Gluten free crackers: what the label means, why oats need care, and crackers for a gluten free cheese board

From the crackers.biz wiki

A gluten free cracker leaves out wheat, barley and rye and is usually built on specially produced oats, rice, maize and starch. UK law only lets a label say gluten free when the food as sold holds at most 20mg of gluten per kilogram, or 20ppm, and any oats in it have to be kept apart from other grains to stop contamination. According to Coeliac UK, gluten free oats suit most people with coeliac disease, but not quite all.

When the usual crackers are off the menu

Wheat is the backbone of the cracker aisle. It is the flour in water biscuits, cream crackers and nearly every snack cracker, and traditional crispbread is rye. Take gluten away and most of the shelf goes with it, which can make a shared cheese board awkward.

Gluten free crackers get round this by starting from different grains. In the ones we stock, the main ingredient is usually oats grown and handled to keep them free of gluten, helped along by flours of rice and maize and by starches from tapioca, maize and potato. On the board they behave like any other cracker.

The law behind the words

In the UK, gluten free is a legal claim, not a marketing phrase. The retained version of Commission Implementing Regulation 828/2014 allows it only when the food, as the shopper buys it, has no more than 20mg of gluten in each kilogram. Coeliac UK expresses the same threshold as 20 parts per million, and says the rule has been compulsory since January 2012, following the international Codex standard.

A second, weaker phrase exists on paper. Very low gluten covers foods whose wheat, rye, barley or oat ingredients have been specially treated to cut the gluten, with up to 100mg per kilogram. Coeliac UK says no UK foods currently carry it, although some elsewhere in Europe do.

Why oats are a special case

Oats get a paragraph of their own in the regulation. Any oats in a food sold as gluten free have to be grown and processed in a way that keeps wheat, rye, barley and their hybrids out, and the oats themselves may carry no more than 20mg of gluten per kilogram.

The problem is the company oats keep. Coeliac UK points out that standard oats are often processed in the same places as wheat, barley and rye, which can leave them contaminated. Oats kept apart from those grains, and testing at 20ppm or below, can be sold as gluten free, and Coeliac UK says the great majority of people with coeliac disease eat them without trouble.

Not everyone, though. Oats have their own protein, avenin, which resembles gluten, and Coeliac UK notes that a very few people with coeliac disease still react to gluten free oat products. If symptoms carry on, its advice is to go over oats with a health professional.

In short, an ordinary oatcake and a gluten free oatcake are different products. Only the pack that says gluten free counts; our article on oatcakes explains how oatcakes are made.

Inside the packs

Each of our gluten free crackers has an ingredient list on Open Food Facts, and together they show how the recipes work around wheat:

- Nairn's Gluten Free Oatcakes: wholegrain gluten free oats make up 90 per cent, with palm fruit oil, sea salt and raising agents.
- Nairn's Gluten Free Wholegrain Crackers: a blend led by gluten free oats, then maize and rice flours, palm fruit oil, starches from tapioca and maize, brown rice syrup and sea salt.
- Nairn's Super Seeded: that blend plus brown linseed, millet and chia.
- Nairn's Rosemary and Sea Salt Flatbreads: 75 per cent gluten free oats, bound with tapioca and maize starches and flavoured with rosemary and sea salt.
- Schär Crispbread: just rice and maize flours, salt and sugar.

Oats carry the Nairn's range, with rice and maize flours and a mix of starches taking the place of wheat flour. Schär leaves oats out altogether, which is worth knowing for anyone who avoids oats as well as gluten.

Checking before you buy

The words gluten free on the front are the legal promise. Coeliac UK also runs the Crossed Grain trademark, a certification symbol it owns; it says certified products have been through extra checks, including gluten analysis certificates and independent audits of how they are made. On Open Food Facts, the Schär Crispbread record lists the Crossed Grain trademark among its labels.

Turn the pack over too. Allergens are picked out in bold in the ingredients, and some packs carry may contain warnings. That matters with rice cakes in particular: rice has no gluten, but some flavoured rice cakes warn that they may contain wheat, gluten or barley. Our articles on rice cakes and how rice cakes are made look at them in more detail. Recipes change over time, so always trust the current pack over any list, including ours.

A gluten free cheese board

With the right crackers, nobody at the table needs a separate course. Gluten free oatcakes, sturdy and nutty, stand up to a strong Cheddar or a blue. The wholegrain crackers and the rosemary flatbreads are lighter, for

soft and fresh cheeses, and Schär's rice and maize crispbread is a plain, neutral base for anything. Serve them apart from the wheat crackers, on a separate plate with a knife that is used for nothing else. For matching crackers to cheeses, see our guide to the best crackers for cheese, and for the Edinburgh baker behind most of these, Nairn's oatcakes.

Quick facts

Legal threshold	20mg of gluten per kg (20ppm) in the food as sold
Very low gluten	100mg per kg at most; unused on UK foods, Coeliac UK says
Oat rule	Grown and processed so wheat, rye and barley cannot get in
Avenin	The oat protein a very few coeliacs still react to
Crossed Grain	Coeliac UK's certification mark
Our range	Seven Nairn's gluten free lines, plus Schär Crispbread

Questions people ask

What makes a cracker gluten free?

Two things: a recipe with no wheat, barley or rye, and a factory that keeps them out. The UK version of Regulation 828/2014 then sets the test: at most 20mg of gluten in every kilogram of the food as sold.

Can people with coeliac disease eat oatcakes?

Only oatcakes made with gluten free oats. Ordinary oats are frequently handled in the same places as wheat, barley and rye, Coeliac UK explains, which can contaminate them. Gluten free oats suit most people with coeliac disease; a very few still react, and Coeliac UK suggests talking to a health professional if symptoms carry on.

Does Ryvita contain gluten?

Yes. Rye is the base of Ryvita's crispbreads, and wheat is in some of them. Schär's crispbread, made from rice and maize, is the gluten free alternative on our shelf.

What is the Crossed Grain symbol?

A certification trademark owned by Coeliac UK. It says certified products have been through extra checks, including gluten analysis certificates and independent audits of how they are made.

Are gluten free crackers vegan?

Some are. Schär Crispbread has four ingredients, rice and maize flours, salt and sugar, and its record is labelled vegan. The two Nairn's gluten free cheese lines contain milk.

Which gluten free crackers suit a cheese board?

Nairn's gluten free oatcakes for Cheddar and blue cheese, their wholegrain crackers and flatbreads for softer cheeses, and Schär Crispbread as a plain base for anything.

Sources

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5. Original Oatcakes, gluten free (0612322000387), Open Food Facts
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