

From Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

Cracking Good Crackers

by Lydia Lovell

Of all the pastries we Americans eat, perhaps the commonest is the cracker. Crackers come in many more shapes and sizes than breads, cakes, and pies, combined. I've known a well-stocked supermarket to devote an entire aisle to crackers. And just think of all we purchase, week after week. We buy crackers for soup and chowders, for cheese, for peanut butter and marshmallow, for hors d'oeuvres, and just to nibble on like those tiny fish-shaped crackers.

And crackers come in a multitude of flavors: cheese, onion, bacon, garlic, sesame, and other herbs. They come with both salted and unsalted tops. Some crackers are entirely salt-free, such as matzos. Some are sweet, good with milk, and some are bland, ideal for strong cheeses.

And crackers come in all kinds of packaging. They are to be found in tins, in long narrow boxes, in large flat ones, in small, compact, brick-shaped packages, or loosely packed in large paper bags and boxes. And crackers may be made from all-purpose white wheat flour, cracked wheat flour, whole wheat flour, rye flour, corn flour, rice flour, potato flour, and cassava. Some are thick, some are thin. Their variety is practically endless.

Have you ever wondered, since we use crackers both with and between meals, whether you might make them? As prices per package escalate with each passing week, it has occurred to me that supplying my own crackers might be worth the effort. Chances are good most of us have the necessary ingredients in the house. All that's needed, then, is some recipes. After checking dozens of cookbooks, I was astonished to find a severe dearth of cracker recipes. In fact, it was necessary to conduct an intense search of Aunt Olivia's most esoteric files to come up with some. And, since they are rare, I felt I should test them to see if the results were worth the time, effort, and cost of materials. Among the recipes I gathered, there are but five you may want to try.

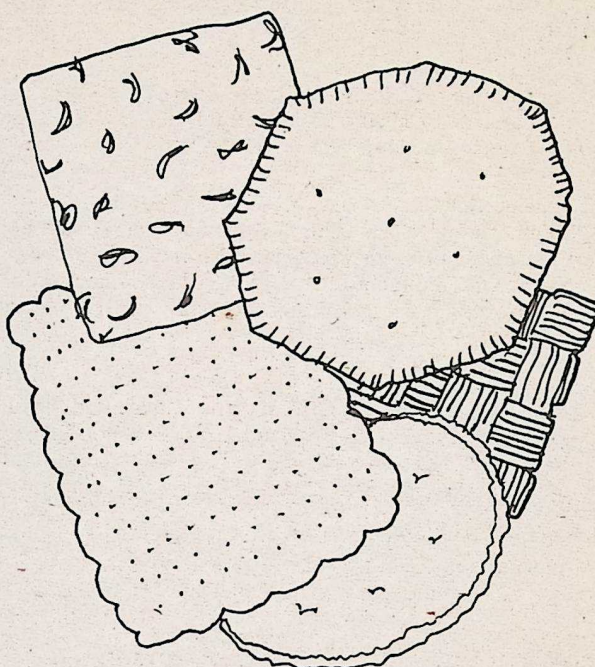
Cracker-making, I've concluded, is worth doing only if you're around the house anyhow and only if you're willing to accept some variations in the results. It's not for the busy career woman juggling housekeeping chores evenings and weekends. Nor is it for the perfectionist. By that I mean, you may get from the same batch of cracker dough a couple of dozen excellent crisp, crackling crackers. Another dozen may not be baked quite long enough because they were a little too thick; the rest may be overdone because they were rolled too thin. For the most part, however, homemade crackers are superior to those your supermarket offers. And if you worry about additives and preservatives in foods you eat, when you mix your own dough, you know exactly what goes in it.

Aunt Olivia's recipe for a plain, ordinary, unflavored, salt-free cracker is called, simply enough, **Crackers**.

2 C. flour
¼ C. butter

Enough milk to make
a stiff paste

In a medium bowl, cut butter into flour with pastry blender, or two knives, until mealy. Add milk, tablespoonful by tablespoonful, until dough forms a stiff ball. Place dough on floured board and beat it smooth with a rolling pin. By that I mean, **BEAT IT**. Hit it with the rolling pin until it is flat. Fold it twice, and hit it some more, repeating until the dough is smooth. Then



roll it thin, cut into diamond shapes or squares, arrange them on a cookie sheet leaving spaces between, and prick each with a fork. Bake at 375° until done, about 10 minutes. Let cool on tin for two minutes, then with a spatula transfer to brown paper. A clean grocery bag, slit and laid flat, makes an ideal cooling surface. Makes 3-4 dozen. If you want a flavored cracker, sprinkle with onion powder, garlic powder, salt, celery flakes, sesame seeds, paprika, cayenne pepper, experiment with your own herb combinations, or use commercial seasoned salt, before baking.

