Burns Night: oatcakes, Scottish cheese and the last course of a Burns supper

From the crackers.biz wiki

Burns Night falls on 25 January, the birthday of the poet Robert Burns, and a Burns supper traditionally finishes with oatcakes and cheese, after the haggis and the pudding, with whisky and coffee. Wikipedia dates the first supper to 1801, when friends of Burns met at Burns Cottage in Ayrshire. For the cheese course, oatcakes are the Scottish choice, and Dunlop, an Ayrshire cheese Burns is said to have enjoyed, suits the night.

A supper that ends with oatcakes

Every year on or near 25 January, people in Scotland and far beyond sit down to a Burns supper, a meal held for the poet Robert Burns, who was born on that day in 1759. There is haggis, there are speeches and there is poetry. And when all that is done, there is cheese and oatcakes.

That last course is the reason a cracker shop cares about Burns Night. It is a dinner where the cracker has its own place in the running order, and the cracker in question is Scottish: the oatcake.

How the tradition began

Wikipedia records that the first Burns supper was held in 1801 at Burns Cottage in Ayrshire, the house where the poet was born, by his friends, on the fifth anniversary of his death. The first Burns Club was founded in Greenock the same year. Its members held their first supper on 29 January 1802, believing that to be the birthday, before parish records showed that Burns was in fact born on 25 January 1759.

The idea spread widely. Wikipedia notes that Burns suppers are held all around the world, and that around 2,500 of them have been plotted on a world map.

The running order

A traditional Burns supper follows a well known pattern, which Wikipedia sets out:

1. The guests are piped in and the host says a few words of welcome.
2. Everyone says the Selkirk Grace, a short Scottish blessing.
3. The soup course is served.
4. The haggis is carried in to the sound of the bagpipes, and the host or a guest recites Burns's Address to a Haggis before it is cut and eaten.

5. After the meal come the toasts. The Immortal Memory is a speech in praise of Burns. Then come two lighter speeches, the Address to the Lassies and, in answer, the Reply to the Laddies.
6. There are more poems and songs, a vote of thanks, and the evening closes with Auld Lang Syne.

The menu

The food is as fixed as the speeches. Wikipedia's list starts with a soup course, such as Scotch broth, potato soup, cullen skink or cock a leekie. Then comes the haggis, served with mashed potatoes and swede, the neeps and tatties. A pudding follows, perhaps cranachan or tipsy laird. Even the pudding brings oats to the table: Wikipedia lists cranachan's ingredients as whipped cream, whisky, honey, raspberries and oatmeal, and says it began as a harvest celebration after the raspberry picking in August. A traditional way to serve it is to put a dish of each ingredient on the table so that everyone builds their own. The meal finishes with oatcakes and cheese, and the whole supper is accompanied by Scotch whisky and coffee.

Why oatcakes

Oats have long been Scotland's grain. Wikipedia quotes Samuel Johnson's famous dictionary definition of oats, "a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people", and notes that Scottish soldiers of the fourteenth century went on campaign with a sack of oatmeal and a metal plate. In Scotland, oatcakes are cooked on a girdle or baked on a tray, and large rounds are cut into farls before baking.

An oatcake's nutty, slightly coarse bite stands up well to strong cheese, which makes it a good end to a rich supper. Our article on oatcakes tells their history in full.

A cheese with a Burns connection

For the cheese itself, one Scottish cheese has a direct link to the poet. Dunlop cheese comes from Dunlop in Ayrshire, Burns's home county. Wikipedia describes it as a mild, sweet, buttery cheese that resembles a soft Cheddar, first made by Barbara Gilmour in the early eighteenth century from the unskimmed milk of local cows. Her method spread across Scotland, and by 1837 the parish was making about 25,000 stones of it a year.

Wikipedia also quotes Jessie Lewars, a friend of the Burns family, who recalled the poet eating bread and Dunlop cheese from his Ayrshire friends, with his book by his side, "happy as a courtier at the feast of Kings". Local production stopped around 1940, but Wikipedia says that as of 2007 it was still being made near Stewarton and on Islay, and since 2015 it has been protected as Traditional Ayrshire Dunlop.

Another traditional Scottish cheese is made for oatcakes. Caboc is a cream cheese of double cream or cream enriched milk, shaped into a log and rolled in toasted pinhead oatmeal, and Wikipedia says it is served with oatcakes or dry toast.

Oatcakes for the board

Our shelf has oatcakes for every kind of Burns board:

- Stockan's Thick Oatcakes come from Orkney and are sturdy enough for a generous slice; see Stockan's oatcakes.
- Nairn's Rough Oatcakes have a coarse texture that suits a strong Cheddar or a blue.
- Nairn's Fine Oatcakes are smoother, for softer cheeses.
- Nairn's Savoury Biscuit Selection puts several kinds in one box.

Our article on Nairn's oatcakes tells the Edinburgh baker's story.

How much cheese to put out

Coming at the end of a big meal, the cheese course does not need to be large. The Academy of Cheese suggests 50 to 75g of cheese per person after dinner, and no more than three cheeses. Take the cheese out of the fridge 30 to 60 minutes before it is served. For which cracker goes with which cheese, see our guide to the best crackers for cheese.

Quick facts

Date	25 January, Robert Burns's birthday (born 1759)
First supper	Burns Cottage, Ayrshire, in 1801
Order of the meal	Soup, haggis, pudding, then oatcakes and cheese
To drink	Scotch whisky, then coffee
Ayrshire cheese	Dunlop, protected as Traditional Ayrshire Dunlop since 2015
Highland cheese	Caboc, a cream cheese rolled in toasted oatmeal
How many suppers	About 2,500 plotted on a world map

Questions people ask

What is eaten at the end of a Burns supper?

Oatcakes and cheese. Wikipedia's menu runs from a soup course to haggis with mashed potato and swede, a pudding (cranachan, say, or tipsy laird), and then oatcakes and cheese, with Scotch whisky and coffee.

When was the first Burns supper?

In 1801, at Burns Cottage in Ayrshire, held by friends of the poet on the fifth anniversary of his death, Wikipedia says.

In what order does a Burns supper run?

Guests are piped in, the host welcomes them and the Selkirk Grace is said. After the soup, the haggis is piped in and addressed, then eaten. Speeches follow: the Immortal Memory in praise of Burns, then the lassies are addressed and give their reply. Songs and poems, a vote of thanks and Auld Lang Syne end the night.

Which Scottish cheese suits Burns Night?

Dunlop is a good story to tell. It comes from Burns's own county of Ayrshire, and Wikipedia quotes a family friend who said Burns was happy with bread and Dunlop cheese and a book beside him.

Which oatcakes should I buy for a Burns supper?

Rough oatcakes for a sturdy base, fine oatcakes for soft cheese, thick Orkney oatcakes for a hearty board, and a selection box if you want several kinds at once.

What is Caboc?

A Scottish cream cheese made from double cream or cream enriched milk, shaped into a log and rolled in toasted pinhead oatmeal. Wikipedia says it is eaten with oatcakes or dry toast.

Sources

1. Burns supper, Wikipedia
2. Dunlop cheese, Wikipedia
3. Caboc, Wikipedia
4. Cranachan, Wikipedia
5. Oatcake, Wikipedia
6. How much cheese per person: the complete guide for every occasion, Academy of Cheese

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