When Rickey was upset, he almost always made cheese straws. They were one of the few things he had ever learned to cook, and making them seemed to comfort him.

—Poppy Z. Brite, Liquor: A Novel

Of the many foods that I have made and served to my guests over the years, there is none that folks seem to love more than the old southern cocktail party standby, cheese straws. Since cheese has always been imported into the hot and humid South, cooking it in cracker form has long been a southern way of “preserving” the cheese, or at least the cheese flavor. There are some relatively new artisan and farmstead cheesemakers in the area today (the Southern Cheesemakers Guild lists about two dozen members on its Web site, southerncheese.com), but they are the exception, not the rule.

Outside the South, cheese straws just don’t seem to be a part of the vernacular. You find them here and there, but only in the South do they seem so firmly entrenched as truly regional fare, like boiled peanuts or grits. The late Bill Neal, my dear friend who spearheaded the revival of traditional southern cooking, wrote that cheese straws came from England, but my research doesn’t exactly bear that out. The British have adopted them, and they occasionally appear with cocktails in the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean, but I’m reasonably sure that they are a fairly recent—meaning not much more than a century old—American culinary phenomenon, even if the first printed recipe I have found is in a British cookbook (by the notoriously plagiarizing Mrs. Beeton). If they are truly British, why do my friends in London ask me to bring them with me when I visit?

It’s true that Queen Mary (Queen Consort, that is, wife of George v) enjoyed a cheese biscuit made with Parmesan and no cayenne, according to her chef, Gabriel Tschumi, but his memoirs weren’t published until 1954, at the end of her reign. The Brits’ use of Parmesan is telling. Bill Neal wrote that in England cheese straws were often made solely from Parmesan, “despite the superb true cheddar.” I would attribute the use of imported cheese to a case of snobbery, to yet another way of separating one from the lower classes. In 1970 Elizabeth David, the great English food writer, quoted a recipe for Thick Parmesan Biscuits from The Cookery Book of Lady Clark of Tillypronie, published in 1909, nine years after Lady Clark’s death. A dozen biscuits call for ¾ pound of flour, 2 ounces each of butter and grated Parmesan, the yolk of one egg, salt, and cayenne. Rolled to ½-inch thickness and cut into 1-inch diameter rounds, the biscuits’ thickness are their distinguishing characteristic. David tells us, “The Parmesan is also essential. English cheese will not do.” Ironically, David also says that cayenne adds “an important zest to… the beloved English cheese straws,” but offers no recipe, not even in her comprehensive English Bread and Yeast Cookery (1977).

The year prior to David’s claim that Cheddar wouldn’t, Adrian Bailey wrote The Cooking of the British Isles for the influential Time-Life Series, Foods of the World. His cheese straws, which he identifies as “cheese-flavored pastry sticks,” are typical of English recipes, with a bit of unnecessary ice water, which indeed makes them more like pie dough. But at least they include sharp Cheddar. Neither Jane Garmey nor Jane Grigson, both of whom wrote extensively about British cooking in the 1980s, offers recipes for what I would think of as cheese straws, unless I am to seriously consider Garmey’s, which is one-inch thick, or Grigson’s cheese and oatmeal biscuit from northeastern England, which calls for “a hard, dried-out piece of cheese, Cheddar or a mixture of Cheddar and Parmesan in the proportions of 3:1.”

I don’t pretend to have culled every cookbook looking for recipes (though I own hundreds and have pretty muchdevoured my own collection as well as several yards of shelves of the Library of Congress, where, incidentally, 2,500 cheese straws were served at the Library’s sesquicentennial celebration in 1950). But I am reasonably sure that...
they first appeared in print in the late nineteenth century, and on this side of the Atlantic.

In my research, I look for recipes for cheese crackers, biscuits, or wafers. A straw, after all, is just a cracker (or biscuit or wafer, depending on where it’s made). Though named, presumably, because of their shape, cheese straws might be round, according to hundreds of recipes I’ve found in cookbooks and on the Web. Horticulturists complain about how difficult common nomenclature is, but I think we culinary historians have it worse, since, other than Escoffier, hardly anyone has bothered to codify recipes, and it’s nearly impossible to recognize some of today’s versions of the French classics as having been based on the originals. Mayonnaise comes to mind. And biscuits are as varied as cookies. An English dictionary will tell you that a biscuit, “a crisp dry bread,” is so called because it is “twice-cooked” (from the Latin biscotum, like Italian biscotti). The word, variously spelled, appeared in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century works, but from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries bisket was the regular form. The Oxford English Dictionary sounds downright disdainful: “The current biscuit is a senseless adoption of the modern French spelling, without the French pronunciation,” it proclaims, while citing its earliest appearance as besquite in 1350. My Petit Robert, an abridged French dictionary, gives 1175 as the first French use, as bescuit. It’s all Latin to me.

