## making crackers

It's not certain where crackers got their start, but before they were called crackers—sometime in the mid nineteenth century—they were referred to as hardtack, unleavened bread, or wafer biscuits. Most likely they were taken on long ocean voyages and other journeys where fresh bread couldn't be baked daily. In the latter part of the century, they began to be commercially produced, packaged, and shipped worldwide. But, like so many other things that were created by women in their kitchens, the homemade version was passed over in favor of something more modern and convenient.

So, you may wonder—why make homemade crackers? Well, for one, they're easier to make and more healthful than cookies, and as with cookies, homemade is better. The handcrafted look and fresh taste of a batch of crackers from your kitchen make a simple service of cheese and crackers for guests special. In fact, these crackers are good enough to serve on their own with drinks, without the cheese. And a simple box or tin with an assortment of savory crisps is a most welcome gift, whether you are arriving for Thanksgiving dinner or looking for something a little different for December gift giving.

Crackers are so easy to make that a batch can be whipped up in time for last-minute guests, and the recipe easily committed to memory. Most recipes make use of ingredients already in your kitchen: flour, butter or oil, milk or other liquid, a bit of sugar, and sometimes eggs. Freshly toasted spices, rich, sharp cheeses, and fresh herbs can give crackers a depth of flavor and an addictive quality that makes them delicious snacks in their own right. Others are more than willing to be a blank canvas for a brushstroke of cream cheese and shred of smoked salmon, or perhaps just a light coating of sweet,

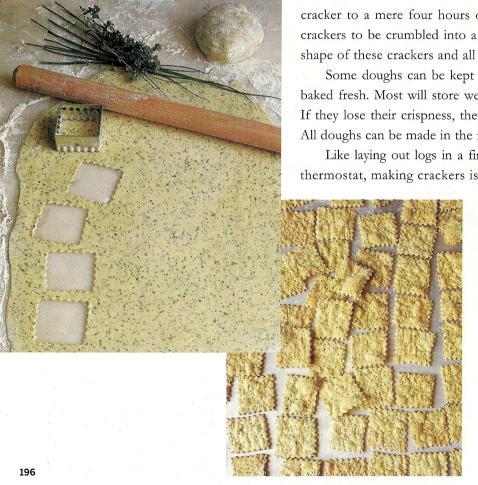
fresh butter. We've even shortened and simplified the classic thirty-six-hour soda cracker to a mere four hours of waiting (not work) to create little spherical soup crackers to be crumbled into a bowl or just popped in your mouth. Of course the shape of these crackers and all the others can be changed to suit your mood.

Some doughs can be kept in the freezer or refrigerator, ready to be sliced and baked fresh. Most will store well for a week or two, or even longer if kept airtight. If they lose their crispness, they can be revived by drying them out in a low oven. All doughs can be made in the food processor, but can also be easily made by hand.

Like laying out logs in a fireplace and building a fire, instead of turning up the thermostat, making crackers is a simple pleasure, one that is worth reviving.

OPPOSITE: A trio of wooden boxes, covered with tissue paper and tied with ribbons, hold walnut blue-cheese coins, caraway cards, wheat squares, sesame rounds, and herb swatches. LEFT: Herb swatches can be made in about twelve minutes.

