

The Hermit Cookie: A Reclusive Recipe from America's Archives



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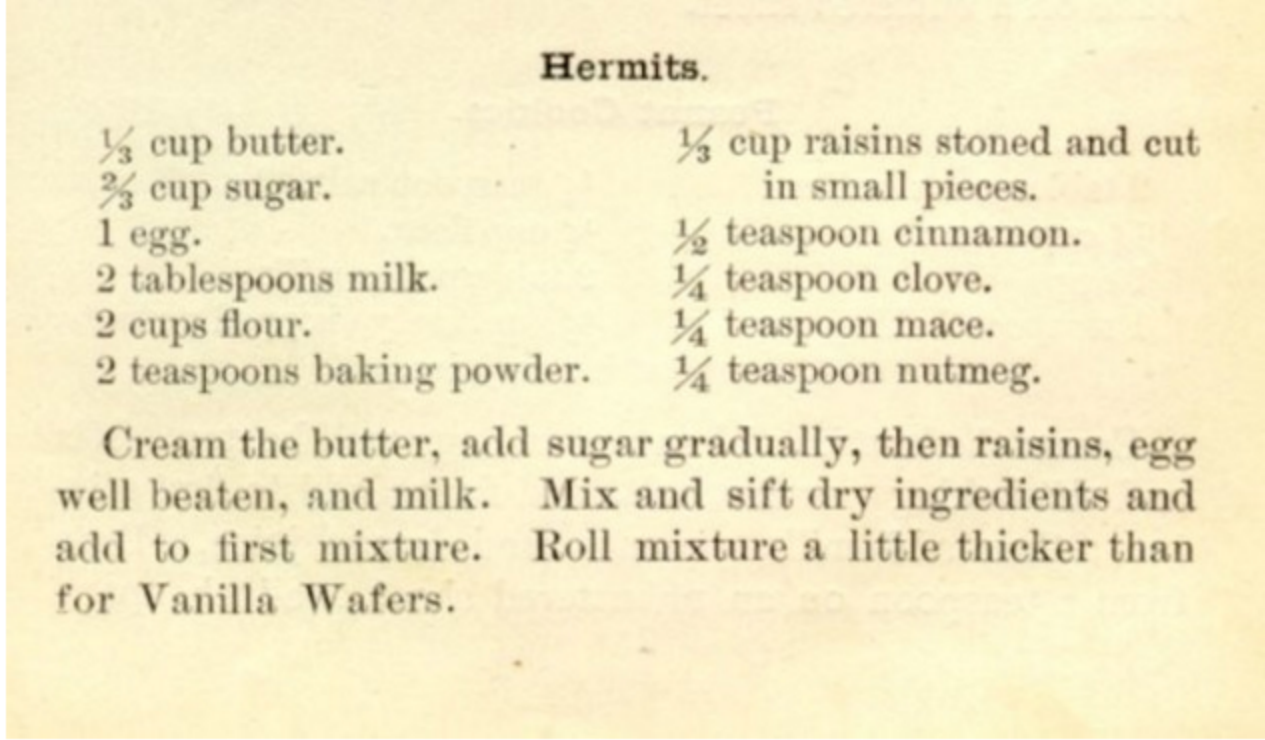
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In a July 1888 article in the Springfield, Massachusetts *Republican*, Anna Barrows listed the perfect larder for a picnic: Potted meats (think: pre-Spam); refreshing “acid jellies” of juice and gelatin; and one recipe for a cookie “quite as good as fruit cake.” Though fruitcake’s reputation [has suffered in the intervening years](#) and acid jellies are not on any current menus, we still know the [“hermit” cookie](#), a spice cookie studded with fruit and nuts.

Barrows, a leading journalist of household science, spoke with the voice of professionalized domesticity when she advised readers: “To any rich cookie dough, add one teaspoonful mixed spice—clove, cinnamon and allspice—and one solid cupful of chopped fruit, either citron, currants, seeded raisins, or a mixture of all.” She praised the hermit cookie as the ultimate in the convenience cookie: “This will keep for months, **if out of humanity’s reach**, hence, perhaps their name.”

