Crackers: every kind explained, and what to eat them with

From the crackers.biz wiki

A cracker is a crisp, thin bake, mostly flour and usually savoury, made to carry cheese, butter or a topping. The families you will meet are water biscuits, cream crackers, oatcakes, rye crispbread, matzo and flavoured snack crackers such as Ritz and TUC. They started life as hard rations for sailors and soldiers.

What makes a cracker a cracker

Put a cracker next to a biscuit and the difference is easy to see. A biscuit is usually a treat in its own right. A cracker is a platform: flat, dry, crisp, and happiest with something on top of it. Wikipedia's definition is almost as plain as the crackers themselves: a baked biscuit, made mainly from flour, that is flat and dry. Everything else, from the salt on top to the seeds in the dough, is a variation on that theme.

That simple recipe is why crackers keep so well. With so little water left in them after baking, there is not much for anything to spoil, and a sealed pack sits happily in the cupboard until the cheese comes out. It is also why they are so easy to get wrong at home: crisp needs dry, and dry needs a hot oven and patience.

From ship's biscuit to cheese board

Crackers have a working past. Wikipedia traces today's cracker to the portable rations carried by soldiers and seamen, with records reaching back to the year 1190. Those early bakes were hardtack, or ship's biscuit: flour from grain or pulses, worked with water and baked until it could survive months in a ship's hold. They stayed an important part of a British sailor's diet until canned food arrived in the 1800s. Our article on hardtack and ship's biscuit tells that story in full.

Refinement came in the nineteenth century. In Massachusetts, Josiah Bent started baking in 1801, turning out a flour and water cracker that could cross an ocean without spoiling. In England, Jonathan Dodgson Carr opened a small bakery in Carlisle in 1831, and by 1836 he was milling wheat for his Table Water biscuits. Carr's became a royal warrant holder in 1841, and within fifteen years of opening it was the largest baking business in Britain. You can read how that happened in our piece on Carr's of Carlisle and the table water biscuit.

Raised with yeast, raised with soda, or not raised at all

The easiest way to understand the cracker aisle is by what makes the dough rise, if anything does.

Soda crackers, which include saltines and the British cream cracker, are made from a dough that is fermented with yeast. The fermentation gives them their light, flaky layers and a faint savoury tang. Snack crackers, the buttery round and flavoured kinds, are in most cases raised with baking soda or other chemical

raising agents instead, which gives a tender, crumbly bite. Then there are crackers with no raising at all. Water biscuits and matzo are both examples: flour and water, rolled thin and baked hard.

Whichever camp a cracker sits in, you will usually find a pattern of small holes across it. Bakers call this docking. Without the holes the dough would blister and balloon in the heat; with them it bakes evenly and lies flat. If you have ever wondered about the neat rows on a cream cracker, our article on why crackers and biscuits have holes explains the craft behind them.

The families on our shelf

Water biscuits

The plainest of the lot, and made with cheese in mind. Wikipedia's description is short and to the point: flour and water, rolled until thin, baked until brittle, and eaten with cheese or a glass of wine. That plainness is the point: nothing gets in the way of a good Cheddar or a ripe Brie. On our shelf that means Carr's Table Water, with the larger Table Water Large for a proper board and the cracked black pepper version when you want a little heat. The whole range sits on our water biscuits shelf.

Cream crackers

Dublin gave these islands the cream cracker. Joseph Haughton came up with it in his own home, and William Jacob began baking it commercially around 1885. Despite the name, you will not find cream in the recipe: Wikipedia explains that the word describes how the mixture is worked during manufacture. Cream crackers are flaky, light and a touch more robust than a water biscuit, which is why they stand up to butter, Cheddar, corned beef or Marmite. Wikipedia calls Jacob's the most widely known cream cracker brand, and we stock Jacob's Original Cream Crackers alongside the high fibre version. Our article on how cream crackers are made follows the dough through its layers.

Oatcakes

Oatcakes come from Scotland, where they were traditionally cooked on a girdle, a flat iron griddle, or baked as rounds on a tray and cut into wedges called farls. They are oatier and more crumbly than a wheat cracker, and they go with cheese, soup, meat and fish; in Scotland they can stand in for toast at breakfast. Try Nairn's Rough Oatcakes for a hearty bite or Stockan's Thick Oatcakes from Orkney. There is more in our guide to oatcakes and how to eat them.