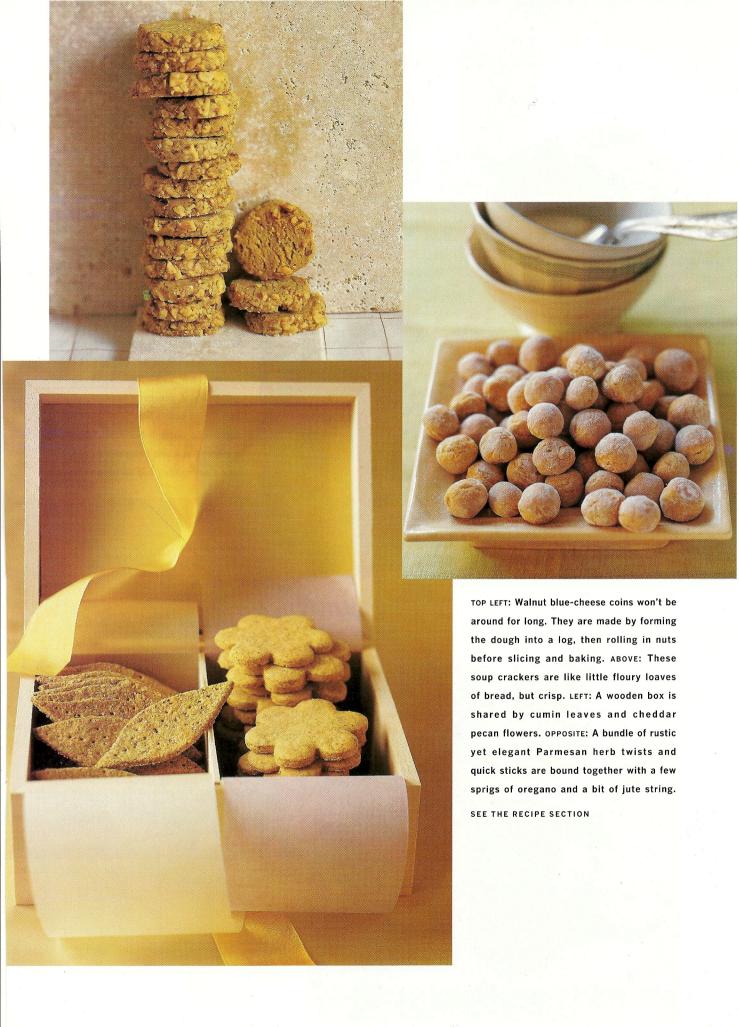
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electric mixer with whisk attachment, beat eggs on medium-low speed until fluffy. While mixer is running, combine remaining 3/4 cup sugar and 1/4 cup water in small saucepan over medium-high heat. Cook, stirring occasionally, until temperature registers 245° (firm-ball stage) on a candy thermometer, about 5 minutes. Immediately turn mixer to high speed. Pour sugar mixture into running mixer in a thin stream; continue to beat until mixture increases in volume and is pale yellow, about 5 minutes. Meanwhile, place bowl with softened gelatin over saucepan of simmering water; stir until gelatin has dissolved. 3. Turn mixer to low; add gelatin mixture. Add pumpkin purée, ½ teaspoon cinnamon, 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg, allspice, ginger, salt, and sour cream; combine. Pour filling into pie crust; refrigerate until set, 4 hours or overnight. 4. To serve, whisk heavy cream, confectioners' sugar, and vanilla in a medium bowl until stiff. Using an Ateco #864 star tip, pipe whipped cream in rosettes onto pie. Sift remaining tablespoon cinnamon on top.

set aside to soften, 10 minutes. In bowl of

## MAKING CRACKERS

### Whole-Grain Buttermilk-Cumin Crackers

MAKES 60

The crackers will have better flavor if you toast and grind the cumin seeds.

- 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> cups whole-wheat flour, plus more for dusting
- ½ cup toasted wheat germ
- 1/4 cup sunflower seeds
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin seed
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut up
- ½ cup nonfat buttermilk Kosher salt for sprinkling Vegetable-oil cooking spray
- 1. Heat oven to 350°. Spray two baking sheets with cooking spray; set aside. In food processor, pulse flour, wheat germ, sunflower seeds, cumin, baking powder, baking soda, and table salt. Add butter, and process until mixture resembles coarse meal. With machine running, gradually add buttermilk; process until dough comes together and is moist. 2. Transfer dough to a lightly floured surface, and allow to rest for 5 minutes. Roll until ½ to ½ inch thick. Sprinkle with kosher salt; roll gently to press salt into dough.
- 3. Cut dough into 4-inch-long leaf shapes, or

other desired shape, and transfer leaves to ungreased baking sheets. Pierce each cracker liberally with a fork. Bake until hard, about 16 minutes. Transfer to wire rack to cool. Store in an airtight plastic container.

