian way: butter, a slice of cheese, cucumber, smoked fish or boiled egg. It is sturdy enough to take a topping without going soft straight away,

which makes it useful for canapés too. For the wider family it belongs to, see our guide to every kind of cracker.

Quick facts

The old recipe	Just rye flour (wholemeal), water and salt
Long traditions in	Sweden, Finland and Norway
Age	Baked in central Sweden by the sixth century
Baking days	Traditionally only twice a year, after harvest and in spring
Old storage trick	Round loaves with a hole, hung on poles near the ceiling
In Swedish homes	85 per cent of households had crispbread in 2003
In Britain	Ryvita imported it from 1925 and began baking it in 1932

Questions people ask

Is crispbread a bread or a cracker?

Strictly a bread: Wikipedia calls it a flat, dry bread made mostly with rye. In practice it snaps and crunches like a cracker and is eaten the same way, so we shelve it with the crackers.

Why does crispbread last so long?

Because it is baked until there is hardly any water left in it, so there is very little for mould or staleness to work on. Once the pack is open, close it tightly, because damp air is what softens it.

Can I eat crispbread if I avoid gluten?

Only one made for that. Rye and wheat both contain gluten, so ordinary crispbread is out, but Schar makes a crispbread without it. The pack always has the final word.

Is Ryvita Swedish?

The idea is. Ryvita started in 1925 by importing rye crispbread from Scandinavia, then began baking in Birmingham in 1932 and moved to Poole in Dorset in 1949.

Why did old Swedish crispbread have a hole?

For storage. The round loaves were pierced through the centre so they could be slid onto long poles and hung up near the ceiling.

How often did Swedes bake crispbread?

Traditionally only twice a year, according to Wikipedia: once after the harvest, and again in spring when the frozen rivers began to flow.

Sources

1. Crispbread, Wikipedia

2. Ryvita, Wikipedia
3. Who we are, Peter's Yard
4. Cracker (food), Wikipedia

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