Sesame biscuits and crackers: barazek, benne wafers, ka'ak and sesame crispbreads

From the crackers.biz wiki

Sesame is one of the oldest oilseed crops, domesticated more than 3,000 years ago, and its seeds give biscuits and crackers a nutty, toasty crunch. Famous sesame biscuits include barazek from Damascus, made with sesame and pistachio, ka'ak rings, and the benne wafers of Charleston, South Carolina. Sesame is one of the 14 allergens that must be declared on food in the UK.

A seed with crunch

Sesame seeds are small, but they bring a lot to a biscuit: a toasty, nutty flavour, a delicate crunch and a pretty speckled finish. Across the Middle East, sesame biscuits are sold in every pastry shop; in the American South, a thin sesame wafer is a treasured local speciality; and in Britain, sesame turns up on crackers and crispbreads. Here is where sesame comes from, the great sesame biscuits of the world, what sesame crackers are made of, and why sesame labelling matters so much.

What sesame is

Wikipedia describes sesame, Sesamum indicum, as a plant native to India, with wild relatives across sub Saharan Africa. It is one of the oldest oilseed crops known, domesticated well over 3,000 years ago: charred sesame found in the Indian subcontinent dates to about 3500 to 3050 BC, and sesame was traded between Mesopotamia and India by 2000 BC. In 2024, Wikipedia says, the world grew 6.7 million tonnes of sesame, with India the largest producer, followed by Myanmar and Sudan.

Sesame is used on bread, crackers and biscuits around the world, and ground into tahini paste and halva in the Middle East. Wikipedia even connects the magic words open sesame, from Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, to the way sesame pods split open when they are ripe.

Barazek, the sesame biscuit of Damascus

The most famous sesame biscuit of the Middle East is barazek. Wikipedia describes it as a Levantine cookie whose main ingredient is sesame, often with pieces of pistachio, with a sweet, buttery and nutty flavour and a crisp, brittle texture. It is traditionally made from flour, clarified butter called samneh, sugar, sesame, pistachios and yeast. Barazek probably originated under Ottoman rule in Damascus, particularly in the Al Midan neighbourhood, and today it is sold in pastry shops across Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Syria and

the wider Arab world. Historically, Wikipedia adds, barazek sold especially well during Ramadan, and in Jerusalem street vendors still sell them through the holy month; see Eid biscuits. For more pistachio biscuits, and the Dubai chocolate craze, see pistachio biscuits.

Ka'ak and the sesame rings

Sesame also covers many of the ka'ak of the Arab world, from sesame covered bread rings to dry, crunchy biscuit rings; see ka'ak. Sesame biscuits and rings are baked for festivals across the region, alongside date filled maamoul; see maamoul and Lebanese biscuits. Searches for Greek, Moroccan, Lebanese and Chinese sesame biscuits show how many baking traditions share the seed.

Benne wafers of Charleston

On the other side of the Atlantic, sesame has its own history. Wikipedia describes benne wafers as thin sesame seed cookies with African origins, a traditional Lowcountry food most associated with Charleston, South Carolina. Benne comes from West African languages and means sesame. Wikipedia says benne seeds first came to America on ships carrying enslaved Africans, who grew the plants in their own gardens on plantations, and that plantation owners also grew benne to make oil as a cheaper alternative to imported olive oil.

Sesame crackers and crispbreads

In Britain, the most familiar sesame biscuit is savoury. Ryvita sesame crispbread is a good example of what sesame crackers are made of: Open Food Facts lists it as 81% wholegrain rye flour, rye bran, 11% sesame seeds and salt. For the Ryvita story, see Ryvita, and for more seeded crackers, such as Nairn's gluten free super seeded crackers and Peter's Yard seeded flatbreads, see seeded crackers. Check each pack for sesame, because seed mixes vary.

Baking sesame biscuits at home

Sesame biscuits are quick to make, and toasting the seeds first makes all the difference. Toast 75g of sesame seeds in a dry frying pan over a medium heat, shaking the pan, until they turn golden and smell nutty, then tip them onto a plate to cool.

For thin, crisp sesame wafers in the style of benne wafers, beat 60g of soft butter with 100g of light brown sugar, beat in one egg and a few drops of vanilla, then stir in 60g of plain flour, a pinch of salt and the toasted sesame seeds. Drop half teaspoons of the mixture onto lined trays, well apart because they spread, and bake at about 170°C, or 150°C in a fan oven, for 8 to 10 minutes until golden brown. Let them cool on the tray for a minute before lifting them off; they crisp as they cool.

For a barazek style biscuit, press balls of a buttery dough into a plate of sesame seeds on one side and chopped pistachios on the other, flatten them and bake until pale gold.

Sesame biscuits and mint tea

Sesame biscuits from the Middle East are made for sweet mint tea.

Sesame and allergies

Sesame is one of the 14 allergens that the Food Standards Agency lists as having to be declared on food in the UK. Its labelling has a sad history. Wikipedia explains that after the death of Natasha, a teenager who died after eating a sandwich containing sesame, food prepacked on the premises for direct sale must carry full ingredient labelling. The FSA says that from 1 October 2021, food prepacked for direct sale must have a label showing a full ingredients list; the rule is known as Natasha's Law. If you are buying or baking for someone with a sesame allergy, check every label, including the may contain warnings.

Quick facts

Sesame	Sesamum indicum, native to India
Domesticated	Well over 3,000 years ago
World crop, 2024	6.7 million tonnes, India first
Barazek	Sesame and pistachio biscuits, Damascus
Benne wafers	Charleston, South Carolina
Allergen	One of the UK's 14

Questions people ask

What are sesame biscuits?

Biscuits or crackers made with or coated in sesame seeds, from Levantine barazek and ka'ak to Charleston's benne wafers and sesame crispbreads.

What are barazek?

Wikipedia describes barazek as a Levantine cookie whose main ingredient is sesame, often with pieces of pistachio, which probably originated in Damascus under Ottoman rule.

What are benne wafers?

Thin sesame seed cookies with African origins, Wikipedia says, a traditional Lowcountry food most associated with Charleston, South Carolina. Benne comes from West African languages and means sesame.

Is sesame an allergen?

Yes. Sesame is one of the 14 allergens that must be declared on food in the UK. Natasha's Law, which requires full ingredient labels on food prepacked for direct sale, is named after Natasha, who died after eating a sandwich containing sesame.

What are sesame crackers made of?

Open Food Facts lists Ryvita sesame crispbread as 81% wholegrain rye flour, rye bran, 11% sesame seeds and salt.

Where does open sesame come from?

Wikipedia links the phrase from Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves to the way ripe sesame pods split open.

Sources

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