Matzo: how matzo crackers are made, the 18 minute rule, and the history of Passover bread

From the crackers.biz wiki

Matzo is an unleavened flatbread made from flour and water only, baked so quickly that it cannot rise. Wikipedia says dough is considered to begin leavening 18 minutes after it gets wet, so matzo for Passover is mixed, rolled, pricked and baked within that time; machine made matzo, invented in France in 1839, gave us the square, cracker like sheets sold today.

The simplest bread there is

Matzo is about as simple as baking gets: flour and water, rolled thin, pricked and baked in a very hot oven. Yet it carries more history and more rules than almost any other food on the biscuit aisle. It is eaten by Jewish families at Passover to remember the Exodus from Egypt, and all year round by people who simply like its plain, toasty crunch. Here is how matzo is made, why it has to be made so fast, and how it became the square crackers sold in boxes today.

What matzo is

Wikipedia describes matzo, also spelled matzah or matza, as an unleavened flatbread that is part of Jewish cuisine, made from flour and water. For Passover, simple matzo made of flour and water is mandatory for all. The flour must be ground from one of five grains: wheat, spelt, barley, rye or oat. There is no yeast, no raising agent, no fat and, in plain matzo, no salt.

Why matzo is eaten at Passover

The reason is in the story of the Exodus. Wikipedia explains that, according to the Torah, the Israelites left Egypt in such haste that they could not wait for their bread dough to rise, so they baked it flat. Matzo is also called lechem oni, the bread of affliction or poor man's bread, a symbol of humility and of slavery. During the eight days of Passover, observant Jews eat no leavened bread at all, and matzo takes its place at the table.

The 18 minute rule

The heart of how matzo is made is time. Wikipedia says that dough is considered to begin the leavening process 18 minutes after it gets wet, and sooner if eggs, fruit juice or milk are added. Matzo for Passover must therefore go from the moment water touches flour to the moment it leaves the oven in under 18

minutes. Passover matzo bakeries typically clean their equipment between batches so that no scrap of old dough can start the next batch rising.

How matzo is made, step by step

The method has barely changed in centuries:

1. **Mix.** Flour and cold water are mixed quickly into a stiff dough, with no resting time.
2. **Roll.** The dough is rolled very thin, by hand into rough rounds or by machine into long sheets.
3. **Prick.** Rows of small holes are pricked across the surface, the same docking that stops water biscuits and crackers puffing up; see crackers.
4. **Bake.** The sheets go into an extremely hot oven for just a few minutes, until crisp and blistered with brown spots.
5. **Cool and pack.** Machine matzo is cut into squares and packed into boxes.

The result is dry, crisp and slightly charred in places, with a clean, toasty wheat flavour.

Shmurah and machine matzo

There are two main kinds. Wikipedia describes shmurah matzo, meaning guarded matzo, as made from grain that has been under special supervision from the time it was harvested, to make sure it cannot come into contact with water and begin to ferment. Shmurah matzo is often baked by hand into irregular rounds, and many families use it at the Seder, the Passover meal.

Machine made matzo came later. Wikipedia says the matzo machine was invented in France in 1839, and that cracker like, mass produced matzo became the most common form in Europe and North America. Machines made it possible to bake matzo evenly and quickly, well within the 18 minutes, and gave us the familiar square sheets.

The great matzo bakers

Wikipedia names Manischewitz, Streit's, Rakusen's and Yehuda among the significant matzo producers. In Britain the best known is Rakusen's of Leeds: Wikipedia records that Lloyd Rakusen, a watchmaker, started the business in 1900 by baking matzo in his own back room, and that all its products are certified kosher. For the company's story, see Rakusen's. For biscuits at Hanukkah, see Hanukkah cookies.

Egg matzo and other kinds

Not all matzo is plain. Egg matzo, or enriched matzo, is made with eggs or fruit juice instead of water, which gives a richer, slightly sweeter cracker. Wikipedia notes that the requirement to eat matzo at the Seder cannot be fulfilled with egg matzo, and that customs differ: Sephardic communities permit such products throughout Passover, while many Ashkenazi Jews restrict them to the elderly or unwell. Outside Passover, you will also find wholemeal, spelt and flavoured matzos.

Matzo meal, matzo balls and matzo brei

Matzo is also an ingredient. Ground matzo, called matzo meal, is used like breadcrumbs or flour during Passover. Wikipedia describes two classic dishes: matzo balls, dumplings made with matzo meal and served in chicken soup, and matzo brei, matzo soaked, mixed with egg and fried. It adds that Sephardic Jews typically cook with whole matzo rather than matzo meal. Broken matzo also makes a good base for a biscuit cake or a crunchy topping.

Matzo as a cracker

Many people who are not Jewish buy matzo simply as a cracker. It is plain, made without fat, and very crisp, so it suits cheese, butter and jam, smoked fish, or a dip. Because it contains no fat and little or no salt, it lets toppings shine, rather like a large water biscuit; see Carr's water biscuits. It is also a close cousin of the ship's biscuit, another bread baked hard and dry to keep; see hardtack.

Kosher and diet notes

Plain matzo is made from wheat or another grain containing gluten, so it is not suitable for people with coeliac disease unless a gluten free version is specified. For kosher biscuits and how they are certified, see kosher biscuits, and for other Jewish bakes, see rugelach and hamantaschen.

Matzo on our shelf

We stock Rakusen's flame baked matzos from Leeds: Rakusen's of Yorkshire matzos 200g, the larger 300g box and Rakusen's flame baked matzo crackers. For other plain crackers, try Carr's table water crackers or Jacob's cream crackers.

Quick facts

What it is	An unleavened flatbread of flour and water
The 18 minute rule	Dough is treated as leavening 18 minutes after it gets wet
Allowed grains	Wheat, spelt, barley, rye or oat
Shmurah matzo	Made from grain guarded from harvest
Machine matzo	Invented in France in 1839
In Britain	Rakusen's of Leeds has baked matzo since 1900

Questions people ask

How are matzo crackers made?

Flour and water are mixed into a stiff dough, rolled very thin, pricked all over so they do not puff up, and baked in a very hot oven for a few minutes. For Passover, the whole process from wetting the flour to baking must take under 18 minutes.

What are matzo crackers made of?

Plain matzo is made only from flour and water. Wikipedia says the flour must come from one of five grains: wheat, spelt, barley, rye or oat. Egg matzo and flavoured matzos add other ingredients.

Why is matzo eaten at Passover?

Wikipedia explains that it commemorates the Exodus: the Israelites left Egypt in such haste that they could not wait for their bread dough to rise. It is also called the bread of affliction, or poor man's bread.

What is the difference between matzo and a cracker?

Matzo is unleavened bread made from only flour and water, with religious rules about how fast it is made, while crackers usually contain fat, salt and raising agents. In use, though, matzo behaves like a large, plain cracker.

How long does matzo last?

Because it is dry and baked hard, matzo keeps for a long time in its sealed box. Check the best before date on the pack, and keep an opened box airtight so it stays crisp.

What is matzo meal?

Ground matzo, used like breadcrumbs or flour. Wikipedia says it is used for matzo balls, served in soup, while matzo brei is made by soaking matzo, mixing it with egg and frying it.

Sources

1. Matzah, Wikipedia
2. Rakusen's, Wikipedia

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