Ceylon Cinnamon
Making of the Queen of Spices

Posted on



The dried cinnamon – all in golden hues

The goodness of ‘True Cinnamon’ is highly prized today, just as it was in the ancient world. It is especially enhanced as Ceylon Cinnamon is produced organically and is thus of great value.

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The cultivation of cinnamon in Sri Lanka today takes place along the coastal belt from Negombo to Matara, and in Kalutara and Ratnapura. The plant thrives on the sandy earth of the Negombo area as well as the loamy soil of the Southern coastal belt.

The cinnamon bark is obtained ideally from plants around three years old. The peelers, some from families who have passed this tradition down for generations, are skilled and quick, thanks to years of experience.

Peelers usually sit on a mat beside stacks of cinnamon stems along with the tools of the trade. The first task is removing the outer peel, which is then recycled as fertilizer. Next the exposed inner bark is rubbed with a brass rod called the '*koketta*'. This loosens the bark, and the peeler cuts two slits with neat and very precise movements. It enables him to carve out the inner layer of the bark as one piece. The removed bark is packed in layers, one inside the other, and dried in the sun for seven days.

Even today, modern factories very rarely deviate from this natural procedure, the only major notable difference being that within factories they employ 'graders'. Experienced hands identify the grade of cinnamon with a touch. Grades range from the best quality 'Alba' to the lowest 'H3'.

The cinnamon production in Sri Lanka is closely connected with the Salagamas, the traditional 'caste of cinnamon peelers'. Despite this English title, the caste was in fact in charge of the entire procedure of cultivating and managing the vast plantations. Under Portuguese rule, cinnamon fetched a very high value, and the Salagamas came to enjoy a prominence. During the period of the Dutch however, they had to face extremely difficult times due to the Hollanders' excessive appetite for the spice. Today, though many have left the traditional occupation, the cinnamon industry continues while preserving the ancient techniques and nature-friendly practices.

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