CRACKERS

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And there is another distinction as well, one that goes a long way toward increasing their level of sophistication. A small amount of cayenne pepper, just 1/8 teaspoon, makes a big difference. You sense the heat, but just a little, and it amplifies the smooth bite of the Cheddar.

The Onion Crackers were also utterly delightful. A full cup of chopped onion (for up to 60 very small crackers) makes them pungent yet rounded in flavor, and poppy seeds add just the hint of an unexpected edge.

Of all the crackers I made, the Onion Crackers make the best accompaniment to cheese — nothing too assertive, please. Which is to say they are the crackers that best live up to their potential and even their duty as crackers.

A cracker without cheese is like a kiss without the squeeze.

Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Homemade onion crackers.

Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Homemade cream crackers.

CRISPY SESAME CRACKERS

Yield: 12 servings

1½ teaspoons active dry yeast
1 teaspoon granulated sugar
1/3 cup warm water
1/3 cup plus 1 teaspoon cold water, divided
2 cups all-purpose flour, or more as needed
1 tablespoon butter, cut up
2 teaspoons salt
1 egg
2 tablespoons sesame seeds, preferably a mix of black and white

1. Combine the yeast, sugar and warm water together in the bowl of an electric mixer or a large bowl. Let rest 8 to 10 minutes, until it becomes foamy. Add 1/3 cup of the cold water, then add the flour, butter and salt. Mix to combine with the dough hook or a wooden spoon.

2. If using a mixer, mix the dough on medium speed until smooth and elastic, pulling the dough down off the hook if it climbs it. If mixing by hand, turn the shaggy dough out onto cutting board and knead for 5 to 8 minutes, until the dough is smooth and elastic. If the dough is sticky, add a little more flour. Gather into a ball, place the dough in an oiled bowl, turn to coat lightly, cover, and set it aside in a warm place to rise until doubled in size, 1 to 1 ½ hours.

3. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

4. The goal is to make the crackers paper-thin. The easiest way to do this is to use a pasta machine. If you don't have one, take manageable-sized pieces of dough and, on a lightly floured surface, roll them out as thinly as possible into strips that are 3 to 4 inches wide and 6 inches long. It helps to roll out the pieces of dough, let them rest for 5 or 6 minutes, and then roll them out again, repeating if necessary.

5. Lay the strips of dough on a nonstick baking sheet or a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Beat together the egg with the remaining 1 teaspoon cold water, and brush the crackers with this egg wash. Sprinkle with the sesame seeds, then score the strips of dough to make triangular shapes; they will break apart into individual crackers when they bake.

6. Turning the crackers as necessary, bake for 7 to 10 minutes until they are a deep gold. Remove to a rack to cool, then store in an airtight container for up to 1 week — or less, if humidity is high.

Per serving: 102 calories; 3 g fat; 1 g saturated fat; 18 mg cholesterol; 3 g protein; 17 g carbohydrate; 1 g sugar; 1 g fiber; 395 mg sodium; 21 mg calcium

— Recipe from "Mustards Grill Napa Valley Cookbook" by Cindy Pawlcyn with Brigid Callinan

ONION CRACKERS

Yield: 8 servings

2 cups all-purpose flour, approximately 1 teaspoon baking powder
1 tablespoon granulated sugar
2 teaspoons salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
2 tablespoons poppy seeds
1 egg, room temperature
1/3 cup vegetable oil
1 cup finely chopped onions
2 tablespoons water, if needed

1. Lightly grease 2 baking sheets or line with parchment paper.

2. In a mixing bowl, add the flour, baking powder, sugar, salt, pepper and poppy seeds. In a separate bowl, stir together the egg, oil and chopped onions. Slowly pour the onion mixture into the flour, stirring vigorously with a wooden spoon to blend well. The dough should be firm. Add more flour if needed.

3. Turn the dough onto a floured work surface and knead briefly — only enough to make a smooth dough. Add sprinkles of flour if the dough is sticky. Place the dough in a buttered bowl, cover with plastic wrap and allow to relax in refrigerator for 30 minutes.

4. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Divide the dough into 2 pieces. Cover 1 piece with plastic wrap while shaping the first batch of crackers. Press and roll the dough into a rectangle about the length of the baking sheet. Roll the dough as thin as possible without tearing it apart. With the help of the rolling pin, lift and transfer the thin sheet of dough to the baking sheet.

5. With a rolling pizza cutter or jagger, cut the dough into as many crackers as you desire. Prick (dock) each cracker with the tines of a fork. Repeat for the second piece of dough.

6. Bake in the middle or lower shelf of the oven until a light golden brown, from 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the thickness of the dough. After 8 minutes, check the crackers to be certain they are baking as you want them. Cool on a metal rack.

