Stockan's oatcakes: triangle oatcakes from Stromness in Orkney

From the crackers.biz wiki

Stockan's is a fourth generation family business that bakes oatcakes in Stromness, Orkney. Its story begins in the 1890s, when Gilbert Archer joined Tods, a Leith grocery wholesaler, which bought R. Garden and Company of Kirkwall around 1906. In 1986 the company bought Stockan's bakery in Stromness, and it now trades as Stockan's. Its oatcakes are triangles because round oatcakes were traditionally cut into four.

Oatcakes from the edge of Scotland

Orkney sits off the north coast of Scotland, and its oatcakes have travelled a long way from there. Stockan's bakes them in Stromness, a harbour town on mainland Orkney, and its triangle oatcakes are a familiar sight on cheeseboards far beyond the islands. The company is small, family owned and more than a century old, and its story is bound up with Orkney's shops, ships and wars.

A grocer from Leith

Stockan's own history begins in the 1890s, when a young Gilbert Archer joined Tods, a wholesale grocer in Leith, Edinburgh's port. As Tods grew, its business reached north along the shipping routes to Orkney, where Gilbert had relatives.

Around 1906, Tods bought R. Garden and Company, general merchants in Kirkwall, Orkney's main town. Garden's delivered by horse drawn van and later by motor van, and even ran floating shops that served the outer islands. Its bakery made loaves, biscuits and cakes and the coarse ground Garden's Thick Oatcakes, and Stockan's records that during both World Wars, Garden's bakery supplied bread to the naval ships at Scapa Flow, the great anchorage in the middle of Orkney.

Stockan's of Stromness

The turning point came in 1986, when the company bought Stockan's bakery in Stromness, bringing its prized recipes for fine milled thin oatcakes into the business. In time all the baking moved to Stromness and the company took the Stockan's name. Today it describes itself as a fourth generation, family owned business, run by Irené and Catriona Archer, Gilbert Archer's great grandchildren, with a loyal team, many of whom have been there more than 20 years and some more than 40.

Why the oatcakes are triangles

Stockan's oatcakes are instantly recognisable by their shape. The company explains that oatcakes were traditionally made with just oats, water and salt, rolled thin, cooked on a griddle over an open fire, and then cut into four, creating the triangle, or sector, shape that lives on today, ideal for sharing. Its Orkney Heritage range goes one step further: The Grocer describes a split mould that makes a grooved triangle, so each oatcake can be snapped neatly into two smaller triangles.

A very Scottish food

Oatcakes are one of Scotland's oldest foods. A fourteenth century account describes Scottish soldiers carrying a metal plate and a sack of oatmeal so they could make oatcakes on campaign, and for centuries oatcakes were a mainstay of Scottish meals; see oatcakes. Stockan's still bakes in that tradition. Talking to The Grocer in 2024, Irené Archer said the most rewarding part of the job is working with a traditional product that is still loved today, and the company told the magazine it was growing through speciality food shops and online.

An Orkney grain

Orkney has its own ancient grain, bere. Wikipedia describes bere as a six row barley grown mainly in Orkney, and calls it probably Britain's oldest cereal in continuous commercial cultivation, possibly grown since Neolithic times; it is nicknamed the 90 day barley because it ripens so quickly in Orkney's short summer, and it is ground into beremeal for bannocks, bread and biscuits. In 2024, The Grocer reported, Stockan's Orkney Heritage Bere Barley Chilli and Cheese Oatcakes won gold at the Farm Shop and Deli Product Awards.

What is in a Stockan's thick oatcake?

We stock Stockan's thick oatcakes. The Open Food Facts record lists wholegrain oats at 78 per cent, vegetable oil from palm and rapeseed, fortified wheat flour, sugar, salt and a raising agent. The wheat flour makes a difference: unlike some oatcakes, such as Nairn's gluten free range, these contain gluten. The record lists no milk or other animal ingredients.

Thick or thin?

Scottish oatcakes come in two main styles. Thick, coarse oatcakes, like Garden's Thick Oatcakes before them, are chunky and nutty; thin, fine milled oatcakes, like the Stockan's recipes from Stromness, are crisper and more delicate. Nairn's makes the same split between its rough oatcakes and fine oatcakes. Both styles are worth trying side by side on the same cheeseboard. For the long history of the oatcake, see oatcakes and Nairn's.

How to eat them

A thick oatcake is sturdy enough for anything. Stockan's suggests its triangles are made for sharing, and they are at their best with a strong cheese: a crumbly Orkney Cheddar, a creamy blue or a soft goat's cheese. They are also good with smoked salmon, with pâté, or simply buttered, with a pot of tea. For an easy lunch, top a thick oatcake with a slice of mature cheese and a spoonful of chutney. For more pairings,

see the best crackers for cheese.

Not to be confused with

Orkney oatcakes are nothing like the soft, floppy oatcakes of the English Potteries, which are really pancakes; see Staffordshire oatcakes. For Scotland's other great bakers, from Walker's to Tunnock's, see Scottish biscuits.

Quick facts

Where	Stromness, Orkney
Roots	The 1890s, when Gilbert Archer joined Tods of Leith
Kirkwall	R. Garden and Company, bought around 1906
Stromness bakery	Bought in 1986
Owners	The Archer family, fourth generation
Why triangles	A round oatcake was traditionally cut into four

Questions people ask

Where are Stockan's oatcakes made?

At the company's bakery in Stromness, the harbour town on mainland Orkney. Stockan's says all its manufacturing moved there after it bought Stockan's bakery in 1986.

Why are Stockan's oatcakes triangular?

Stockan's explains that oatcakes were traditionally rolled thin, cooked on a griddle and then cut into four, creating the triangle, or sector, shape that lives on today, ideal for sharing.

Who owns Stockan's?

The Archer family. Stockan's says it is a fourth generation, family owned business, run by Irené and Catriona Archer, great grandchildren of Gilbert Archer.

Are Stockan's thick oatcakes gluten free?

No. The Open Food Facts record for Stockan's thick oatcakes lists fortified wheat flour as well as wholegrain oats at 78 per cent, so they contain gluten.

What is bere?

An ancient six row barley grown mainly in Orkney, which Wikipedia calls probably Britain's oldest cereal in continuous commercial cultivation. Stockan's won a gold award in 2024 for an Orkney Heritage oatcake made with bere barley.

Sources

1. Our story, Stockan's Oatcakes

2. Our triangle oatcake story, Stockan's Oatcakes
3. How the Orkney heritage brand won gold, The Grocer, 2024
4. Bere (grain), Wikipedia
5. Stockan's Thick Oatcakes (5015168000026), Open Food Facts

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