However the cookie came by its reclusive name—and there’s no clear answer—the hermit was a cookie that traveled. Dozens of stories suggest that sailors coveted the cookies that would “keep” as they sailed clippers down the the Eastern Seaboard and beyond. Others say that hermit bars came from the Cape Cod town of Harwich. Still, other suggestions for the cookie’s unique name remain: As Brette Sember speculates in her 2012 book *Cookie: A Love Story*, other explanations argue that the name is adapted from the Moravian cookie (another spice cookie from Colonial America), or that the cookie resembles a hermit’s robe. This etymological mystery will likely go unsolved.



A hermit cookie recipe from Fannie Farmer's "The Boston Cooking-School Cookbook" (1896).

From Maine to Massachusetts, the hermit was a favorite offering in pantries and bakeshops by the early 20th centuries. Fannie Farmer included a hermit with mace, cloves, raisins, and cinnamon in her cookbooks, but the cookie became a staple in recipe collections published by community groups.

Paula Marcoux, a Plymouth, Massachusetts-based food historian who studies 19th-century foodways and writes about them at [The Magnificent Leaven](#), believes that the hermit cookie may be a descendant of various spice cookies or desserts, including a late 19th-century tea biscuit called a common rusk, which is made with spices and cooked to a satisfying crisp.

“At first, the name ‘rusk’ didn’t ring any bells with me because a ‘rusk’ seemed like a biscotti. However, like a hermit, it can be made with sweet or sour milk. And it has cloves or nutmeg. It’s chewy and pleasantly sweet, and it has raisins,”—all characteristics of the hermit.

She’s also seen an 1880s memoir of a Plymouth resident who joyfully remembers reaching his short arm into the hermit cookie jar as a child. But while she thinks he was using a later name for the treat—because there are relatively few hermit references before the 1880s—Marcoux thinks those cookies in the jar were probably an early version, though, because “people don’t misremember their childhood cookies.”

As with any recipe, there is freedom within the form. Canadian hermits often feature dates. Molasses could take the place of ground spices, and during World War I’s food rationing and shortages, sorghum could stand in for sugar. Lard could also be a key ingredient. Raisins, often plumped before adding to the batter, were the preferred fruits. But in pockets of New England with cranberry bogs, those tart berries and currants could replace dried grapes. Purists often argue that the ideal hermit is cut into a brownie-like bar, but hermit drop cookies exist.

The enduring popularity of the hermit cookie lies in both its simplicity—many a turn-of-the century or 1950s household could rustle up brown sugar, flour, baking soda, and a fruit or spice of choice—but also its social history.

The hermit has been a cookie of its times: able to survive without refrigeration and to change with American households and taste. From about 1890 to 1920, when domestic science was becoming an American obsession, middle-class mothers were refashioned as home managers, overseeing the coordination of a healthy home and children. The hermit cookie ranked among their favorite wholesome sweets, a treat that could comfort toddlers while giving them a serving of a healthy fruit or even a dose of bran or rolled oats—more than a hundred years before the Jessica Seinfeld method of sneaking veggies into pizza crust.

If the hermit was one sign of a healthful, loving home (complete with that baking, fondly watchful mother), the cookie’s status as a slice of nostalgia was cemented during the world wars. Its heartiness made it perfect for mailing to soldiers away from home: “Nutty, crunchy cookies sure hit the spot with the soldier boys,” reported visitors to California’s Camp Callan Army center in a 1943 article reprinted in farm journals alongside a hermits recipe. In a letter to his mother in Boston, new recruit and future bomber pilot George Neilson wrote from training camp: “I have, right there, that fine, thoughtful package. ... The hermits are fresh, the peanuts + chocolate are good. ... I haven’t dug all the way down, yet. You really think of everything, Ma. I hope I’ll make you proud of me.”

Food editor Chris Morocco developed a hermit cookie recipe based on his grandmother’s:



[Hermit Slices](#)

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To ensure these don’t break, use a couple of layers of parchment paper or foil in the baking dish and make sure they’re completely cooled before removing them.