

Spice: For good taste and good health

Posted on

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Serendib, Taprobane, Ceilao, Ceylon and now Sri Lanka ... call it by any name but it will, as since times long ago, smell as sweet, as “its spicy-wooded vales.” It was more than a century ago that a gifted friend of the poet Wordsworth, Mrs. M.E. Fletcher, penned these lines in praise of Ceylon:

“To me thy spicy-wooded vales,
Thy dusky sons and jewels bright,
But image forth the far famed tales,
But seem a new Arabian night.”

Traders and explorers from distant lands have for centuries been lured to this island by the sweet odours of cinnamon. Regaling the senses of far off sea travellers, it gave the promise of much profit for those who lay claim to the source of such spicy breezes. The descriptions of travellers, the constant promise of profit and the competition of the seafaring merchants of the west for control of the Orient’s spice routes were to combine in changing the course of Sri Lanka’s history, as she became the prize of one colonizing power after another.

Cinnamon and cloves, nutmeg and mace, cardamoms, pepper and ginger, turmeric and fennel seed, chillis both green and red-these are the secrets of the culinary art in Sri Lanka. In a country where each home has its distinctive taste in curry. within the range and differentiation of regional tastes. the spices of Sri Lanka play a major role in preserving and enhancing the taste of food.

Curry powder, the secret of the Sri Lankan culinary expert which has traditionally been home-made to suit the taste and individual recipes of housewives and domestic cooks, and which is now a profitable line-item on super-market shelves, is

a blend of spices which naturally lay out the taste of Sri Lankan foods. While spices have always been a part of the exotic East, with the spicy dish of curried meat, fish or vegetables stimulating dreams of the Orient, little is known of the many uses that spices have, apart from those in the kitchen.

Spices form an important class of vegetable products, being valued in cookery, confectionery, the preparation of beverages and liqueurs and in perfumery. Many of them are of special importance in medicine, either on account of their effect in aiding the digestion by increasing the gastric juices, or for disguising nauseous decoctions. There is also the antiseptic and preservative properties of certain spices, because of their volatile oils, both in domestic and scientific uses. Unknown to many, spices form a whole pharmacopoeia in our kitchen shelves. Ayurveda, the science of long life? for thousands of years has spoken of the power of herbs and spices to heal, revitalise and soothe the human body; while at the same time they add pungency, aroma and taste to our food.

There are sacred uses of spices too. In social and religious customs. of Oriental countries, spices are used even today for burning incense and religious offerings. Pepper, especially in the villages, has been from ancient times used as an insect repellent. Not least among the virtues of spices are the effects they have on sweetening the breath. Cardamoms are commonly used both in Sri Lanka and India for this purpose.

CINNAMON – *Cinnamomum Zeylanicum* cassia: (Kurundu, Sinhala: Karuva, Tamil:) has been from early days the most coveted of spices. It is native to Sri Lanka and India, and in the East, determined fortunes gained and empires founded. Would you believe that cinnamon was once more valuable than gold? Cinnamon has healing uses: it removes anorexia, is useful in mucus formation, chronic sinusitis, colds and bronchitis. Distilled water of cinnamon relieves abdominal colic, distension, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. The search for cinnamon was the chief incentive of the Portuguese in discovering the route round the Cape to India and Ceylon in 1505. It was brought to Portugal as tribute from the Sinhala kings. The Dutch, on obtaining possession of the island in 1656, made cinnamon a state monopoly, and this arrangement continued till 1833.

CARDOMOM – *Ellateria Cardomomum* (Ensal or Enasal – Sinhala; Elakai- Tamil;) is a spice consisting of whole or ground seeds of *Ellateria Cardomomum*. Sri Lanka, India and Guatemala are the main countries of production. Used as a mouth freshener, it is light in digestion and is useful in nausea and abdominal colic. it increases

appetite and is soothing and calming to the mucus membrane. It is used to flavour curries, liqueurs, sauces, pickles and baked foods. Medicinally, cardamom is employed as an aromatic stimulant, carminative and flavouring. In India it is a reputed aphrodisiac and is widely used in masticatories.

Now for something about PEPPER, *Piper nigrum*, (Gam-miris Sinhala; Molagu, Tamil) Remember the good rhyme "Pepper is good and hath a good smack." In those days black pepper was widely cultivated in the tropics of south western Asia, where it came to be used widely as a condiment. Pepper removes anorexia. It is believed that ten grains of pepper taken early in the morning on an empty stomach keeps the system well nourished. This is a creeping perennial vine and is indigenous to the low country forests of Sri Lanka, South India and Malaysia.

Pepper is one of the earliest spices known to man and is mentioned by Theophrastus in the fourth century BC. Marco Polo in the 13th century observed great quantities of pepper being used in China and noted that its cultivation extended as far as Java. This plant in Sri Lanka is probably an introduced one, the date of which however, is unknown. It appears to have been an article of commerce during the Dutch occupation of Ceylon, for Bertolacci says that they (the Dutch) collected annually from 40,000 to 150,000 lb of pepper worth from 1 to 1-1 2 fanams a pound.

