Rusks: the twice baked bread of the world, from beschuit and zwieback to beskuit

From the crackers.biz wiki

A rusk is a hard, dry biscuit or twice baked bread. Almost every country has one: Britain's Farley's teething rusks date from the 1880s; the Dutch eat light, crumbly beschuit, famously topped with sugared aniseeds for a birth; zwieback means twice baked in German; South Africans have dunked beskuit since the 1690s; and in India, rusks are dipped in milky tea.

Baked twice

The rusk is one of the oldest ideas in baking: bake a loaf or a cake, slice it, then bake the slices again slowly until they are completely dry. The result keeps for a long time, crunches when you bite it and softens beautifully when dunked. Wikipedia defines a rusk simply as a hard, dry biscuit or a twice baked bread, and the word biscuit itself comes from the Latin for twice cooked, so the rusk is, in a sense, the original biscuit; see a short history of the biscuit. Greece has its own hard rusk, the paximadi; see Greek biscuits.

Why bake twice?

Baking twice drives out almost all the water, and dry food keeps. Wikipedia says crispbread keeps fresh for a very long time because it holds so little water, and the same is true of rusks, which is why South Africans first dried their bread in the 1690s. The flip side is that a dry rusk soaks up moisture eagerly, from a cup of tea or from damp air, which is why rusks are made for dunking and must be kept in a sealed tin; see why biscuits go soft.

Britain: the teething rusk

In Britain, rusk usually means a baby's teething rusk. Wikipedia says Farley's Rusks are a dry teething biscuit dating from the 1880s, made by Heinz since 1994. Today's advice has moved on: the NHS says it is best to avoid rusks for teething babies, because nearly all brands contain some sugar, and suggests raw fruit and vegetables instead, always supervised; see biscuits for babies and toddlers.

The Netherlands: beschuit

Dutch beschuit, Wikipedia says, are light, round, rather crumbly, unsweetened rusks. They star in one of the loveliest food traditions in Europe: when a baby is born, visitors are served beschuit met muisjes, rusks

spread with butter and scattered with muisjes, aniseeds coated in sugar. For the Dutch beschuit with muisjes, see Dutch biscuits.

Germany: zwieback

The German rusk is zwieback, a name that, as Wikipedia notes, literally means twice baked, which describes exactly how it is made.

Italy: fette biscottate

In Italy, twice baked slices of bread are called fette biscottate. Wikipedia points out that they are quite distinct from the sweet, almond biscotti with which they share the idea of baking twice; see biscotti.

South Africa: beskuit

In South Africa, the rusk is a national institution. Wikipedia says beskuit have been dried in South Africa since the late 1690s as a way of preserving bread, and that they are typically dunked in coffee or tea before being eaten. Ouma is the best known brand, with buttermilk among its flavours; see South African biscuits.

India: rusk and chai

In India, rusks are often called toast biscuits or cake rusk. Wikipedia describes them as usually eaten dipped in milky tea, which softens them, and the sweet cake rusk is made from wheat flour, sugar, fat, a leavening agent and sometimes egg; see the best biscuits to dunk in chai.

Russia, Sweden and Finland

Russia has sukhari, which Wikipedia describes as either slices of a sweet, challah like bread, baked in the style of biscotti, or cubes of leftover bread, air dried. In Sweden, skorpor are traditionally dipped into coffee, milk or juice, and in Finland, korppu is a common coffee bread, normally eaten after being dipped in coffee. The whole Nordic habit is in dunking around the world.

From ship's biscuit to breakfast

Twice baked bread fed armies and navies long before it became a breakfast food. Wikipedia notes that Roman legions ate twice baked breads on campaign, and that by 1731 the Royal Navy's ration was a pound of biscuit a day per sailor, hard, dry and made to last months at sea. The gentle, lightly sweet rusks of today's breakfast table are descendants of that tough old ration.

Rusks and biscotti

Italy's biscotti are rusks with ambitions. Cantucci from Prato are baked as a log, sliced and baked again, which makes them hard, dry and perfect for dunking in coffee or in a glass of vin santo after dinner. The method is the rusk's; the almonds and sugar make it a treat; see biscotti.

Rusks and their relatives

The rusk has many close relatives on our shelf. Melba toast is a thin, twice toasted bread, created for the singer Dame Nellie Melba; try Trimlyne Melba toast and see Melba toast. Hardtack, the ship's biscuit, is a rusk taken to extremes; see hardtack. And crispbread and crunchy breakfast biscuits share the same dry, keeping quality: try Ryvita.

Making rusks at home

Rusks are an excellent way to use up bread or cake. Slice a day old loaf, a plain sponge or a batch of buttermilk scones, lay the pieces on a tray and bake them in a very low oven for an hour or more, until they are completely dry and crisp right through. Cool them fully, then keep them in an airtight tin, where they keep well, ready for dunking.

Quick facts

What a rusk is	A hard, dry biscuit or twice baked bread
Britain	Farley's teething rusks, from the 1880s, made by Heinz since 1994
Netherlands	Beschuit; beschuit met muisjes to celebrate a birth
Germany	Zwieback, meaning twice baked
South Africa	Beskuit, dried since the late 1690s to preserve bread
India	Rusks dipped in milky tea

Questions people ask

What is a rusk?

Wikipedia defines a rusk as a hard, dry biscuit or a twice baked bread: bread or a cake like dough baked once, sliced, then baked again slowly until dry and crisp.

What is zwieback?

The German rusk. Wikipedia notes that the name literally means twice baked, which describes how it is made.

What is beschuit met muisjes?

A Dutch tradition for celebrating a birth: beschuit, light, round, crumbly rusks, spread with butter and topped with muisjes, aniseeds coated in sugar.

What are South African rusks?

Beskuit, which Wikipedia says have been dried in South Africa since the late 1690s as a way of preserving bread, and are typically dunked in coffee or tea. Ouma is the best known brand.

Are rusks good for babies?

The NHS says it is best to avoid rusks for teething babies, because nearly all brands contain some sugar. See our guide to biscuits for babies and toddlers.

Sources

1. Rusk, Wikipedia
2. Tips for helping your teething baby, NHS
3. Biscuit, Wikipedia
4. Hardtack, Wikipedia
5. Biscotti, Wikipedia
6. Crispbread, Wikipedia

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