## Simple White Crackers

MAKES 20

You'll have to discard any scraps, since this dough can't be rolled out again.

- 1 cup all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, cut up
- ¹/₃ cup plus 1 tablespoon milk Kosher salt for sprinkling
- 1. Heat oven to 325°. In a food processor, pulse flour, table salt, and sugar. Add butter, and pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. With machine running, gradually add milk; process until dough comes together.
- 2. Transfer dough to lightly floured surface. Roll into 10-by-12-inch sheet, 1/16 of an inch thick. Sprinkle with kosher salt; roll to gently press the salt into the dough.
- 3. Cut dough into 2½-inch squares; carefully transfer to ungreased baking sheet. Liberally pierce with fork. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, until just brown and firm to touch. Transfer to rack to cool. Store in airtight plastic container.

## Wheat Squares

MAKES 90

- 1 cup all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- 1 cup whole-wheat flour
- 2 tablespoons toasted wheat germ
- 2 teaspoons table salt
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut up
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 3/4 cup milk
- egg white
   Kosher salt for sprinkling
- 1. Heat oven to 325°. In a food processor, pulse the flours, wheat germ, and table salt. Add the butter; pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. With machine running, gradually add honey and milk; process until the dough comes together.
- 2. Transfer the dough to a lightly floured surface, and divide into four equal parts. Roll each into a 9½ -by-10½-inch sheet, 1/8 of an inch thick. Transfer to ungreased baking sheets. Score into 1½-inch squares.

Using a fork, pierce each square three times. 3. Brush egg white over dough; sprinkle with kosher salt. Bake for 20 minutes, until crackers become stiff. Turn with spatula; bake an additional 6 to 8 minutes, or until crackers are light brown and firm to the touch. Transfer to rack to cool. Store in an airtight plastic container.

## Walnut Blue-Cheese Coins

MAKES 30

These crackers are very rich, yet still quite light and crispy.

- 1 cup toasted walnuts (3½ ounces)
- 3/4 cup all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut up
- 1/4 pound blue cheese, crumbled Kosher salt for sprinkling
- 1. In a food processor, finely grind ½ cup walnuts. Add the flour, table salt, pepper, and baking soda; pulse to combine. Add butter; pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. Add cheese; pulse until the dough comes together, about 15 seconds.
- 2. Heat oven to 350°. Transfer dough to lightly floured surface; divide into two equal parts. Using your hands, roll dough into two 1½-inch-diameter logs. Coarsely chop remaining ½ cup walnuts; sprinkle over a clean work surface. Roll logs in walnuts; wrap each log in plastic wrap; chill until firm, at least 3 hours. 3. Slice logs into ¼-inch-thick coins. Transfer to ungreased baking sheet; sprinkle lightly with kosher salt. Bake for 15 minutes, until centers are firm to touch. Transfer to a wire rack to cool. Store in an airtight container.

## Parmesan-Herb Twists

MAKES 28 TWISTS

- $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- ½ teaspoon salt Pinch freshly ground pepper
- 2 tablespoons mixed fresh herbs, such as sage, thyme, or rosemary, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 egg white
- 1 teaspoon milk
- ¹/₄ cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (1 ounce)
- 1. Heat oven to 325°. In food processor, pulse flour, salt, pepper, and herbs. Add oil, and pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal.

With machine running, add ½ cup cold water; process until dough comes together.

- 2. Transfer dough to lightly floured surface; divide into two equal parts. In small bowl, whisk together egg white and milk; set aside. Roll out dough into a 7-by-9-inch sheet, ½ of an inch thick. Brush dough with egg wash; sprinkle generously with cheese.
- 3. Cut dough into ½-inch strips. Twist each strip; pull until 16 to 18 inches long. Transfer to ungreased baking sheet. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, until dough just begins to brown and feels firm to the touch. Transfer to wire rack to cool. Store in airtight plastic container.

