Cheese straws: Mrs Beeton's cayenne cheeses and the cocktail party snack of two continents

From the crackers.biz wiki

A cheese straw is a finger of cheesy, cayenne spiked pastry baked crisp, for nibbling with drinks. Wikipedia counts it among the traditional foods of both England and the Southern states of America. Isabella Beeton printed an early version in 1861, which she called cayenne cheeses: equal weights of butter, flour and grated cheese, cut into four inch fingers. The earliest recipe to use the name, according to the food writer John Martin Taylor, is in an American book, The White House Cookbook, published in 1887.

Pastry that thinks it is a cracker

A cheese straw is a long, thin finger of rich pastry, full of grated cheese and sharpened with cayenne, baked until crisp. It snaps like a cracker and vanishes like a crisp, and it has been handed round at parties for well over a century.

Wikipedia places it in two homes, England and the Southern states of America, where it is eaten before a meal or as a snack. Its basic dough is butter, flour, salt, Cheddar and cayenne pepper, and the dough is either cut into strips or pushed through a cookie press. That puts the cheese straw right beside the cracker: a savoury, crunchy thing to eat with a drink, with the cheese already baked in.

Mrs Beeton's cayenne cheeses

The recipe usually named as the first in print is in the Book of Household Management that Isabella Beeton published in 1861. Number 1642, cayenne cheeses, is short enough to learn by heart.

The quantities are simple: butter, flour and grated cheese, half a pound of each, seasoned with cayenne and salt, a third of a teaspoon apiece. First the butter goes into the flour, rubbed in with the fingertips. Cheese and seasoning go in next, then only as much water as it takes to bring everything together as a paste. Once rolled, the sheet is cut into fingers roughly four inches long.

Into a moderate oven they went, for a quarter of an hour to twenty minutes, coming out only lightly coloured, and Beeton wanted them eaten very hot. Her costing was one shilling and four pence, and she marked them seasonable at any time. By modern standards the mixture is rich: equal weights of butter, flour and cheese mean a third of the dough is fat and another third is cheese.

The recipe in modern measures

Half a pound is about 227g, so Beeton's recipe works out at roughly 225g each of butter, plain flour and a hard grated cheese, with a pinch each of cayenne and salt. A moderate oven is usually taken to mean around 180C. Keep the fingers thin and even, bake them until pale gold, and they will snap cleanly once cool. For a party, a twist in each strip before baking makes them look more festive, and a cookie press gives neat ridged sticks.

The name arrives in America

John Martin Taylor, a writer on Southern food, looked into the history for an essay in the journal Gastronomica in 2008. The earliest recipe he could find under the name cheese straw was in an American book, The White House Cookbook, published in 1887, and it used flour, butter, Parmesan, salt and cayenne.

He also points out that Beeton, like many cookery writers of her day, borrowed most of her recipes, so the idea is probably older than her book. And he goes further, describing cheese straws as we know them as largely an American phenomenon of the last century or so, even though the British adopted them too.

Why the South fell for them

Taylor explains the South's attachment in practical terms. First, keeping quality: most Southern homes had no air conditioning until the late 1960s, and a snack that stayed crisp in the heat was worth having. Second, drink. Port cities such as Charleston, New Orleans and Savannah had a flourishing cocktail culture, and a salty, cheesy stick was exactly what went with it.

He also points to Charleston Receipts, a fundraising cookbook first published in 1950 which he calls the oldest continuously published fundraiser cookbook in America. It prints a standard cheese straw recipe in its chapter on canapés. His tips for the best straws: use a soft Southern flour, fold the dough several times for a flakier result, and remember that the more flavourful the cheese and seasoning, the better the straws.

Serving cheese straws

Cheese straws belong with drinks. Stand them upright in a glass or a jar, where they add height to a spread of flat crackers, or lay them on a board beside the cheese. Because the pastry is so rich, a few go a long way.

If vegetarians are coming, choose the cheese with care. The Vegetarian Society explains that many traditional cheeses are made with animal rennet, and names Parmigiano Reggiano among them, a cheese some cheese straw recipes call for. Many Cheddars are made with vegetarian rennet instead; the label will say.

Cheese straws and the cracker shelf

We do not sell cheese straws. Several things on our shelf do a similar job at a party, though. Crosta and Mollica Classic Torinesi breadsticks give you the long, crisp stick; our article on breadsticks tells their story. For cheese baked into a cracker, Jacob's Cheddars, Carr's Melts Cheese and Nairn's Gluten Free Mini Cheese Bakes are the ones to try, and our guide to cheese crackers compares how much cheese each contains. Britain's other famous savoury stick is the Twiglet.

Quick facts

What they are	Fingers of rich cheese pastry, spiced with cayenne
Traditional in	England, and the American South
Beeton's version	Cayenne cheeses, recipe 1642, 1861
Beeton's proportions	Butter, flour and grated cheese in equal weights
Name first printed	1887, in The White House Cookbook
Shaping	Cut into strips or piped with a cookie press

Questions people ask

What goes into cheese straws?

Wikipedia's basic dough is butter, flour, salt, Cheddar and cayenne. Mrs Beeton's version used half a pound each of three things, butter, flour and grated cheese, with cayenne and salt (a third of a teaspoon of each) and a little water to bind.

Who invented cheese straws?

Nobody can be named. The oldest printed recipe John Martin Taylor found was Beeton's 1861 cayenne cheeses, and he thinks she probably took it from somewhere else, as she did with most of her recipes. The name itself first turns up, he says, in an American book of 1887.

What made cheese straws a Southern favourite?

Keeping quality and cocktails, in John Martin Taylor's view. A crisp snack that lasted was valuable in the heat, since most Southern homes had no air conditioning until the late 1960s, and port cities such as Charleston, New Orleans and Savannah had a flourishing cocktail culture.

How long did Mrs Beeton bake them?

A quarter of an hour to twenty minutes, in a moderate oven, until only lightly coloured, and she wanted them served very hot. Her costing was one shilling and four pence, and she called them seasonable at any time.

Are cheese straws vegetarian?

Only if the cheese is. The Vegetarian Society notes that many traditional cheeses are set with animal rennet, including Parmigiano Reggiano, which some recipes use. Check the cheese.

Can I buy something similar?

We do not sell cheese straws, but for a crisp stick with drinks try Italian breadsticks, and for a cheesy bite, Jacob's Cheddars or Nairn's Mini Cheese Bakes.

Sources

1. Cheese straw, Wikipedia
2. Beeton's Book of Household Management, 1861, chapter 33, Victorian London
3. Cheese straws, by John Martin Taylor, Gastronomica
4. Which cheeses are suitable for vegetarians, and which aren't?, Vegetarian Society

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