Melba toast: the crisp toast named after an opera singer

From the crackers.biz wiki

Melba toast is a dry, crisp, thinly sliced rusk, often served with soup and salad or topped with melted cheese or pâté. Wikipedia says it is named after Dame Nellie Melba, the stage name of the Australian soprano Helen Porter Mitchell, and was created for her by the chef Auguste Escoffier; the name is thought to date from 1897, when she was very ill.

A toast with a stage name

Few foods are named after an opera singer, and fewer still are eaten every day. Melba toast is one of them: thin, crisp, curled slices of twice toasted bread, served with pâté at a dinner party, with soup at lunch or with cheese at any time. It carries the name of a great Australian soprano, and its story takes us into the kitchen of the French chef Auguste Escoffier.

What Melba toast is

Wikipedia describes Melba toast as a dry, crisp and thinly sliced rusk, often served with soup and salad or topped with either melted cheese or pâté. It is bread that has been toasted, split and toasted again until it is very thin and completely dry, which gives it a delicate crunch and lets it keep for a long time.

Dame Nellie Melba

The toast is named after Dame Nellie Melba, the stage name of the Australian opera singer Helen Porter Mitchell. It is not the only dish Escoffier named after her. Wikipedia records that he invented peach Melba, a dessert of peaches and raspberry sauce with vanilla ice cream, at the Savoy Hotel in London in 1892 or 1893, after the Duke of Orléans gave a dinner party there to celebrate her triumph in Wagner's Lohengrin at Covent Garden.

Escoffier's kitchen

Wikipedia records that the toast was created for her by a chef who was also a fan of hers, Auguste Escoffier, and that the hotel proprietor César Ritz supposedly named it in conversation with Escoffier. Its name is thought to date from 1897, when the singer was very ill and the toast became a staple of her diet. The Ritz name, of course, turns up on the cracker shelf too; see Ritz crackers.

How Melba toast is made

Wikipedia explains the method. Slices of bread are lightly toasted under a grill on both sides; each piece of toast is then sliced through the middle, laterally, to make two very thin slices; and these are returned to the grill with the untoasted sides towards the heat. As they toast, the thin slices dry out and curl at the edges.

At home, the trick is to use day old sandwich bread, which is easier to split, and to watch the second toasting closely, because thin bread burns quickly. Once cool, Melba toast keeps in an airtight tin for several days.

A rusk by another name

Melba toast belongs to the family of twice cooked breads. Wikipedia describes a rusk as a hard, dry biscuit or twice baked bread, and the idea turns up all over the world: Italy's fette biscottate, Germany's Zwieback, whose name means twice baked, South Africa's rusks and Sweden's skorpor; see South African biscuits and biscotti. The oldest of all is the ship's biscuit; see hardtack. And the very word biscuit, from the Latin bis coctus, means twice cooked; see a short history of the biscuit.

Melba toast, crispbread and crackers

Three crisp breads are easy to confuse. Melba toast is ordinary bread, toasted, split and toasted again. Crispbread, Wikipedia explains, is a flat, dry bread made mostly from rye flour, baked dry from the start. And a cracker is a flat, dry baked biscuit made from a dough rather than a loaf. All three keep well because they hold so little water; see crispbread and crackers.

Rusks for babies and for celebrations

The rusk has some lovely traditions. Wikipedia notes that in the UK, Farley's Rusks, dry teething biscuits dating from the 1880s, are given to infants, and that in the Netherlands it is customary to serve beschuit met muisjes, a rusk with a sweet topping, when a baby is born. Finland has korppu, a dried piece of bun.

How to serve it

Melba toast is at its best with something soft and rich:

- **Pâté:** the classic dinner party starter.
- **Soup:** a crisp side for a bowl of tomato or vegetable soup.
- **Cheese:** melted on top, or with a soft cheese and chutney.
- **Dips:** smoked salmon pâté, hummus or taramasalata.

Melba toast on our shelf

We stock Trimlyne Melba toast thins, Trimlyne crispbakes and Bakery Delights crispbakes. For other thin, crisp breads, try Ryvita Original or the Swedish style Peter's Yard crispbreads; see crispbread. For a plain partner to cheese, Carr's Table Water crackers are hard to beat; see our guide to crackers.

Named after people

Melba toast is one of a small club of foods named after famous people. The biscuit world has the Garibaldi, named after the Italian general; the Marie, after a Russian grand duchess; the Bath Oliver, after a Georgian

doctor; and the Abernethy, after a London surgeon. Their stories are gathered in why biscuits are called that.

Diet notes

Melba toast is made from wheat bread, so it contains gluten; check the pack for other allergens, such as milk, soya or sesame.

Quick facts

What it is	A dry, crisp, thinly sliced rusk
Named after	Dame Nellie Melba, the Australian soprano
Created by	The chef Auguste Escoffier
Name dates from	About 1897
How it is made	Toasted, split through the middle and toasted again
Served with	Soup and salad, melted cheese or pâté

Questions people ask

Who invented Melba toast?

Wikipedia says it was created for Dame Nellie Melba by a chef who was also a fan of hers, Auguste Escoffier, and that the hotel proprietor César Ritz supposedly named it in conversation with him.

Why is it called Melba toast?

After Dame Nellie Melba, the stage name of the Australian opera singer Helen Porter Mitchell. Wikipedia says the name is thought to date from 1897, when she was very ill and the toast became a staple of her diet.

How do you make Melba toast?

Toast slices of bread under a grill on both sides, slice each piece through the middle to make two thin slices, then return them to the grill with the untoasted sides facing the heat until crisp and curled.

What do you eat with Melba toast?

Wikipedia says it is often served with soup and salad, or topped with melted cheese or pâté.

Is Melba toast the same as a rusk?

Wikipedia calls it a thinly sliced rusk: like other rusks, it is bread baked or toasted twice until dry and crisp.

Sources

1. Melba toast, Wikipedia
2. Rusk, Wikipedia
3. Crispbread, Wikipedia
4. Peach Melba, Wikipedia

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