Of course, American biscuits are another thing entirely, more like scones. And what we call English muffins are really crumpets. And what the English call biscuits are more like crackers, though they’re often sweet—what we would call cookies. And the same is true in France. Cracker is an American word for “a thin, hard biscuit,” used as early as 1739 in New England, according to the OED. But cheese crackers are harder to trace. One of the earliest published references to cheese straws was in the Victorian magazine Young Ladies Journal, in 1874, according to the oed, which makes a distinction between cheese fingers, “puff paste on which cheese is spread, the paste being then folded over, cut into strips, and browned,” and cheese straws, “grated cheese and flour, or other material, made into a paste, cut into thin strips, and baked crisp.”

I was so glad to find those distinctions in print, because if there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s puff pastry sprinkled with cheese masquerading as cheese straws. Don’t get me wrong: the imposters are perfectly delicious. The Italians call them salatini alla formaggio, and I can think of nothing better to nibble with a glass of prosecco. And the French make cheese crackers, brins de paille, which have some added milk. Always served hot, they beg for claret, as do those made by Eastern Europeans, who add sour cream or yogurt. But none are my idea of cheese straws, which are bold with hot pepper and beg for stronger libations. I’m
reminded of Vertamae Grosvenor’s “Name Calling” chapter from her Vibration Cooking or the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl (1970):

If you are wondering how come I say so-called okra, it is because the African name of okra is gombo. Just like so-called Negroes. We are Africans. Negroes only started when they got here. I am a black woman. I am tired of people calling me out of my name. Okra must be sick of that mess too. 16

There aren’t any cheese straws—or biscuits, crackers, or wafers (another culinary term that can mean waffles, crackers, or cookies)—in any of the major English or American cookbooks published in the eighteenth century or the first half of the nineteenth. I’ve looked through the work of Hannah Glasse, Eliza Acton, Susannah Carter, Amelia Simmons, Eliza Smith, Eliza Leslie, and Lydia Child, as well as in The Virginia House-Wife (1824), The Kentucky Housewife (1839), and The Carolina Housewife (1847). Cheese straws are conspicuous in their absence in both the North and the South during the war years that followed.

The first published recipe that I’ve found is in The Book of Household Management, printed for Isabella Beeton in London in 1861. Most scholars believe that most of Beeton’s 2,100 recipes were lifted from other sources: “She bore four children and died at the age of twenty-eight. It seems doubtful that she had time even to try the recipes.” 17 Nevertheless, her Cayenne Cheeses, with a half pound of butter, a half pound of cheese, and a half pound of flour seasoned with cayenne and salt, are approaching our modern straws, and I have yet to find an earlier printed recipe. 18

Six years later, Mrs. Hill’s New Cookbook was first published in New York, on the heels of the Civil War. It’s a wonder that there was any cheese at all in the American South during the War and Reconstruction, which lasted another ten years after Hill’s book appeared. But Atlanta, where the author lived, was the transportation center of the entire South, and the new economy was intertwined with the railroads. Agribusiness, coincidentally, was just beginning; refrigerated railroad cars weren’t far behind. Cheese from Philadelphia or New York or England arrived in the South unspoiled. Mrs. Hill’s recipe for a cheese biscuit is a classic European-style biscuit, never mind what the historical notes for the University of South Carolina’s facsimile of the 1872 edition say. 19 Mrs. Hill was the wife of a once-prominent judge and politician; she was sophisticated and worldly. Her cheese biscuits, rolled thin, “with very little handling, like puff paste,” also approach my idea of cheese straws, but still aren’t quite there. 20

The White House Cookbook (1887) includes the first recipe I’ve found for a cheese straw per se. Cayenne Cheese Straws call for a cup of flour, three tablespoons of butter, two tablespoons of grated Parmesan cheese, a pinch of salt, and a few grains of cayenne pepper (though the quantities of flour, butter, and cheese vary in different editions of the book).