Uncle Henry's favorite homemade crackers were those Aunt Olivia kept in good supply and which he ate at bedtime with a cup of hot tea laced with milk. "Gives a man bad dreams," he'd say, "to sleep on an empty stomach." He and I would polish off six or eight **Lemon Crackers** apiece with our mugs of tea while Aunt Olivia took only two or three with hers.

2½ C. sugar
3 eggs
1 C. lard (margarine)
1¼ C. milk

1 t. lemon extract
1 t. baking powder
flour enough to make
a stiff dough

In a large bowl, cream sugar and margarine together, beat in eggs, stir in milk and lemon extract. Sift baking powder with a cup of flour and stir into liquid mixture. Continue adding flour, up to four more cups, until dough is stiff. Roll out thin on a floured board, cut into squares or diamonds, arrange on cookie sheets, pierce with a fork, and bake at 350° until golden. Dry on brown paper until cool. Store in air-tight container. Makes 8 to 10 dozen small crackers.

For special occasions, perhaps when she wanted to serve canapes, Aunt Olivia baked **Cheese Crackers**, then topped them with ground ham seasoned with minced celery and tossed

lightly with mayonnaise. Slices of stuffed green olives furnished a crowning touch.

1 C. all-purpose flour
⅛ t. cayenne pepper

½ C. margarine, softened
2 C. shredded Cheddar
cheese

In a medium bowl, mix all ingredients with your hands to form a stiff dough. Pinch off pieces of dough and roll between palms to form balls an inch in diameter. Place balls at least two inches apart on ungreased cookie sheet. Choose a glass with a perfectly flat bottom. Dip bottom of glass in flour and press each ball flat, re-flouring after each press. Bake at 350° until lightly tinged with brown, about 10 minutes. Remove from cookie sheet with a spatula and cool completely before storing. Yield: 30 to 40 crackers.

If you like the flavor of caraway, these are good; if you don't, omit the caraway, but do try these crackers. Aunt Olivia's **Corn Meal Caraway Bow Ties** are good for dipping or snacking with a glass of milk.

1½ C. flour
½ C. corn meal
1½ t. salt
½ C. margarine
Coarse or sea salt

½ t. celery seed
¼ t. caraway seed
(optional)
½ C. dairy sour cream
2 T. ice water

Preheat oven to 325°. In a large bowl, combine flour, corn meal, and salt. Cut in margarine until mixture is mealy. Add celery seed and caraway. Combine sour cream and water; combine mixtures. Stir until dry ingredients are just moistened. Do not overmix. Roll out on floured board to 1/16" thickness. Use a floured 3" cookie cutter to cut crackers. Place on ungreased cookie sheet and sprinkle sparsely with salt. Pinch circles together like bow ties. Bake about 14 minutes until golden. Cool and store in air-tight tin until ready to use. Makes 45 to 50 crackers.

Finally, try **Cheddar Wheat Germ Wafers**. These really taste fine and Aunt Olivia believed they were particularly nutritious.

¾ C. unsifted flour
¼ C. wheat germ
½ t. salt
½ C. margarine, softened
¼ C. finely minced onion

1½ C. sharp Cheddar
Cheese, grated
½ C. finely chopped
walnuts

In a medium bowl, combine dry ingredients. Cut in margarine until mixture is mealy. Add remaining ingredients and mix well. Press into a firm ball. Divide ball in two. Use hands to shape two rolls, each about 1½" in diameter, 6-7" long. Wrap logs in plastic and refrigerate at least an hour. Slice 12 wafers, ¼" thick. Place on greased baking sheet. Bake at 350° until golden, 14 minutes. Alternate logs, replacing each in refrigerator after slicing. Store wafers in container with loose-fitting cover. Yield: about 3 dozen.

If you make your own crackers, I'll wager you'll find snacking harder to resist than ever.

Bon appetit.