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Spelt biscuits: the ancient wheat in crackers and cookies, and why it still contains gluten

From the crackers.biz wiki

Spelt is an ancient species of wheat, Triticum spelta, also called dinkel wheat, grown in Europe for thousands of years and revived by organic farmers towards the end of the twentieth century. Wikipedia says spelt contains gluten, so spelt biscuits are not suitable for people with coeliac disease. It gives biscuits and crackers a nutty, slightly sweet flavour.

An old wheat with a new following

Spelt flour can now be found in supermarkets and bakeries as well as health food shops, and on the ingredient lists of biscuits and crackers. It has a reputation as an ancient, wholesome grain, and it gives biscuits a lovely nutty flavour. But there is one important thing many people do not realise: spelt is a kind of wheat, and it contains gluten. Here is what spelt is, where it came from, how it bakes, and what it means for anyone who needs to avoid gluten. For how spelt compares with other flours, see flour for biscuits.

What spelt is

Wikipedia describes spelt, Triticum spelta, also known as dinkel wheat, as a species of wheat and a relict crop, eaten in Central Europe and northern Spain. It is a hexaploid, most likely a hybrid of wheat and emmer, another ancient wheat. So although spelt looks and tastes a little different from the wheat in ordinary flour, it is a close relative, not a different grain. Its other name, dinkel wheat, comes from Dinkel, the German word for spelt.

A long history

Spelt has been grown for a very long time. Wikipedia says it has been cultivated since about 5000 BCE, and that remains of spelt have been found in Denmark, Germany and Poland from the later Neolithic, dating from 2500 to 1700 BCE. In the Iron Age, from about 750 to 15 BCE, it was a major type of wheat in the south of Germany and in Switzerland, and in the Middle Ages it was grown in parts of Switzerland, Tyrol, Germany, northern France and the southern Low Countries.

Today Wikipedia calls spelt a relict crop, one that has survived from an earlier age of farming. The organic farming movement revived its popularity somewhat towards the end of the twentieth century, Wikipedia says, because spelt requires less fertiliser, and spelt flour, spelt bread and spelt biscuits have followed.

Spelt contains gluten

The most important fact about spelt biscuits is that they are not gluten free. Wikipedia says plainly that spelt contains gluten, and is therefore suitable for baking, but that this makes it unsuitable for people with gluten related disorders such as coeliac disease.

UK rules back this up in two ways. Coeliac UK explains that only foods containing 20 parts per million of gluten or less can be labelled gluten free, and a biscuit made with spelt flour, which is a wheat flour, is not one of them. And the Food Standards Agency's allergen guidance lists cereals containing gluten, such as wheat, rye, barley and oats, among the 14 allergens that must be declared, and says allergens must be emphasised each time they appear in the ingredients list of prepacked food. So on a packet of spelt biscuits, expect to see the spelt or wheat picked out, usually in bold. If you need to avoid gluten, choose products labelled gluten free; see gluten free biscuits and gluten free crackers.

How spelt bakes

In the kitchen, spelt behaves much like ordinary wheat flour, with a few differences that bakers soon notice. Many find spelt doughs softer and stickier, especially if they are over mixed, so handle them gently and chill them before rolling. White spelt flour can usually replace plain flour in biscuit recipes almost weight for weight, while wholemeal spelt makes a darker, denser, nuttier biscuit, rather like a wholemeal digestive; see digestive biscuits. Some bakers find spelt needs a little less liquid, so add water or milk a spoonful at a time.

Spelt in biscuits and crackers

Spelt suits biscuits with plenty of character. Its nutty flavour works well in oat and spelt biscuits, shortbread, digestives and crackers for cheese, and it pairs well with honey, figs, seeds and sea salt. Scandinavian style crispbreads and sourdough crackers often combine spelt or wheat with rye; see crispbread. Wholemeal spelt also makes a very good homemade digestive, with exactly the rough, wholesome texture a digestive needs.

Peter's Yard fig and spelt crackers

We stock one spelt biscuit: Peter's Yard fig and spelt sourdough crackers. The Open Food Facts record for this barcode lists spelt wheat flour, milk, fig pieces, sourdough, rye flour, water, honey and sea salt, and gives its allergens as gluten and milk, so they are not suitable for anyone avoiding gluten or dairy. Always check the pack for the latest ingredients. The fig and honey make them a natural partner for blue cheese and hard cheeses. For the story of the Swedish inspired bakery behind them, see Peter's Yard, and try the original sourdough crispbreads and the sourdough crackers selection box too.

Baking spelt biscuits at home

For a simple spelt biscuit, rub 100g of cold butter into 175g of white or wholemeal spelt flour with 50g of light brown sugar and a pinch of salt, then bind the crumbs with a spoonful or two of milk to make a firm dough. Chill it for 20 minutes, roll it about 5mm thick, cut rounds and bake at about 180°C, or 160°C in a fan oven, for 12 to 15 minutes until golden.

Add 50g of porridge oats and a spoonful of honey for a rustic, flapjack flavoured biscuit, or leave out the sugar and add seeds and sea salt for crackers to eat with cheese. For a vegan version, use a plant based

baking block instead of butter, plant milk instead of milk, and golden syrup rather than honey. Whichever you bake, remember that these biscuits contain gluten.

Gluten free alternatives

If you need a cracker without gluten, choose one made from gluten free oats, rice or maize and labelled gluten free, such as Nairn's gluten free oatcakes or Schär crispbread, and always check the pack.

Quick facts

What it is	An ancient species of wheat, Triticum spelta
Also called	Dinkel wheat
Grown since	About 5000 BCE
Revival	Organic farming, late twentieth century
Gluten	Yes, spelt contains gluten
Not suitable	For people with coeliac disease

Questions people ask

What are spelt biscuits?

Biscuits and crackers made with spelt flour, an ancient species of wheat, instead of or alongside ordinary wheat flour. Spelt gives them a nutty, slightly sweet flavour.

Are spelt biscuits gluten free?

No. Wikipedia says spelt contains gluten, which makes it unsuitable for people with gluten related disorders such as coeliac disease. Choose biscuits labelled gluten free instead.

Is spelt a type of wheat?

Yes. Wikipedia describes spelt, Triticum spelta, also known as dinkel wheat, as a species of wheat, most likely a hybrid of wheat and emmer.

Why is spelt popular again?

Wikipedia says the organic farming movement revived its popularity somewhat towards the end of the twentieth century, because spelt needs less fertiliser.

Can I use spelt flour instead of plain flour in biscuits?

Usually, yes. White spelt flour behaves much like plain flour, while wholemeal spelt gives a darker, denser, nuttier biscuit. Spelt doughs can be softer, so chill them before rolling.

Can spelt biscuits be vegan?

Yes, if they are made without butter, milk, eggs or honey. Use a plant based baking block instead of butter and bind the dough with a little water or plant milk, and always check the pack of any shop bought biscuit.

Sources

1. Spelt, Wikipedia
2. Gluten free food labelling law explained, Coeliac UK
3. Allergen guidance for food businesses, Food Standards Agency
4. Peter's Yard fig and spelt sourdough crispbreads, Open Food Facts

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