Mix into a paste with the yolk of an egg. Roll out to the thickness of a silver quarter, about four or five inches long; cut into strips about a third of an inch wide, twist them as you would a paper spill, and lay them on a baking-sheet slightly floured. Bake in a moderate oven until crisp, but they must not be the least brown. If put away in a tin, these cheese straws will keep a long time. Serve cold, piled tastefully on a glass dish. You can make the straws of remnants of puff pastry, rolling in the grated cheese. 21

But Lord knows where the recipe came from. The publishers highly praised one of the book’s two authors, Hugo Ziemann, Stewart of the White House, as the “preeminent... one time caterer for that Prince Napoleon who was killed while fighting the Zulus in Africa. He was afterwards steward of the famous Hotel Splendide in Paris. Later he conducted the celebrated Brunswick Café in New York, and still later he gave to the Hotel Richelieu, in Chicago, a cuisine which won the applause of even the gourmets of foreign lands.” 22

No cheese straws appear in the Index of The New Dixie Cook-Book (1893), also published in Atlanta, but there are four versions, plus cheese fingers. The authors suggested serving them with salad, “piled on a plate, crossing them in pairs and tying with ribbon of different colors; or, bake in eight-inch lengths and serve in log-cabin style.” An illustration of crossed, tied pairs of straws accompanied the recipes. 23

The following year, the Ladies’ Aid Society of the First Presbyterian Church in Marion, Ohio, north of Columbus, published a recipe for “Cheese Sticks” with no allusions to puff pastry:

One cup of grated cheese, one cup of flour, a small pinch of cayenne pepper, butter same as for pastry; roll thin; cut in narrow strips. Bake a light brown in a quick oven. Serve with salads. 24

A recipe for Cheese Straws, contributed by Mrs. Fred Schaeffer, followed:

One cup of flour, two cups of grated cheese, one teaspoon of salt, one teaspoon of baking powder, and water to roll out like pie dough; roll thin, and cut with pastry wheel in long, narrow strips. Bake in hot oven. 25
Cheese straws were obviously popular by the end of the nineteenth century, and they often appear alongside recipes for dozens of homemade cordials, wines, and drinks. The remarkable Picayune’s Creole Cook Book, published in New Orleans in 1901, includes recipes for nearly one hundred spirited beverages, as well as for cheese straws, which the editors also give their Creole name, *pailles de fromage*. The recipe includes the requisite “salt and cayenne to taste,” although it also includes an egg yolk—typically New Orleans rich, but not necessary. “This is a very dainty dish,” the book says.26

I empathized with Rickey, one of the protagonists in Poppy Brite’s foodie novel, quoted above. He and his partners constantly struggle in their efforts to open a restaurant with a menu based entirely on booze. A dainty treat, so easy to make, must have truly comforted him in the alcoholic madness that Brite conjures as post-Katrina New Orleans.

I think that cheese straws became so wildly popular in the South because they would keep (most southern homes didn’t have air conditioners until the late 1960s), because they’re good, and, possibly most importantly, because they’re so good with drinks. And drink we do! How could we not in this godawful heat? That would also explain their recent popularity in the Caribbean, though few recipes featuring any cheese at all appear in cookbooks from the islands prior to the 1980s. Perhaps the recipe went to Barbados with southerners vacationing there in the twentieth century; more than likely, it arrived with cruise ships. Perhaps it then traveled to England with British vacationers on Barbados. However they arrived there, by 2005 cheese straws were being proclaimed the “King of Canapés” in a poll of forty top chefs, food experts, and critics conducted by Waitrose Foods, the upscale British supermarket. They earned a score of nine out of ten in a survey that judged anything that I cook. Sometimes I use that egg yolk and hold the air in yeast breads, giving them substance: An authentic Cheddar. I also used to mix the dough by hand and roll them out once. Because there’s no liquid in the dough, though, I’ve found that the more it is worked—that is, the more times it is folded over itself, like pastry dough—the flakier the cheese straws will be. But hey, as long as it’s not your house, who cares?27

There is also a prevailing nostalgia for the treats that our mothers and grandmothers provided, even if it was Kool-Aid.28 Nowadays when we talk about the “old days,” though, we usually mean post–World War II, not pre—(I’m fifty-eight, born in 1949, well after the War). The late forties, fifties, and the sixties were times of great prosperity (and cocktail parties!) in America. Recipes for canapés flourished in the old port cities of New Orleans, Charleston, Mobile, and Savannah, each well known as drinking towns from their beginnings.