Crispbread

Crispbread is Sweden's contribution: a dry, flat rye bread whose traditional recipe needs only wholemeal rye flour, salt and water. Swedes have been baking it for at least fourteen hundred years, and the old round loaves were made with a hole in the centre so they could be threaded onto a pole and hung up high. It lasts because there is hardly any moisture left in it after baking. Ryvita Original is the plain British rye crispbread, and Peter's Yard sourdough crispbreads bring a Swedish style to the posh end of the board. Read more in our crispbread article.

Matzo

Matzo is the unleavened cracker at the heart of Passover, made from flour and water with no raising agent at all. It is also a very good everyday cracker in its own right, plain and crisp. Rakusen's flame baked matzos come from Leeds; our matzo article explains how they are made and why speed matters.

Snack crackers and cheesy bites

This is the lively end of the shelf: buttery rounds, salty squares and crackers with the flavour baked right in. Buttery Ritz and salty TUC are built for snacking straight from the box, and Jacob's Baked Cheddars bring the cheese with them. They are made for eating on their own, or for a bowl on the side at a drinks party.

Which cracker for which moment

For a cheese board after dinner, choose contrast: something plain, something oaty or rye, and something with character. A box such as Jacob's Biscuits for Cheese or Carr's Cracker Selection does that work for you in one pack. For canapés at a party, go for something sturdy that will not go soft under a topping: an oatcake, a thick crispbread or a sourdough cracker. For soup, a cream cracker crumbled over the top is hard to beat, as our piece on crackers in soup shows. And for the lunchbox or the afternoon slump, a pack of cheesy bites takes some beating.

If you are building a cheese board for guests, our guide to the best crackers for cheese goes through the classic cheeses one by one. If you need to avoid wheat, start with our guide to gluten free crackers, and remember that rice cakes and some oatcakes are made without wheat too.

Keeping crackers crisp

Crackers go soft for one reason: they soak up moisture from the air. The fix is to give the air nowhere to get in. Roll the inner bag down and clip it, or decant the crackers into a tin or jar with a lid that fits properly, and store it somewhere cool rather than beside the cooker. A tray of limp crackers can usually be rescued in a cool oven for five minutes or so. Leave them until they are completely cold before they go back in the tin, or the warmth will turn to steam. Crackers are dry by design, so treat them that way and they will wait patiently for the next cheese board.

Quick facts

In one line	A thin, crisp bake, mostly flour, usually savoury
Raised with yeast	Cream crackers and saltines, made from a fermented dough
Raised with soda	Most flavoured snack crackers
Not raised at all	Water biscuits and matzo
The holes	Called docking; they keep the bake flat in the oven
Oldest roots	Hard biscuits for sailors and soldiers, recorded as far back as 1190

Questions people ask

Is a cracker a biscuit?

Here in Britain, yes. Crackers are the savoury, crisp end of the biscuit tin, meant to be eaten with something. In the United States the words split: sweet ones are cookies and savoury ones are crackers.

Which crackers are best with cheese?

Mix them. Put out something plain, like water biscuits or cream crackers, something oaty or rye, and one cracker with a flavour of its own. Our guide to crackers for cheese goes cheese by cheese.

Are crackers vegan?

Plenty of plain crackers are, but butter, milk, cheese and honey all turn up in cracker recipes, so check the ingredients on the pack before you buy.

How do you keep crackers crisp?

Air is the problem, not time. Roll the inner bag down and clip it, or move the crackers to a tin with a good lid. Limp crackers can usually be revived on a tray in a cool oven for five minutes or so; let them go cold before you store them.

Do crackers contain gluten?

Most are baked with wheat or rye, so yes. The ones made without gluten say so clearly on the label, and our gluten free crackers guide lists what we stock.

Sources

1. Cracker (food), Wikipedia
2. Cream cracker, Wikipedia
3. Water biscuit, Wikipedia
4. Carr's, Wikipedia
5. Crispbread, Wikipedia
6. Oatcake, Wikipedia

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