## Mixed-Herb Swatches

MAKES 28

This dough is very fragile. Let rest for a minute or two before transferring to baking sheet.

- 1 cup all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 2 tablespoons fresh chives, coarsely chopped
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme, coarsely chopped

- 1 tablespoon fresh oregano, coarsely chopped
- 4 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut up
- 1/4 cup sour cream

Kosher salt for sprinkling

- 1. Heat oven to 325°. In a food processor, pulse flour, table salt, pepper, and herbs. Add butter; pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. With machine running, add sour cream; process until dough comes together.
- 2. Transfer to a lightly floured surface; divide into two equal parts. Roll out into 10-by-12-inch sheets, ½ of an inch thick. Sprinkle with kosher salt; roll to gently press salt into dough. 3. Using crimping wheel or fluted square cookie cutter, cut dough into 2½-inch swatches; transfer to ungreased baking sheet. Pierce swatches liberally with a fork. Bake for 12 to 14 minutes, until swatches are just brown and feel firm to the touch. Transfer to wire rack. Store in airtight plastic container.

## **Curried Parchment Bread**

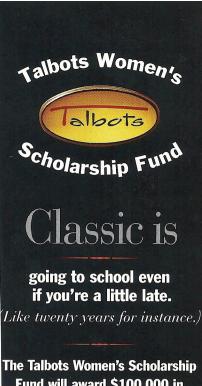
MAKES 4

If the dough is too wet, sprinkle with flour.

- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic

- 2 tablespoons minced fresh ginger (½ ounce)
- 1 cup minced onion (5½ ounces)
- 1/8 teaspoon cayenne
- 1/8 teaspoon cardamom
- 1/4 teaspoon turmeric
- 1/4 teaspoon ground coriander
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon curry powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- 1 tablespoon solid vegetable shortening
- 1. Heat oven to 325°. Warm butter in sauté pan over medium heat. Add garlic, ginger, and onion; cook until very fragrant, about 3 minutes. Stir in spices and ½ teaspoon salt, and pepper to taste; cook for 30 seconds. Remove from heat; allow to cool.
- 2. In a food processor, pulse flour and remaining ½ teaspoon salt. Add shortening; pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. With machine running, gradually add 5 tablespoons of spice mixture; process until the dough comes together.
- 3. Transfer dough to a lightly floured surface; divide into four equal parts. Roll out dough as

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thinly as possible into a 9½-by-11-inch rectangle. Transfer to an ungreased baking sheet; bake for 10 minutes. Turn, and bake an additional 5 minutes, until firm. Transfer to wire rack to cool. Store in airtight plastic container.

## Cheddar-Pecan Flowers

MAKES 16

This dough is delicate and needs to be handled carefully.

- ½ cup all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> cup finely ground pecans, toasted (2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> ounces)
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne
- 2 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut up
- 1/4 pound sharp cheddar cheese, grated Kosher salt for sprinkling
- 1. Heat oven to 350°. In food processor, pulse flour, pecans, table salt, black pepper, and cayenne. Add butter; pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. Add cheese; pulse until pieces are no longer visible. With machine running, gradually add 2 tablespoons cold water; process until dough comes together.
- 2. Transfer to a lightly floured surface; divide dough into two equal parts. Roll out each into a ½-inch thickness. Sprinkle with kosher salt.
- 3. Cut dough into 2½-inch flower shapes, or other desired shape; transfer to ungreased baking sheet. Bake for 15 minutes, until centers are firm to the touch. Cool on wire rack. Store in airtight plastic container.

