Saltines: America's soda cracker, and its British cousins

From the crackers.biz wiki

A saltine is a thin, usually square cracker made from white flour, fat and baking soda, sometimes with yeast, pricked with holes and lightly sprinkled with coarse salt. Wikipedia records that F. L. Sommer and Company of St Joseph, Missouri, created it in 1876 as the Premium Soda Cracker, and that the company merged into what became Nabisco in 1898.

The cracker in the American soup bowl

In America, the everyday plain cracker is the saltine: a thin, pale square, pricked with holes and dusted with coarse salt. Wikipedia notes that saltines are commonly crumbled into soups, chilli and stews, and eaten with salads. Britain has its own plain crackers, and they are close cousins, but not the same.

What a saltine is

Wikipedia describes a saltine as a thin, usually square cracker made from white flour, sometimes yeast, although many are yeast free, fat and baking soda, with most varieties lightly sprinkled with coarse salt. It has perforations over its surface, and a distinctively dry and crisp texture. It is also called a soda cracker.

Where it came from

Wikipedia records that F. L. Sommer and Company of St Joseph, Missouri, created the cracker in 1876. It was first called the Premium Soda Cracker and later saltines, and it quickly became popular. Sommer's company eventually merged into what became Nabisco in 1898, the company later famous for Oreo and Ritz; see Nabisco.

The Premium name stuck to the cracker in some places. Wikipedia notes that in Australia and New Zealand, similar crackers are sold as Arnott's Salada and Nabisco Premium, and that in the United Kingdom similar crackers have been made by Huntley and Palmers; see Arnott's and Huntley and Palmers.

The National Biscuit Company

Nabisco, the company the saltine joined, was itself formed in 1898, as the National Biscuit Company, by merging several American bakeries under Adolphus Green. Its first great product was the Uneeda Biscuit, a plain cracker sold in innovative sealed packaging that kept it dry and fresh. British bakers solved the same problem with tins; see biscuit tins. Nabisco went on to create the Oreo in 1912 and Ritz in 1934, and it is now part of Mondel?z International, which acquired it in 2012; see who owns the biscuit brands.

Why the holes?

Those neat rows of holes are called docking holes. They let steam escape as the thin dough bakes, so the cracker stays flat and crisp instead of puffing up into a pillow. Cream crackers, water biscuits and matzos are pricked for the same reason; see how cream crackers are made.

Saltines and British crackers

People often ask how saltines compare with the crackers they know. Here is the family:

- **Cream crackers:** Britain's everyday plain cracker, made from a fermented dough of wheat flour, vegetable oil and yeast, laminated into layers, which makes it flaky. The name comes from the way the mixture is creamed, not from cream. Try Jacob's cream crackers.
- **Water biscuits:** thin, hard and brittle, made from little more than flour and water, and usually served with cheese or wine; Wikipedia names Carr's and Jacob's as leading brands. Try Carr's Table Water crackers; see Carr's water biscuits.
- **Ritz:** round, golden and richer, with a buttery taste, created by Nabisco in 1934; see Ritz crackers and Ritz Original.
- **TUC:** the salty Belgian cracker of 1958, lighter and more savoury; see TUC and Jacob's TUC.
- **Matzo:** flour and water only, unleavened and flame baked; see Rakusen's and Rakusen's matzo crackers.
- **Hardtack:** the rock hard ship's biscuit of flour and water, made to keep for months and softened in liquid before eating; see hardtack.

How saltines are eaten

Wikipedia notes that saltines are commonly dipped or crumbled into soups, chilli and stews, and eaten with, or crumbled into, salads. Like any plain cracker, they also make a base for cheese or a spread. British crackers do all the same jobs: a cream cracker is lovely crumbled into tomato soup, and a water biscuit is made for cheese; see the best crackers for cheese.

Biscuit or cracker?

The words themselves differ across the Atlantic. In America, sweet biscuits are nearly always called cookies and flat savoury ones crackers, so a saltine is a cracker and nothing else. In Britain, a cream cracker or a water biscuit is still a biscuit, which is why Jacob's sells a box of crackers called Biscuits for Cheese; see biscuit vs cookie and Jacob's Biscuits for Cheese.

Saltines in a British kitchen

We do not stock saltines at the moment. If a recipe calls for saltines, a cream cracker is the closest everyday swap: crush them for a coating or a topping, or crumble them into soup. For a cracker with a salted top, try Ritz or TUC, and for the plainest, a water biscuit.

Crackers and cheese

The great British use for a plain cracker is the cheeseboard. A mix of textures works best: a flaky cream cracker, a thin water biscuit, a nutty oatcake and a rye crispbread. See the best crackers for cheese, oatcakes and crispbread.

Diet notes

Saltines, cream crackers and water biscuits are made with wheat flour, so they contain gluten. Recipes vary between makers, so always check the ingredients and allergy advice on the pack.

Quick facts

What it is	A thin, usually square cracker, lightly salted
Also called	A soda cracker
First made	1876, by F. L. Sommer and Company, St Joseph, Missouri
First name	The Premium Soda Cracker
Nabisco	The company merged into what became Nabisco in 1898
In Australia	Arnott's Salada; in New Zealand, Nabisco Premium

Questions people ask

What is the difference between saltines and cream crackers?

Both are thin, dry crackers pricked with holes. A saltine is usually square and topped with coarse salt, while a British cream cracker is made from a fermented dough laminated into layers, which makes it flakier.

What is the difference between saltines and water crackers?

A water biscuit is made from flour and water with little or no fat and no salt topping, and is usually served with cheese or wine. A saltine contains fat and baking soda and has a salted top.

Are saltines the same as Ritz crackers?

No. Ritz, also first made by Nabisco, is a round, buttery tasting cracker, richer than a plain, square saltine.

When were saltine crackers invented?

In 1876, by F. L. Sommer and Company of St Joseph, Missouri, according to Wikipedia.

What is the difference between hardtack and saltines?

Hardtack is a very hard biscuit of flour, water and sometimes salt, made to keep on long voyages and usually softened in liquid. A saltine is a light, crisp cracker made to be eaten as it is.

Sources

1. Saltine cracker, Wikipedia
2. Cream cracker, Wikipedia
3. Water biscuit, Wikipedia

4. Ritz Crackers, Wikipedia
5. Hardtack, Wikipedia

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