

# Ship Biscuits

What does a hungry sailor eat at sea? Follow steps taken by 18th-century bakers to make food that can survive a long voyage.

## What you will need:

- 1 cup flour\*
- 1/3 cup water
- Mixing bowl
- Mixing spoon
- Toothpick
- Baking tray
- Oven
- An adult safety partner

*\*Flour used in the 18th century would most closely resemble a mix of 2/3 cup whole wheat white flour and 1/3 cup white flour. You can use whatever flour you have on hand for this recipe.*



## Make the biscuits!

1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.
2. Add the flour to the mixing bowl. Slowly mix in water until it makes a stiff dough. The amount of water needed will depend on the flour that you are using.
3. Let the dough rest for 10 minutes. Knead the dough until smooth and divide it into golf ball size pieces.
4. Roll each piece into a ball and press down on each until it forms a 1/2 inch thick biscuit.
5. Use a toothpick to make holes in the top of each biscuit. The holes should be placed about 3/4 inches apart and should cover the entire surface. These will allow the biscuit to bake evenly, just like the holes in a saltine cracker or graham cracker.
6. Place the biscuits on the baking sheet and bake for one hour. Open the door twice during baking to allow the humid air to escape.
7. Cool the biscuits and store them in the cool oven or another dry place for three days to dehydrate.
8. Try your biscuits!

## Why would anyone eat a ship biscuit?

Ship biscuits, also known as hardtack or sea biscuits, were baked until completely dry so that they would last for years. This made them perfect for sailors, travelers, and soldiers who needed to take food on long journeys without refrigeration. Adding salt would have made them tastier, but the salt would also absorb water from the air, making them moldy.

A nearly complete ship biscuit was found by archaeologists at the [Robinson Terminal South site \(44AX235\)](#) in Alexandria in 2017. The biscuit was discovered near the location of [Andrew Jamieson and Company's bake house](#), which was in business from 1787 to 1802. The bakery made biscuits for the many ships that sailed in and out of Alexandria's busy seaport.

## Take it further!

Just how long would a ship biscuit last? Try this experiment to find out!

1. Place a ship biscuit and a piece of bread in separate ziptop bags. Seal them tightly.
  2. Put both bags on a windowsill, closet, or another unrefrigerated area.
  3. Check on the biscuit and bread each day over the course of three weeks. What do you see? Note any changes, including mold growth.
  4. Throw out both bags without opening them at the end of the experiment.
- Molds need moisture to survive and grow. Which type of baked good, biscuit or bread, makes a better environment for mold growth?
  - Sailors would not have access to easy refrigeration in the 18th century. What other ways did they preserve food? Research to find out. Are any of those methods similar to what we still do today?



*A nearly intact ship biscuit found at the Robinson Terminal South site (44AX235) in Alexandria*