CLOVES, *Eugenia Caryophyllata*., (Karabunati, Sinhala; -Krambu, Tamil) The clove tree a native of the Moluccas, was introduced to Ceylon before the arrival of the British in 1796. The dry unexpanded flower buds are picked green and spread in the sun for a few days to dry until they turn a dark brown. Clove oil is obtained by distillation from the leaves and unripe fruit, also from broken cloves and stalks. It is used for various scientific purposes and for artificial vanillin, the active principle of vanilla. Clove oil helps to relieve toothaches. It is applied externally in rheumatic pains, sciatica, headache and lumbago. It also subsides gas and expels worms. It is helpful in colds and sinusitis.

NUTMEG, *Mystica Fragrans* (Saadikka, Sinhala; Sadikai, Tamil) The nutmeg was introduced to Ceylon about 1804 and is often found in low country gardens. Thenutmeg is an aromatic, stimulant, carminative and, in large doses, a narcotic. It is chiefly employed as a flavouring agent and condiment. The essential oil is administered in diarrhoea and dysentery and to relieve pain. It is also used in combination with other stimulating oils as an external application for rheumatism. MACE (Wasa - Vasi, Sinhala; Poolie, Tamil), the netlike wrapper surrounding the nutmeg inside the husk, is used in confectionery and for culinary purposes.

The healing qualities of CORIANDER, *Coriandrum Sativum*, (Koththamalli, Sinhala and Tamil) in colds, fevers and many other illnesses are only too well known among Sri Lankans in all walks of life. The annual herb is cultivated to some extent in this country, but mostly in North India, Asia Minor and Morocco. The seed is used for the extraction of a volatile oil which is a highly aromatic and favourite ingredient in curries and sauces. Coriander is even mentioned in the Bible. This spice is soothing, calming, acts as an appetiser and a carminative. Its decoction, when used as an eye-wash eases the burning, pain and swelling in the eyes, in Conjunctivitis.

GINGER, *Zingiber Officinale*, (Inguru, Sinhala; Inji, Tamil) is used as a spice for flavouring curries, for pickles and for preserves. It is also used in confectionery and for making ginger beer. It is useful in dyspepsia, flatulence and spasmodic affections of the stomach, as well as being a corrective adjunct to a purgative to prevent nausea and griping. Rubbed up with water, dried ginger is also often applied to the forehead in a headache. On the abraded skin it acts as an antiseptic. An oil prepared by boiling fresh ginger with onions in oil of sesame is used as a dressing for wounds and ulcers.

TURMERIC, *Curcuma Domestica* (Kaha, Sinhala; Manjai, Tamil) is a stimulant and carminative and is employed to relieve sprains. Inhaled it is reported to be of help in providing relief to catarrh sufferers. But more often the spice is used in almost all types of cooking as a condiment. It is also used as an antiseptic. It keeps the blood pure and keeps the person free from eosinophilia. It is also an appetiser and carminative and is useful for urinary disorders, eczema, sinusitis and anaemia.

MINT, *Mentha Viridis* (Minchi, Sinhala, Kururijang, Tamil) is used mainly for relieving dyspepsia, gases, indigestion, nausea and gastric upsets. FENNEL, *Ocimum Sanctum* (Maduru, Sinhala; Perumcheerham, Tamil) is an appetiser, digestive and carminative. It subsides colic, mucus formation and feverishness. Distilled water prepared from dry fennel is very effective for colic in infants.

CUMIN, *Cuminum cyminum* (Suduru, Sinhala; Chinnacheerham, Tamil) acts as a digestive and is beneficial to the heart, and in women strengthens the uterus. GARLIC, *Allium* (Sudulunu, Sinhala; Vellaipudu, Tamil) is a stimulant and digestive. It clears gas, anorexia and disorders of the nervous system. It is useful in alleviating sciatica, rheumatic pains and backache.

TAMARIND, *Tamarindus indicus* (Siyambala, Sinhala; Puli, Tamil) is an appetizer, specially in curries, removes anorexia and allays burning of the stomach. In

Ayurveda, herbs and spices have three types of post digestive action ... sweet, pungent and bitter. By breaking food down thus, the sages of old analysed their physiological effects and the effects on the mind too. All these spices are grown in Sri Lanka, some even in home gardens. There are many spice gardens specially close to Kandy and near Matale (on the road from Kandy to Dambulla) where you could see many varieties of spices in their natural surroundings.

Most super-markets and grocery stores stock small packets of the spices, which are reasonably priced. For those looking for spicy souvenirs to take back home, the larger markets in Colombo, Kandy and other principal towns are the best. Traders in these markets make special packs of spices, for the tourist. Prices are marked, but bargaining will not be out of place. The open market gives the best choice. If you are the more enterprising type, then take a walk down 5th Cross Street in the Pettah, Colombo.



Cinnamon – from early days one of the most coveted of spices.



Cardamoms and cloves – two of the spices for which Sri Lanka is well known.