The Junior League of Charleston’s Charleston Receipts, first published in 1930, is the oldest continuously published fundraiser cookbook in America. It includes, in its second chapter, “Canapés,” a perfectly acceptable recipe (though I usually add some red pepper flakes as well as the finely ground cayenne called for). Like The Picayune’s Creole Cook Book, Charleston Receipts includes an entire “Beverages” chapter—the first!—composed of mostly highly potent punches to serve dozens.29 I’m sure that cheese straws were already a tradition in the lowcountry prior to Charleston Receipts, although they don’t appear in Two Hundred Years of Charleston Cooking, published in 1930, which was assembled under the watchful eye of some visiting Yankees who certainly knew from cocktail parties, as they say. I remind myself, however, as the late scholar Karen Hess often proclaimed, that “The lag between practice and printed word is one of the most frustrating aspects of work in the discipline of culinary history.”30 And so I keep looking. Since beginning this article, in fact, I have found recipes nearly identical to the one in Charleston Receipts in several fundraiser cookbooks published in South Carolina in 1948, as well as in The Savannah Cookbook from 1933.31

I have published some very good recipes for cheese straws that will cook up perfectly every time, but, truth be told, I like to tinker with cheese straws more than just about anything that I cook. Sometimes I use that egg yolk and sometimes I don’t. I’ve tried flavoring them with anchovies, red pepper paste (that I buy in a squeeze tube), tuong at toi (Vietnamese chile paste with garlic), and a variety of cheeses. I used to insist on unbleached flour and very sharp, authentic Cheddar. I also used to mix the dough by hand and roll them out once. Because there’s no liquid in the dough, though, I’ve found that the more it is worked—that is, the more times it is folded over itself, like pastry dough—the flakier the cheese straws will be. But you should use a soft southern flour such as White Lily if you can find it, because it has less gluten (the tough molecules that stretch and hold the air in yeast breads, giving them substance): you want your straws to be flaky and light. The thinner you roll them, the flakier as well.

I assembled ten typical recipes from a variety of sources both old and new, then figured the average ingredients: 3 cups of grated cheese, 1 ½ to 2 cups of flour, 7 tablespoons...
of butter, 1 egg yolk, and salt and cayenne to taste (from ¼ to 1 teaspoon of each). When all is said and done, recipes vary little.

One thing’s for sure: the more flavorful the cheese and seasoning, the better the straws. Shirley King (1931–2005), the great chef and food writer, spiced hers with anchovies and advised, “If you like a sharp-tasting cheese straw, use Gruyère.”12 Lately I’ve been making them with blue cheese, to much praise. The crackers will have a slightly bluish tint to them. Put them out with the beverage of your choice and watch them disappear! •

Blue Cheese Straws

MAKES THREE TO FOUR DOZEN

Use a fairly dry blue cheese, not a creamy one, in this recipe. There are some flavorful ones made in America these days. You can even use the already crumbled blue cheese found in every grocer’s dairy case. Believe me, I’ve used it at friends’ beach houses and folks have raved.

INGREDIENTS

2 ounces (½ stick) unsalted butter
½ teaspoon salt, plus more for garnish
½ pound blue cheese, crumbled (see headnote)
¼ teaspoon cayenne, plus more for garnish
1 cup all-purpose (preferably soft southern) flour, plus more for dusting
1 egg yolk (optional)

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Put all of the ingredients except the egg yolk in the work bowl of a food processor and blend with the steel blade until the mixture comes together in a ball. If the cheese is very dry, you may need to add the egg yolk to make the mixture form a ball. But let the processor do its thing. It will probably make the ball without the yolk.

Divide the dough in half, dust a counter and rolling pin with flour, and roll the first half of the dough out to ¼ inch thickness, in a rectangular shape. Keep folding the dough over and rolling it out until you have a perfect rectangle, about 5 by 9 inches. Place any trimmings with the remaining half of dough. Using a long knife, score the rectangle into twenty crackers, each about ½ inch wide and 4 ½ inches long. Carefully lift the straws up, using a metal spatula if necessary, and place them close together, but not touching, on a heavy baking sheet. Roll out the remaining dough and cut similarly. Sprinkle with salt and/or cayenne, if desired. Bake the straws for 20 to 25 minutes, or until they just begin to brown. Lift them up onto racks to cool. When perfectly cool, remove them to airtight tins to store. They may be frozen for later use.

NOTES

6. Ibid., 25.
12. Ibid., Supplement, 246.
13. Ibid., 185.
14. Ibid.
20. Mrs. A.P. Hill, Mrs. Hill’s New Cook Book (New York: Carleton, Publisher, Madison Square, 1872), 332.
22. Ibid., iii.
24. Recipes Tried and True. Marion, Ohio, First Presbyterian Church Ladies Aid Society (Marion, Ohio: Press of Kelley Mount, 1894), 54.
25. Ibid.
32. Shirley King, Saucing the Fish (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 82.