

## What You Need to Know about Biscuits

In the tradition of foods associated with antiquity, the earliest biscuits—dating back to ancient Rome—employed minimal ingredients and rudimentary techniques. They began as a stout, cooked porridge of fine wheat flour and water spread on a plate to dry, broken into pieces and fried—a process reflected in the Latin roots of the word biscuit itself: bis, which means twice; and coctus, which means cooked. Thus, the earliest biscuits were hard and unleavened—what we might call hard tack today. In the 7th century, Persians began baking these hard, unleavened biscuits with sugar. Sugar stuck to the word biscuit and stayed there—at least in Europe, where, to this day, British cookies are called biscuits and Italian cookies, biscotti.

In the United States, biscuits took off in fresh directions. Fine colonial butter made its way into most recipes and sweet milk replaced water. Still, the dough remained unleavened and the final biscuits hard. A case in point, the Southern Planter's recipe for "Hard Biscuits" (published in the 1840s), directs the cook to rub butter into flour, dampen the dry ingredients with milk to make a dough, and roll it out, using reserved flour. The dough is cut into rounds, and baked in a hot oven. Another early biscuit recipe, the famous Beaten Biscuits of the South, were—and continue to be—made from unleavened dough pounded with a mallet (producing blisters), folded back onto itself, and pounded again and again—efforts that reflect, perhaps, a desire to get a rise out of the dough (though, in truth, the final puffy, cracker-like product resembles an early Roman biscuit more than a modern American one).

Biscuits didn't really turn the corner in their development, of course, until bakers began to leaven them in the mid-1800s, skipping the eggs they used to leaven cakes and the beer yeast that raised their bread, in favor of an agent that truly anticipated modern American baking: pearlash. Pearlash, potassium carbonate, was a powder extracted from wood ashes through steeping and evaporation. When the evaporation step was eliminated, the ash water, called lye or potash, was used to make, among other things, hominy. Pearlash produced a strong alkaline effect in the presence of an acid by bubbling and giving off carbon dioxide, just like baking soda. In fact pearlash is the great-grandfather of baking powder. Native Americans were the first to use it as a seasoning and as a leavening agent, and Americans the first to patent it. In fact pearlash was the first patent issued in this country period—in 1790. All this makes America the de facto birthplace of chemical leavening—and biscuits the first real American quickbread.

From pearlash, to saleratus (a crude form of sodium bicarbonate), and later to baking soda and powder, the leavening agents bakers seized to make biscuits were, inevitably, the quick, chemical sort. You'd expect early iterations to have been yeasted (both beer yeast and grape ferment were widely used in bread making at the time), but historical documents suggest this was not the case. Perhaps it is because biscuit dough always had a higher fat to liquid ratio than standard bread dough, a ratio that does not particularly favor the environment in which yeast likes to work. (Add extra liquid and yeast to unleavened biscuit dough and, behold, biscuit becomes dinner roll!) Perhaps it is because biscuits, unlike bread doughs, generally experience no kneading—they're trying to be tender and want as little gluten development as possible. In rural areas of the colonial South, plantation journals described wild yeast ferments in which raw biscuits were set out before baking and inoculated with airborne yeasts that lifted the dough in the oven, but this practice involved unpredictable ferment times and erratic finished flavors (plantation journals note multiple day ferments).

The earliest yeasted biscuit recipe we found used a sponge (or soft bread dough) and saleratus together—anticipating, perhaps, the hyper inflated modern angel biscuit. Appearing in the Southern Planter in 1858, these biscuits are "moulded"

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not stamped into cakes, baked in a hot oven, and come with an acknowledgement from the author that her “biscuits” are a lot like bread.

The most famous biscuits of the South were made with sour (or clabber) milk or buttermilk and baking soda, a combusive mix of acid and alkali that produced a spectacularly high pan of biscuits. By 1850 Southern biscuits had reached the height of their form with fresh bolted, local soft wheat flour (classified as pastry flour today), sweet butter, buttermilk and soda--plus a light touch and a ripping hot oven. (Lard, though used to make flaky biscuits, never gained the favorability of butter in biscuit work.)

Scratch biscuits, leavened with spare amounts of soda and phosphate, survived the first onslaught of convenience food prior to 1900. But then came “self-rising” flour offering just the “right” amounts of baking soda, phosphate and salt. The fall of scratch biscuits can be traced to Southerners who succumbed to the wiles of packaged baking mixes during the Depression. Seductions of “easy” and “quick” dealt a nearly lethal blow to all authentic Southern quick breads, especially biscuits.

The history of biscuits chronicles a surreal acceleration of more and more leavening after World War Two, an acceleration that enters the theater of the absurd when a motherlode of “modern” biscuit recipes, industrial mill advertising and convenience ingredients collide after 1950 to form a culture of nearly instant biscuits. Boxed mixes, self-rising flour, extra baking powder and extra baking soda reach critical mass with the class of biscuits known as “Angel” or “Bride’s” biscuits, which have an abundance of quick leavens--and yeast, too. In this declension even the terms “bleached” and “enriched” become good things. The conversion from local fresh milled natural biscuit flour to packaged commercial flours is so complete in the South today that our “finest” biscuit flours now have counterparts dubbed unbleached and unenriched to warn home bakers of their “inferior” quality.

Catshead, Angel, Bride’s, Truckers, Farm, Baby, Drop, Pinch, Graham, Cream, Beaten and many more lyrical names are grace notes in the saga of Southern biscuits. But perhaps most important are the two traditional biscuit styles: soft and fluffy versus crisp and flakey. Soft biscuits are crowded together in their baking pan so that the sides cannot brown or harden and are torn to separate when baked. Crisp biscuits have more fat, less liquid, and enough space between each other on the sheet pan that their sides brown and crisp. Each has its own set of diehard fans and apologists.