Crackers in soup: the medieval sop, America's oyster crackers and saltines, and what to crumble into your bowl

From the crackers.biz wiki

Putting crackers in soup continues the medieval sop: bread left to soak in broth, soup or wine. Wikipedia says the words soup and sop come from the same Germanic source, and that supper comes from sop. In the United States, saltines are commonly crumbled into soups, chilis and stews, and small oyster crackers go with clam chowder and oyster stew. From our shelf, cream crackers and oatcakes are good sturdy choices for a hot bowl.

Bread in broth: the oldest way to eat soup

Long before anyone crumbled a cracker into a bowl, people were dropping bread into their broth. In Wikipedia's definition, a sop is bread or toast soaked through with liquid and then eaten, and sops were an everyday medieval food, eaten with broth, with soup or with wine. At simple meals the bread was picked apart into smaller pieces to soak; at grand feasts it could be cut into neat fingers beforehand.

The habit is written into our language. According to Wikipedia, the words soup and sop are cognates, both coming from the same Germanic source, and the word supper comes from sop too. Even the phrase toast of the town goes back to the custom of dipping spiced toast into a drink.

Sops never really went away. Wikipedia counts the bread floating in a French onion soup, a dish that took its present form in the eighteenth century, as a modern sop. In the Alentejo region of Portugal, dry bread is served in fish broth, and in nineteenth century Australia, a sop could mean stale damper bread soaked in cold tea with jam. Crackers in soup are simply the crisp, modern end of the same tradition.

America's soup crackers

Nowhere made more of the idea than the United States, where soup crackers are a category of their own.

The best known is the oyster cracker, a small salted cracker, usually a round about 15mm across, though hexagonal ones exist. Wikipedia lists oyster stew, clam chowder and Cincinnati chili as its usual partners, and says it is eaten crushed into soup or seasoned as a snack. The name has two explanations: either the crackers were first served with oyster stew and clam chowder, or they look a little like an oyster shell. They are not made from oysters.

Two places claim the invention. In Vermont, the Westminster Cracker Company dates its oyster crackers to 1828. In New Jersey, the credit goes to Adam Exton of Trenton, around 1847, whose nephew later recalled

a first output of 100 pounds of crackers a day. Wikipedia describes them as popular in the northeastern United States, especially New England, and around Cincinnati. We will cover them in full in our article on oyster crackers.

Then there is the saltine, first baked in 1876 in St Joseph, Missouri, by the firm of F. L. Sommer, who called it the Premium Soda Cracker and raised it with baking soda. The name saltine followed, and the firm became part of Nabisco in 1898. Wikipedia says saltines are often dipped into soups, chilis and stews or crumbled over them. Our article on saltine crackers tells their story.

A song about crackers in soup

The idea was familiar enough to make a hit. Shirley Temple first sang Animal Crackers in My Soup on screen, in Curly Top in 1935. Ray Henderson wrote the tune, and Irving Caesar and Ted Koehler wrote the lyrics. Wikipedia notes that it has since been recorded by singers from Mae Questel, the voice of Betty Boop, to Anne Murray and Barbra Streisand.

Crackers in soup beyond America

The habit travels. In Jamaica, the Gleaner reported in 2011, people crush or boil their tough Excelsior water crackers in soup; our article on Jamaican water crackers has the story. In Britain, which cracker you choose makes a real difference to how it behaves in the bowl.

Which crackers to put in your soup

Pick the cracker for the job you want it to do.

- For crumbling in and keeping some bite, a sturdy, layered cracker works best. Jacob's Cream Crackers are made from a fermented dough rolled into layers, and they are sturdy enough to keep some bite for a while; see how cream crackers are made.
- For a light crunch on top, thin Carr's Table Water can be broken over the bowl just before eating. They soften quickly, so do not add them early.
- With a thick broth or a winter soup, oatcakes are a natural partner, and Nairn's Gluten Free Oatcakes suit anyone avoiding gluten. Our article on oatcakes explains what makes them different, and a Burns supper starts with soup and ends with oatcakes.
- For tomato soup, a cheesy cracker adds flavour of its own: Jacob's Cheddars bring 11 per cent dried cheese to the bowl. Our guide to cheese crackers compares the others.

A simple rule covers them all: add crackers in the bowl, never in the saucepan. Crumble them in at the last moment for crunch, stir them in and wait a minute if you want them to thicken the soup, or leave them on the side plate so each spoonful can have as much or as little as you like. For guests, put two or three kinds in a basket on the table and let everyone help themselves: soup with a choice of crackers makes an easy lunch. For the whole cracker family, see our guide to every kind of cracker.

Quick facts

Ancestor	The medieval sop (bread steeped in broth or wine)

Word history	Soup and sop share a Germanic source; supper comes from sop
America's soup cracker	The oyster cracker, a salted round about 15mm across
Oyster crackers go with	Clam chowder, oyster stew and Cincinnati chili
Saltines	Commonly dipped or crumbled into soups, chilis and stews
The song	Shirley Temple's Animal Crackers in My Soup (Curly Top, 1935)

Questions people ask

Why do people crumble crackers into soup?

Crackers add crunch and salt at first, then soften and thicken the broth, and they turn a light soup into more of a meal. It is the medieval sop in a crisper form.

Who started putting crackers in soup?

No one person. Soaking bread in broth, soup or wine was common in medieval times, Wikipedia says; a cracker is simply a crisper bread doing the same job.

Why do Americans put crackers in soup?

They have had soup crackers for a long time. Oyster crackers were being made in Trenton, New Jersey, by about 1847, and one Vermont company claims to have made them since 1828; saltines followed in 1876. Wikipedia says saltines are commonly dipped or crumbled in soups, chilis and stews.

Are oyster crackers made from oysters?

No. They are small salted crackers. Wikipedia offers two explanations for the name: they were first served with oyster stew and clam chowder, or they look a little like an oyster shell.

Do Ritz crackers work in soup?

Nothing stops you. Ritz are rich and tender, so crumble them over at the last moment, or keep them on the side for dipping.

What else can go in soup besides crackers?

Croutons are the obvious swap: Wikipedia calls the bread in French onion soup a modern sop. Breadsticks, oatcakes or Melba toast work well too.

Sources

1. Sop, Wikipedia
2. Oyster cracker, Wikipedia
3. Saltine cracker, Wikipedia
4. Animal Crackers in My Soup, Wikipedia
5. Excelsior water cracker at 100, The Gleaner, 17 June 2011

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