Cheese crackers: Cheddars, Mini Cheddars, cheese oatcakes, and how much cheese is really in them

From the crackers.biz wiki

Cheese crackers, often called cheese biscuits in Britain, have cheese baked into the dough. The best known are Cheddars, which began at Crawford's, and their small round offshoot, Mini Cheddars, a McVitie's idea of the mid 1980s that has carried the Jacob's name in Britain since 2014. The labels on our shelf show how much cheese each one holds: 15 per cent in Nairn's Cheese Oatcakes, 11 per cent dried cheese in Jacob's Cheddars, and around 5 per cent cheese powder in Ritz Cheese.

Crackers with the cheese already in

Most crackers are made to carry cheese. A cheese cracker brings its own. The cheese, or a dried cheese powder, is mixed into the dough before baking, so the cracker tastes savoury and cheesy on its own, and needs nothing on top. In Britain these are often called cheese biscuits, in the British sense of biscuit, which covers savoury bakes as well as sweet ones.

They sit somewhere between the cheese board and the snack bowl. You might not put a cheese cracker under a slice of Stilton, but you would put a bowl of them out with drinks, pack them in a lunchbox or eat a handful with a glass of wine.

Cheddars: a Scottish start

Britain's best known cheese crackers are Cheddars, and Wikipedia says they were originally made and sold by Crawford's. Crawford's started out in 1813 baking ship's biscuits on The Shore, the waterfront at Leith, the port of Edinburgh. William Crawford took it over in 1856 and built it up, and it baked shortbread, digestives, ginger nuts and cream crackers. In 1960 United Biscuits, itself formed in 1948 when McVitie and Price joined MacFarlane Lang, bought William Crawford and Sons for six million pounds. Our article on United Biscuits tells that larger story.

Cheddars were later sold under the McVitie's name, and Wikipedia says they stayed McVitie's until 2014, when they moved to the Jacob's brand in the UK. In Ireland they are still sold as McVitie's. Our article on Jacob's crackers covers the rest of that range.

Mini Cheddars

The small round version arrived in the 1980s. Wikipedia puts their origin in 1984 and 1985, when McVitie's was widening its range. The brand has tried many flavours since. Among those Wikipedia records are BBQ, Marmite, Branston Pickle, cheese and onion, ham and cheese and mature Cheddar among them, eight flavours on sale in 2019, and a run of limited editions in 2020 and 2021, from nacho cheese and jalapeño to Ploughman's and Strathdon Blue, none of which were still on sale by 2023.

People often ask whether Mini Cheddars are crisps. They are not. Wikipedia calls Cheddars baked savoury biscuits, and the ingredient list begins with wheat flour, not potato. They belong on the cracker shelf.

How much cheese is in a cheese cracker?

This is where the labels get interesting. We looked up each cheese cracker on our shelf on Open Food Facts, and the amount of cheese varies a great deal:

- Nairn's Cheese Oatcakes: cheese at 15 per cent, with 71 per cent wholegrain oats.
- Nairn's Gluten Free Cheese Oatcakes: also 15 per cent cheese, with gluten free oats.
- Jacob's Cheddars: dried powdered cheese at 11 per cent, of which half is Cheddar.
- Jacob's Red Leicester Cheddars: dried powdered cheese at 11 per cent.
- Mini Cheddars Original: dried cheese at 10 per cent on some packs and 12 on others.
- Carr's Melts Cheese: dried cheese powder at 9 per cent, with poppy seeds and dried onion.
- Jacob's Smoked Cheddar Cheddars: dried powdered cheese at 8 per cent, half of it Cheddar, with smoked salt.
- Nairn's Marmite and Cheese Oatcakes: cheese at 6 per cent and Marmite at 9 per cent.
- Ritz Cheese: cheese powder at 5.3 per cent.

One caution when comparing them. Dried cheese powder has had most of its water taken out, so a gram of it carries more cheese than a gram of fresh cheese does. The oatcakes use cheese; most of the others use dried cheese or cheese powder, so the numbers are not exactly like for like. They do show, though, which crackers lean hardest on real cheese.

What makes them crisp

Cheese crackers are rich doughs, with fat and cheese as well as flour, and most of them are raised with a little help. Jacob's Cheddars, Mini Cheddars and Carr's Melts Cheese all list ammonium bicarbonate with bicarbonate of soda, a pairing that suits thin, dry bakes. Our article on ammonium bicarbonate explains why. Nairn's regular Cheese Oatcakes are different: oats, cheese, palm fruit oil and sea salt, with just bicarbonate of soda.

Are cheese crackers vegetarian?

Only if the cheese is. According to the Vegetarian Society, rennet, used to set many cheeses, is traditionally made from enzymes in the stomachs of cows and other ruminants, and that many classic cheeses use it. Vegetarian cheeses are set with microbial rennet from a fungus, or with rennet from thistles instead.

Two of our cheese crackers carry a vegetarian label on Open Food Facts: Jacob's Red Leicester Cheddars and Nairn's Cheese Oatcakes. For the others, the record does not say either way, so read the pack before buying for a vegetarian guest. None of them is vegan: every one contains milk, as cheese, cheese powder or whey.

Serving cheese crackers

Because they already taste of cheese, these crackers work best on their own or with something that contrasts: a glass of beer or wine, a bowl of olives, a few slices of apple or a spoon of chutney. For a proper cheese board, a plainer cracker that lets the cheese lead is usually the better choice; our guide to the best crackers for cheese explains how to match them. For more about the oat based cheese crackers, see oatcakes, and for a cheese flavoured cracker from America, Ritz.

Quick facts

Cheddars first made by	Crawford's, a bakery founded in Leith in 1813
Mini Cheddars	A McVitie's line of 1984 to 1985
Brand name	Jacob's in Britain from 2014; still McVitie's in Ireland
Most cheese on our shelf	Nairn's Cheese Oatcakes, 15 per cent
Jacob's Cheddars	11 per cent dried cheese, half of it Cheddar
Least	Ritz Cheese, 5.3 per cent cheese powder
Raising agent in Cheddars	Ammonium bicarbonate with bicarbonate of soda

Questions people ask

Is there real cheese in Mini Cheddars?

There is. Wikipedia confirms that real cheese goes into Cheddars, and the Mini Cheddars Original label lists dried cheese at 10 to 12 per cent, depending on the pack.

Are Mini Cheddars crisps or crackers?

Crackers, or biscuits in the British sense. Wikipedia calls Cheddars baked savoury biscuits, and the ingredient list starts with wheat flour. There is no potato in them.

Are cheese crackers vegetarian?

Not always. The Vegetarian Society explains that many traditional cheeses are made with rennet from animal stomachs. The records for Jacob's Red Leicester Cheddars and Nairn's Cheese Oatcakes carry a vegetarian label; for anything else, check the pack.

Are any cheese crackers vegan?

None of the cheese crackers we list are: every one contains milk, whether as cheese, cheese powder or whey.

Who first made Cheddars?

Crawford's, according to Wikipedia: a firm that started out baking ship's biscuits at Leith in 1813 and joined United Biscuits in 1960. Cheddars were sold as McVitie's until 2014 and as Jacob's since.

What flavours have Mini Cheddars come in?

Wikipedia records BBQ, Marmite, Branston Pickle, cheese and onion, ham and cheese and mature Cheddar over the years, and limited editions in 2020 and 2021 such as Ploughman's, Strathdon Blue and chilli Cheddar, since discontinued.

Sources

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