Jamaican water crackers and the crackers of the Caribbean: Excelsior, SodaBix and Shirley

From the crackers.biz wiki

Jamaican water crackers are hard, plain crackers descended from the British water biscuit, and a staple in Jamaica. The best known, Excelsior, comes from the Jamaica Biscuit Company, founded in Kingston in 1910. Jamaicans eat them with steamed fish, cheese or peanut butter, dunk them in tea and crush them into soup. In Barbados, the West India Biscuit Company makes SodaBix crackers and the Shirley biscuit, named in 1952 after a member of its office staff.

Britain's water biscuit, Jamaica's staple

The water biscuit began as a British refinement of the ship's biscuit, and it travelled wherever British ships and bakers did. Wikipedia notes that several versions of the water cracker exist in former British colonies, and it picks out Jamaica in particular: there, it says, water crackers are an everyday staple, made in bulk by more than one local company, and tough.

A Jamaican water cracker is not the delicate, thin wafer that sits on an English cheese board. It is a sturdy cracker that you have to bite with intent, and Jamaicans eat it at every time of day: with breakfast tea, with cheese at lunch, with steamed fish, and as a snack on the bus.

The water cracker has travelled well beyond Jamaica. Wikipedia lists it as still popular in Ireland, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the UK, and in Chile, where McKay is a leading brand. In most of those places it is the thin cracker for cheese and wine; in Jamaica it became something closer to daily bread.

Excelsior: a century of hard crackers

The name most Jamaicans reach for is Excelsior. In June 2011 the Gleaner, Jamaica's national newspaper, marked the brand's centenary with a report on its maker, the Jamaica Biscuit Company, usually called Jambisco. Its founders in 1910, the paper said, were Lionel DeMercado and Alfred DaCosta, both Jamaican, and John Crook, an American, and the first factory stood at No 2 Church Street in Kingston.

By 2011, the Gleaner reported, Excelsior made up half of all the company's sales and profit, and production had risen by half over the previous twenty years. In 1999 Carreras, which then owned Jambisco, sold the company and its Excelsior brand to a Trinidad business. The crackers are exported too, with Britain and the USA the biggest export markets.

My Island Jamaica, a guide to the island, says the crackers are made at 206 Spanish Town Road in Kingston, that they have kept their original size and toughness, and that people commonly call them tough or hard crackers. Besides the original, there is a cinnamon version.

Why they are made so hard

The toughness is the point. According to the Gleaner, the crackers were prepared for people who travelled long distances and needed food that would last. It is exactly the thinking behind the ship's biscuit: bake out the water, and what is left keeps for a very long time. Our article on hardtack and the ship's biscuit tells the older story, and Wikipedia traces water crackers of flour and water back to 1801, when Josiah Bent started baking them at Milton in Massachusetts for long sea voyages.

How Jamaica eats its crackers

Few crackers are asked to do as many jobs. The Gleaner's list of ways Jamaicans use Excelsior is long. People dip them in sweet tea or in milk, hot or cold. They crush them into soup or boil them in it. They eat them fresh with tinned food and all sorts of relishes. Parents even give them to babies who are teething. It also described the cracker as a stomach filler during long waits at clinics and on bus journeys.

My Island Jamaica adds more. It suggests cheese for a lunch on the go; a spread of peanut butter, jam or marmalade, or Solomon Gundy, a spicy smoked herring paste, for a snack; and dunking at breakfast, in whatever is in the cup. Above all, it says, the most loved way to have Excelsior is with steamed fish.

Crushing crackers into soup is a habit Jamaica shares with much of the English speaking world, as our article on crackers in soup shows.

Barbados: SodaBix, Eclipse and Shirley

In Barbados, the biscuit maker to know is WIBISCO, the West India Biscuit Company, based on Gills Road in Bridgetown; it calls itself one of the Caribbean's oldest bakeries. Its savoury crackers include SodaBix and Eclipse Dippers, and it makes sweet biscuits as well.

Its most famous product is sweet rather than savoury. The company's website tells it this way. In 1952 WIBISCO wanted a brand new biscuit, and one of the women working in its office was called Shirley. By the company's account she was an especially sweet person, and the biscuit was given her name. Shirley biscuits now come in coconut, ginger and wheat crunch versions as well as the original, and WIBISCO says Shirley is now on sale in over 20 markets worldwide, Britain, Canada and the USA among them.

What to buy here instead

We do not sell Excelsior, SodaBix or Shirley, and we will not pretend a British cracker is the same thing. But if you want the idea behind a Caribbean water cracker, a hard, plain cracker made to carry other food, our shelf has some close relations:

- Rakusen's Matzos list just wheat flour and water, the purest water cracker recipe we stock; our article on matzo explains why.
- Carr's Table Water is the thin British original; see Carr's water biscuits.

- Jacob's Cream Crackers are sturdier and hold up well in soup.

For the whole cracker family, see our guide to every kind of cracker.

Quick facts

Jamaica's best known cracker	Excelsior water crackers
Maker	Jambisco (Jamaica Biscuit Company)
Founded	Kingston, 1910 (No 2 Church Street)
Share of sales	Half of Jambisco's sales in 2011, the Gleaner reported
Favourite pairing	Steamed fish, according to My Island Jamaica
In Barbados	The West India Biscuit Company of Bridgetown: SodaBix, Eclipse and Shirley

Questions people ask

What are Jamaican water crackers?

Hard, square crackers in the water biscuit tradition, eaten across Jamaica with meals, drinks and snacks. Wikipedia says several Jamaican brands make them in quantity, that the island treats them as a staple, and that they are notably tough.

Why are Jamaican crackers so hard?

They were made to keep. The Gleaner wrote in 2011 that they were prepared for people who travelled long distances and needed food that would last, which is the same reason ship's biscuits were baked hard.

Which company bakes Excelsior?

Jambisco, short for the Jamaica Biscuit Company. According to the Gleaner, three men started it in 1910: Lionel DeMercado and Alfred DaCosta, both Jamaican, and John Crook from the United States.

How do people eat Excelsior crackers in Jamaica?

The Gleaner's list: dipped in sweet tea or in milk, hot or cold; broken up or boiled in soup; eaten with tinned food; and handed to teething babies. My Island Jamaica adds cheese, spreads such as peanut butter, and Solomon Gundy, and says steamed fish is the favourite partner.

Can I buy Jamaican water crackers in the UK?

We do not sell them. Britain is one of Excelsior's export markets, according to both the Gleaner and My Island Jamaica, so look in Caribbean grocers. On our shelf, matzo is the closest thing to a cracker of pure flour and water.

Why is the Shirley biscuit called Shirley?

The West India Biscuit Company's own account: in 1952 its office had a lady called Shirley on the staff, and she was so sweet natured that the new biscuit took her name.

Sources

1. Water biscuit, Wikipedia
2. Excelsior water cracker at 100, The Gleaner, 17 June 2011
3. Excelsior Water Crackers, Jamaica's favourite, My Island Jamaica
4. The Story of a Caribbean Classic, The West India Biscuit Company
5. Home, The West India Biscuit Company
6. Matzo (5010112006161), Open Food Facts

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