## Caraway-Onion Cards

MAKES 24

- 1 cup all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- 1 cup rye flour
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- 4 tablespoons toasted caraway seeds
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut up
- 1 cup minced onion
- 1 large egg white Kosher salt for sprinkling
- 1. Heat oven to 350°. In food processor, pulse flours, table salt, pepper, sugar, and 2 tablespoons caraway seeds. Add butter; pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. Add onion; pulse until well combined, about 30 seconds. With machine running, gradually

add between 1 and 2 tablespoons cold water, until dough comes together and is stiff.
2. Transfer dough to a lightly floured surface; divide into two equal parts. Roll out as thinly as possible. Cut into 2-by-3½-inch rectangles.
3. Brush egg white over dough; sprinkle with remaining 2 tablespoons caraway seeds and kosher salt. Pierce crackers liberally with fork. Bake on ungreased baking sheet 20 to 25 minutes, until firm to the touch. Let cool on wire rack. Store in airtight plastic container.

## Sesame Rounds

MAKES 26

- 1 cup all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon freshly grated lemon zest Pinch cayenne
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh thyme
- 3 tablespoons sesame seeds, unhulled
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut up
- 1 large egg white Kosher salt for sprinkling
- 1. Heat oven to 350°. In a food processor, pulse flour, table salt, black pepper, lemon zest, cayenne, thyme, and 2 tablespoons sesame seeds. Add butter; pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. With machine running, add ½ cup cold water; process until the dough comes together.
- 2. Transfer to lightly floured surface; divide dough into two equal parts. Roll out to ½ inch thickness. Cut into ½½-inch circles; transfer to an ungreased baking sheet.
- 3. Brush egg white over rounds; sprinkle with remaining tablespoon sesame seeds and kosher salt. Bake 20 to 25 minutes, until firm to the touch. Let cool on wire rack. Store in an airtight plastic container.

## Soup Crackers

MAKES 180 TO 200

- 1½ teaspoons active dry yeast
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> cups warm water (about 110°)
- $4\frac{1}{2}$  cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
  - 1 teaspoon baking soda
  - 2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons nonfat buttermilk
  - 2 teaspoons salt
- 1/4 cup solid vegetable shortening
- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil for coating bowl and plastic

1. In medium bowl, combine yeast, sugar, and water. Let stand in warm place until creamy, about 5 minutes. Using a wooden spoon, stir in 3½ cups flour until well combined. Form into a ball. Transfer to a clean, oiled bowl; cover with oiled plastic wrap. Let rise in a warm place until doubled, about 2 hours. 2. In a small bowl, dissolve baking soda in 1 tablespoon water. Stir baking-soda mixture, buttermilk, salt, and shortening into yeast mixture; if necessary, knead to combine. Gradually stir in enough remaining 1 cup flour to create a soft but not tacky dough.

3. Transfer dough to a lightly floured surface; knead until firm, about 7 minutes. Cover loosely with plastic wrap; let rest for 15 minutes. Knead dough until becomes elastic and smooth, about 5 minutes. Transfer to lightly oiled bowl; cover tightly with oiled plastic wrap. Let rise in a warm place for 2 hours.

4. Heat oven to 325°. Turn dough onto a well-floured surface; roll into a 12-by-17-inch rectangle. Fold into thirds, and roll out to original size again. Repeat folding-and-rolling process. Cut off one-half teaspoon of dough. Form into ball by stretching dough over itself and pinching at bottom to secure. Roll in flour, and place on ungreased baking sheet. Repeat process until all dough is used. Bake crackers for 40 minutes, until cooked through completely. Transfer to wire rack to completely cool. Store in an airtight plastic container.

## **Quick Sticks**

MAKES 28

- 2 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
  - 3 tablespoons solid vegetable shortening
- 1. Heat oven to 350°. In a food processor, pulse flour, salt, and baking powder. Add shortening, and pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. With machine running, gradually add between ½ and ¾ cup cold water, until dough comes together.
- 2. Transfer dough to a lightly floured surface. Roll into an 8-by-10-inch sheet, ½ inch thick. Cut lengthwise into ¼-inch-wide strips. 3. Using your hands, roll strips back and forth in flour so they form tubular sticks. The strips will lengthen to about 16 when rolled. Place sticks on a baking sheet, pressing ends onto the sheet to keep them straight. Bake for 13 to 15 minutes, until firm and cooked through. Transfer to a wire rack to cool. Store in an airtight container.

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