

Ship's Biscuit (Hardtack)

History:

Before the age of refrigeration, sailors and folks on land had to be able to store food for long periods of time without it perishing. Hardtack was the most common, and cheapest, of the ships stores available to sailors, even though it often went moldy or was infested with maggots before the sailors could polish off the rations by the end of a journey. It was not uncommon for sailors to wait until after dark to eat, so they couldn't see the amount of worms and maggots that got into their mealsacks. Even though hardtack is largely considered a sailor's food in our 21st-century mentality, one could find hardtack in the pantries and underground cellars of almost all land-dwelling pre-American colonists, as well, because it provided shelf-stable sustenance through harsh winter months when planting, hunting, gathering, and fishing were impossible. Hardtack, even then, was nearly inedible, and was largely a way of transporting and distributing flour, which the sailors needed in their diets. It was not meant to be delicious, only nutritious, filling, and easy to transport. Sailors had to soak the hard biscuit in water, grog, or slop to get it soft enough to eat, and often they fried it in grease to kill the worms or insects that infested it. In today's recipe, we modify it slightly with a bit of butter and milk instead of water, to make the end result easier to bite into, so no one breaks a tooth. Makes about 16.



Original Ingredients*:

1 lb flour
½ pt water
½ Tbsp sea salt

Leah's Modifications to make biscuits easier to eat and not so hard:

2 oz butter
½ pt skim milk **INSTEAD** of water

Directions:

Place flour and sea salt in mixing bowl, and mix. Place milk and butter in a separate saucepan, and melt together over very low heat. Add the milk and butter mixture into the flour mixture to make a dough, and knead until the flour is absorbed. The mix should be thick, shiny, and stiff. Once mixed, roll the dough out with a rolling pin until fairly thin. Using a round or square cookie cutter (or a cup rim, if you don't have a cookie cutter), cut circles or squares in the flat biscuit dough. Place the circles on a baking tray and use a fork, screwdriver, straw, key-tip, or awl to prick large holes into the dough, in order to let out air when cooking and to dry the biscuit through thoroughly, so the insides don't get moldy at sea. The larger the holes, the better. They should poke all the way through the dough. (If galley cooks didn't have a biscuit cutter, they used nails and awls to make their holes.) Bake slowly at a moderate heat, around 200° F, until golden brown, 30-60 minutes, depending on the thickness of your biscuits. (True hardtack is baked slowly for 3 to 5 hours, but if you do this, your hardtack will become too hard for you to eat.) Let biscuits cool before moving them off the tray.

**Unless you were in the Navy, in which case, to save expenses, they didn't use salt.
Adapted from Vice Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson's 1778 naval recipe
and Ancient Roman hardbread recipes, and modified by Leah Angstman.*