

Sylvester Graham and His Cracker: Rolling Your Own

In a previous blog about Wheaties and the French tartine your writer asserted that the Hungarian high grinding method using a series of steel rollers laid the foundation for ready-to-eat cold cereals. Historically, that was a bit exaggerated. The departure from the time-consuming preparation of hot gruels and porridges was initiated a few decades earlier. Let me explain.

Connecticut-born Presbyterian Minister Sylvester Graham believed that a simple diet of fruit and vegetables would lead to a long life. His faith was forged in the school of hard knocks and a calling. Apparently the youngest of 17 children, his father died when he was two and his mother was unable to care for him. He lived with relatives, one of whom put him to work in his tavern. This experience convinced Sylvester that meat and whiskey made for unhappy endings. After trying his hand at various trades, he answered a calling to the ministry which best suited his delicate physical constitution and his rock-solid faith.

During a sojourn at the Philadelphia Temperance Society, experts convinced him that diet influenced one's health: you are what you eat. Graham combined his no frills theology with no a frill's diet, like that that would have sustained Adam and Eve before the fall. No meat, no alcohol, no pleasure to weaken the spirit.

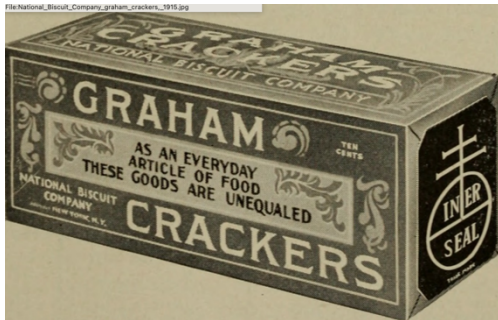
His passion led him to help establish the American Vegetarian Society in 1850, earning him the sobriquet of "father of vegetarianism in America," his only offspring. Earlier, in 1829, he had created his namesake cracker which is nothing like the current imitation found on grocery store shelves. The original was composed of graham flour: coarsely ground whole wheat flour with flecks of bran. After adding water the messy mixture was rolled out, dried, and cut into squares. No shortening to add precious moisture and body. No sugar, molasses, or honey for a touch of dear sweetness. As intended, the dry, tasteless crackers would curb any appetite and dampen any spirit.

Those following his regime were known as "Grahamites." During the 1832 cholera epidemic in New York, Grahamites enjoyed relatively good health earning Sylvester a loyal following. Some restaurants and boarding houses featured his fare. Louisa May Alcott's family joined with others to establish Fruitlands, a short-lived experiment, but the family kept a "Graham Table" where meat, tobacco and coffee were banned. In 1837, Graham published a pamphlet entitled, "A Treatise on Bread and Breadmaking." Philosopher-poet Ralph Waldo Emerson called him "the prophet of bran bread," while a less charitable scribe labeled him "Dr. Bran, the philosopher of sawdust." Emotions ran high, with Graham once attacked by bakers and butchers.



Herman Melville memorialized Graham's cracker in his 1852 novel *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* in which the three protagonists take refuge in an old church converted into apartment and occupied by the Church of the Apostles, a group of bohemian writers, artists, and philosophers who followed Graham's regime: "For all the long wards, corridors, and multitudinous chambers of the Apostles' were scattered with the stems of apples, the stones of prunes, and the shells of peanuts. They went about huskily muttering... through teeth and lips dry and dusty as any miller's, with the crumbs of Graham crackers." Although the good Graham practiced what he preached, he only reached the age of 57.

J. Thompson Gill realized the potential genius of Graham's cracker. In his 1881 book *The Complete Bread, Cake, and Cracker Baker*, Gill added lard and molasses to give the bland wafer some heft and flavor. Eight years later the



National Biscuit Company figured how to mass produce a similar cracker using shortening, sugar, and salt. In 1925 they added a touch of honey to create Honey Maid graham crackers. Ah, the commercial calculus of brand competition between the original and the honeyed cracker from the same manufacturer (red and blue boxes at your local grocery store). National Biscuit Company, now Nabisco, took a whimsical turn and fashioned lions, elephants, camels,

and bears from the graham blend. These animal crackers were fun for kids to eat, but, contrary to Graham's spirit, seemed to condone meat eating. I clearly remember as a kid proudly consuming an entire elephant in one bite.

John Kellogg was inspired by Graham's vision. I, in turn, inspired by the Kellogg brothers' serendipity at producing the first corn flake and by Grahamite devotion to whole wheat flour, set forth to make my own bran flakes. Only those who dare win!

To achieve the approximate equivalent of graham flour I mixed equal parts Colvin Run whole wheat flour with miller's bran. Flecks of bran were clearly visible. Sylvester would have been proud. My recipe called for a couple of tablespoons of ground flaxseed. Why not? Nutty flavor and powerful nutrients. In they went, with a pinch of salt.

In a separate bowl I blended water with.... ok Sylvester, close your ears.... a bit of vegetable oil and molasses (could have used honey or sugar but wanted to stay as wholesome as possible). The oil provides some moisture and a firmer flake; the molasses a little umph of flavor.

Mixing the liquids with the dry ingredients rendered a shaggy, gooey mess. Not sure this was going to work out. But once begun, see it done!



I placed a rimless cookie sheet on a tea towel so it wouldn't scoot around as I rolled out the messy mass to a thin, flat, huge wafer. The recipe called for a buttered sheet. I opted for parchment paper. Less flavor but less clean up fuss.



Onto the middle rack of a low, 300-degree oven for about 45 minutes. I confess I had my doubts. But in the end, there it was: a sheet of baked bran.

Crumbling up the sheet by hand, flakes fell into a bowl to which a touch

of milk was added. By golly, not bad. The molasses and bran flavors popped out. Healthy tasting. A few unsugared raisins added a fruity touch.



There you have it: from Sylvester's cracker to rolling your own, homemade bran flakes.