Breadsticks: the grissini of Turin, from a prince's plain bread to the cheese board

From the crackers.biz wiki

Breadsticks, grissini in Italian, are thin sticks of bread from Turin, baked until crisp and dry right through. According to Italian Wikipedia they date from 1679, when Antonio Brunero, baker to the Savoy court, followed a physician's advice and made them for the young Victor Amadeus II, whose stomach could not manage the soft crumb of ordinary bread. The traditional dough is only flour, water, yeast and salt, and grissini keep for weeks.

A bread that is all crust

A breadstick is bread with the soft part taken away. The dough is rolled or stretched so thin that, once baked, there is no crumb left in the middle, only a long, dry, crisp stick that snaps with a clean crack. That makes the breadstick a close cousin of the cracker, and on a cheese board or a party table it does the same job: it carries flavour, adds crunch and never goes soggy in the hand.

The Italian name is grissino, grissini in the plural, and it belongs to one city. Wikipedia's description is pencil sized sticks of bread, baked crisp and dry, from Turin, the capital of Piedmont.

Made for a prince who could not eat bread

The story Turin tells about its breadsticks begins with a sickly boy. Italian Wikipedia says that in 1679 the court baker Antonio Brunero, following instructions from Teobaldo Pecchio, a physician from Lanzo, invented the grissino for the young Victor Amadeus II of Savoy. The future king had delicate health and poor digestion, and he could not cope with the crumb of ordinary bread. A bread that was almost entirely crust solved the problem.

The English Wikipedia article tells the same story, describing grissini as a food meant to be easier to digest for a duke who had digestive problems in his childhood.

Who was the boy?

Victor Amadeus II was born in the Royal Palace in Turin in May 1666. His Wikipedia biography describes him as a weak child whose health was closely watched. His father died in June 1675, making him Duke of Savoy at the age of nine, and his mother, Marie Jeanne, ruled as regent in his name and kept real power until 1684. So in 1679, the year of the breadstick, the duke was a boy of twelve or thirteen, and a court physician was still shaping his diet.

He grew up to be a king twice over: King of Sicily from 1713, then King of Sardinia from 1720, until he abdicated in 1730. He died at the Castle of Rivoli, near Turin, in 1732. The bread made for his weak stomach outlived him by centuries.

Where the name comes from

The word grissino, Italian Wikipedia explains, comes from the ghërsa, the classic long loaf of Piedmont. A grissino is, in effect, a ghërsa stretched as far as it will go.

Two ways of shaping a grissino

Turin recognises two traditional kinds, and the difference is all in the baker's hands.

- Rubatà grissini are the older kind. The dough is rolled by hand and pressed slightly flat, which leaves each stick knobbly and a little uneven. Italian Wikipedia gives them a length of anything from 40 to 80cm.
- Stirato grissini came later. Instead of being rolled, the dough is taken by its ends and stretched out to the length of the baker's arms, which Italian Wikipedia says makes the finished stick more crumbly. It was mainly this stretching method that allowed breadsticks to be made by machine, as early as the eighteenth century.

The traditional dough is as plain as bread gets: type 00 flour, water, yeast and salt. Grissini are listed among Italy's traditional food products, the PAT list, in the category of fresh pasta and bakery specialities.

Napoleon's little sticks

Grissini travelled well, and one famous customer made sure of it. According to Italian Wikipedia, at the start of the nineteenth century Napoleon organised a courier run from Turin to Paris whose main cargo was grissini. His name for them was les petits bâtons de Turin: roughly, Turin's little batons. The road from Turin to Paris crosses the Alps, so the story is also a tribute to how well a grissino travels.

Their keeping quality helped. Italian Wikipedia says grissini can be kept for several weeks without spoiling, and it counts that among the reasons they spread so quickly. Like crispbread and the ship's biscuit, a dry, thin bake has little in it that can go stale or mouldy, as our article on crispbread explains.

Breadsticks at the table

In Italy, Wikipedia notes, breadsticks are often offered in restaurants as part of the antipasto, alongside the bread or in place of it, and they can be combined with ingredients such as prosciutto. A grissino wrapped in a thin slice of cured ham is one of the simplest canapés there is.

Because they are dry and rigid, breadsticks also suit soft things that would bend or break a thin cracker: a bowl of houmous, a baked cheese, a pot of pâté. Hold the stick by one end, dip the other, and nothing drips on the tablecloth.

Do not confuse them with American breadsticks. In many North American restaurants, Wikipedia says, breadsticks come soft, usually finished with garlic, butter and cheese. They are closer to a bread roll than to a cracker.

At home, breadsticks earn a place on the cheese board. Stand a handful upright in a glass or a jar and they add height and crunch next to the flat crackers, and they are the easiest thing to hand round with a dip. For the crackers to put beside them, see our guide to the best crackers for cheese.

Breadsticks on our shelf

Crosta and Mollica Classic Torinesi are named for Turin. On their Open Food Facts record the ingredients are wheat flour, extra virgin olive oil at 7 per cent, malted barley flour, salt and yeast, so they carry a little olive oil and malt beyond the traditional dough.

For something more like a snack, Ryvita makes baked sticks in two flavours: salt and vinegar multigrain and sour cream and chive.

For more bread baked until it is all crunch, look at Melba toast, which is made by toasting thin slices of bread until they crisp, and at Twiglets, Britain's own savoury sticks. Our guide to every kind of cracker shows where breadsticks fit in the wider family.

Quick facts

Italian name	Grissino, plural grissini
Home	Turin, in Piedmont
Traditional date	1679, by the court baker Antonio Brunero
Name comes from	The ghërsa, a long Piedmontese loaf
Traditional dough	Type 00 flour, water, yeast and salt
Two classic kinds	Rubatà, rolled by hand; stirato, stretched
Status	A traditional Italian food product (PAT)

Questions people ask

Where do breadsticks come from?

Turin, in Piedmont in the north west of Italy. Wikipedia describes them as originating in the city, and Italian tradition dates them to 1679.

Why were grissini invented?

For a boy with a weak stomach. Italian Wikipedia says the future king Victor Amadeus II had delicate health and could not digest the crumb of ordinary bread, so the court baker Antonio Brunero, guided by the physician Teobaldo Pecchio, made a bread that was nearly all crust.

What is the difference between rubatà and stirato grissini?

Rubatà are rolled by hand and slightly flattened, which leaves them knobbly, and can be 40 to 80cm long. Stirato are stretched by pulling the dough out to the length of the baker's arms, which Italian Wikipedia says makes them more crumbly; that method also allowed machine production from the eighteenth century.

Did Napoleon like grissini?

Italian Wikipedia says so: early in the nineteenth century he arranged a courier run from Turin to Paris, used mostly to carry grissini, and he called them les petits bâtons de Turin.

How long do breadsticks keep?

A long time. Italian Wikipedia says grissini can be kept for several weeks without spoiling, and names that as one reason they caught on so quickly. Keep an opened pack sealed so they stay crisp.

Are American breadsticks the same thing?

No. In many North American restaurants, Wikipedia notes, breadsticks are soft, with garlic, butter and cheese on top. Grissini are dry and crisp.

Sources

1. Breadstick, Wikipedia
2. Grissino, Wikipedia in Italian
3. Victor Amadeus II of Sardinia, Wikipedia
4. Classic Torinesi Breadsticks (5060198640261), Open Food Facts

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