Per serving: 227 calories; 11 g fat; 8 g saturated fat; 23 mg cholesterol; 5 g protein; 29 g carbohydrate; 3 g sugar; 2 g fiber; 594 mg sodium; 98 mg calcium

CURRIED POPPY SEED CRACKERS

Yield: 16 servings

½ cup plus 2 tablespoons warm water (110 degrees)
1½ teaspoons active dry yeast
½ teaspoon granulated sugar
1½ teaspoons curry powder
½ teaspoon salt
1 egg yolk
1½ cups all-purpose flour, plus more as needed
1 tablespoon poppy seeds

1. Pour the warm water into a large mixing bowl. Sprinkle the yeast on top of the water and stir until it dissolves. Stir in the sugar, curry powder and salt. Whisk in the yolk. Add 1 cup of the flour and mix with a wooden spoon until smooth. Gradually add the remaining ½ cup of the flour until the dough becomes too difficult to stir.

2. Turn out the dough onto a floured surface and knead in enough additional flour, if necessary, to form a cohesive dough. Continue kneading and adding small amounts of flour until the dough is firm, resilient and no longer sticks to the work surface. Transfer to a greased bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Set aside in a draft-free place to rise until doubled in bulk, about 1 hour.

3. Preheat the oven to 425 degrees.

4. Invert a jelly-roll pan and generously oil what is now the top. When the dough has doubled in bulk, punch it down and divide it into 8 equal portions. Place 1 portion at a time on the oiled, upside-down baking sheet. Use a rolling pin to roll out the dough as thinly as possible. Wet your hands in cold water and use your fingertips to spread the dough out farther, until it is stretched to the point where it has holes and is almost translucent.

5. Using a pastry brush, lightly coat the dough with cold water. Sprinkle some of the seeds into the dough with your fingertips. Repeat with the remaining pieces of dough.

6. Bake each batch on the inverted pan until crisp and golden, 5 to 7 minutes. Let cool on the pan. Break each piece into half or thirds. Store in an airtight container for several weeks; recrisp in a warm oven, if necessary.

Per serving: 52 calories; 1 g fat; 1 g saturated fat; 12 mg cholesterol; 2 g protein; 10 g carbohydrate; 1 g sugar; 1 g fiber; 78 mg sodium; 12 mg calcium

— Recipe from "White Dog Cafe Cookbook" by Judy Wicks and Kevin Von Klause

ENGLISH OAT CRACKERS

Yield: About 15 servings

3 cups old-fashioned oats
1 cup all-purpose flour
½ cup light brown sugar, lightly packed
1 teaspoon salt
¾ teaspoon baking soda
½ pound (2 sticks) cold unsalted butter, ½-inch diced
¼ cup lukewarm water
Fleur de sel or other crunchy salt

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper.

2. Place the oats, flour, brown sugar and salt in a food processor fitted with the steel blade and pulse for 45 to 60 seconds until the oats are coarsely ground. Add the butter and pulse 15 to 20 times until the butter is the size of peas.

3. Dissolve the baking soda in the lukewarm water and drizzle it over the crumbs in the food processor. Pulse until the mixture is evenly moistened and can be pressed into balls that will hold together.

4. Roll dough into balls about 2 inches in diameter. Evenly space 15 balls on each of the prepared sheet pans. Flour the bottom of a 3-inch-diameter drinking glass and use it to flatten each cracker so it is ⅛-inch thick. The crackers will not be perfectly round. If there is a lot of flour on the crackers, turn them over with a spatula.

5. Sprinkle with the fleur de sel and bake for 18 to 20 minutes until golden brown on the edges. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Per serving: 227 calories; 12 g fat; 8 g saturated fat; 33 mg cholesterol; 3 g protein; 25 g carbohydrate; 7 g sugar; 2 g fiber; 377 mg sodium; 19 mg calcium

— Adapted from "Cooking for Jeffrey" by Ina Garten

CHEDDAR CHEESE CRACKERS

Yield: 6 servings

1½ ounces cheddar cheese, shredded
1 cup all-purpose flour, plus more if needed
¼ teaspoon salt, plus more for sprinkling
¼ teaspoon cream of tartar
¼ teaspoon baking soda
1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1/3 cup plus 2 tablespoons tepid water
½ teaspoon malt syrup
2 tablespoons solid vegetable shortening, room temperature
Butter, melted

1. Grease 2 baking sheets or line with parchment paper. In a mixing bowl, add the cheese, 1 cup of the flour, salt, cream of tartar, baking soda and cayenne pepper. Stir to mix well. In a separate bowl, dissolve the malt syrup in the water and add the shortening. Form a well in the center of the flour; pour in the liquid with the shortening. Blend with a wooden spoon; the mixture will be quite heavy.

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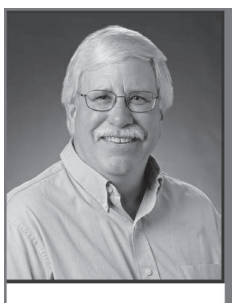

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