Why do biscuits have holes? Docking, from Ritz crackers to Bourbons

From the crackers.biz wiki

The holes are called docking. They let steam escape as a biscuit or cracker bakes, so it stays flat and even instead of puffing up, blistering or cracking. Wikipedia explains that the small holes in Bourbon biscuits stop them cracking by letting steam out, and the seven holes in a Ritz cracker do the same job. At home, a fork does the docking.

Not decoration

Look closely at a cream cracker, a Rich Tea, a Bourbon or a shortbread finger and you will see neat rows of small holes. They look like decoration, but they are there for a practical reason, and bakers have a name for them: docking. Here is what docking does, why different biscuits have different numbers of holes, and why a few biscuits manage without.

What docking does

When a biscuit goes into a hot oven, the water in the dough turns to steam. In a thick, soft dough, the steam escapes gradually; in a thin, tightly packed biscuit or cracker dough, it gets trapped, and it can puff the dough up into bubbles, blister the surface or crack the biscuit. Docking holes give the steam a way out. As our guide to how biscuits are made explains, they let thin biscuits bake flat instead of puffing into bubbles.

Ritz: seven holes

The Ritz cracker is the most famous example. The original is a round, buttery tasting disc about 46mm across, with a scalloped edge and seven holes. The holes let steam escape during baking, preventing air pockets and giving an even, consistent texture. Crackers are baked very fast in very hot ovens, so without holes the steam inside would puff the dough into uneven bubbles; see Ritz crackers and Ritz Original.

Bourbons

Bourbon biscuits carry a neat pattern of small holes, often with the word Bourbon stamped in the middle. Wikipedia explains that the holes prevent them cracking or breaking during baking by allowing steam to escape; see Bourbon biscuits.

Rich Tea, digestives and cream crackers

Rich Tea biscuits are pricked with rows of small holes, and so are digestives, whose holes let steam escape so the biscuit bakes flat and even instead of blistering or cracking. Cream crackers are docked too: their dough is fermented, laminated into thin layers and baked for only a few minutes in a very hot oven, and the docking holes stop the layers puffing up too much. See Rich Tea biscuits, how digestives are made and how cream crackers are made, and try Jacob's cream crackers.

Shortbread and the fork

Shortbread is docked by hand. TasteSCOT's traditional Scottish method tells you to prick the surface all over with a fork before baking, which lets steam escape so the shortbread stays flat and even, and the fork marks have become part of its look; see how shortbread is made. Homemade digestives are forked in the same way.

How factories dock biscuits

In a factory, docking is done by machine. Crackers are rolled into a thin sheet, then cut and pricked with docking holes on the line before they reach the oven. The process is described in how cream crackers are made.

Cream crackers: holes and layers

Cream crackers show why docking matters most in crackers. A typical cracker dough is fermented for many hours, laminated into four to six thin layers and baked for only two to four minutes at around 300°C, falling to 250°C. Without docking holes, steam would force those layers apart into big blisters; with them, the layers separate just a little, which gives the cracker its flaky bite. See how cream crackers are made.

Matzo and crispbread

Matzo is docked for the same reason. Wikipedia explains that matzah is pricked with a fork or a similar tool to keep it from puffing up as it bakes, which is why a matzo cracker is dotted with rows of little holes; see Rakusen's. Traditional Swedish crispbread had a very different hole: Wikipedia describes round, flat loaves with a hole in the middle, so they could be stored on long poles near the ceiling; see crispbread.

Biscuits without holes

Not every biscuit needs docking. Wikipedia explains that malted milk biscuits are typically baked for a short time, about five minutes, at a high temperature, which keeps them crisp without the use of holes; see malted milk biscuits. Soft cookies usually go without, and wafers are baked between hot plates rather than on an open tray; see wafer biscuits.

Hardtack and ship's biscuit

The oldest biscuits of all were made to keep. Wikipedia records that Royal Navy hardtack was stamped out in one stroke into about sixty hexagonal biscuits, and that American Civil War hardtack came in three inch squares; home hardtack recipes usually tell you to prick the dough all over, for the same reason as any other cracker. See hardtack and ship's biscuit.

Docking at home

If you are baking thin biscuits or crackers at home, dock them: prick the rolled dough all over with a fork, in neat rows or at random, before it goes into the oven. For thicker, softer biscuits and cookies, you can skip it. More baking help is in biscuit baking problems and how to make biscuits.

Quick facts

The holes are called	Docking
What they do	Let steam escape so the biscuit bakes flat
Ritz	Seven holes, to stop air pockets
Bourbon	Holes stop the biscuit cracking in the oven
At home	Prick the dough with a fork
No holes	Malted milks, baked quickly at a high heat

Questions people ask

Why do biscuits have holes?

To let steam escape during baking. Without them, the steam trapped in a thin dough would puff it up into bubbles or crack it; with them, the biscuit bakes flat and even. The holes are called docking.

Why do Ritz crackers have seven holes?

The holes let steam escape during baking, preventing air pockets and giving an even, consistent texture.

Why do Bourbon biscuits have holes?

Wikipedia explains that the small holes stop Bourbon biscuits cracking or breaking during baking, by allowing steam to escape.

Why does shortbread have holes?

Shortbread is pricked with a fork before baking to let steam escape as it bakes, which keeps it flat and even.

Do all biscuits have holes?

No. Some, such as malted milk biscuits, are baked for a short time at a high temperature, which keeps them crisp without docking, and soft cookies do not need them.

Sources

1. Bourbon biscuit, Wikipedia
2. Ritz Crackers, Wikipedia
3. Crackers, BAKERpedia
4. Malted milk (biscuit), Wikipedia
5. Shortbread recipe: the traditional Scottish method, TasteSCOT
6. Hardtack, Wikipedia

7. Matzah, Wikipedia
8. Crispbread, Wikipedia

Earn rewards on crackers.biz

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



crackers.biz · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@crackers.biz · 3-click cancel at crackers.biz/cancel/