

Sri Lanka-Land of Fragrant Spices

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From time immemorial, the spices of the tropics have beckoned travellers and traders from distant lands and lured the adventurous explorer in search of the elusive pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Sri Lanka, or Taprobane as the ancient Greeks called her, or again Serendib as the Arab traders of early times knew her, was also known as the land of “Spicy Breezes”. It was mainly spices from this land of “milk and honey” that eventually found their way to Europe, which also made those cities rich overnight, since trading in spices was then, as it is now, an extremely lucrative business. It was to Sri Lanka that the early European and Arab traders made their long journey to purchase the “finest cinnamon in the world”. Her famed spices have also been mentioned by well known travellers of the past-Fahien, a Chinese pilgrim who spent six years in this country in the 5th century AD., Marco Polo and Ibn Batuta the Moor from Tangier.

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Cinnamon was the first important commodity of export in this country. The search for cinnamon it is said was the chief incentive for the Portuguese discovering the route round the Cape to India. Cinnamon or Cassia, has long been used both for medicinal purposes as well as for flavouring foods and although commonly cultivated for its bark and unripe fruits (Cassia buds) its leaves are also popular since cinnamon oil is obtained by their distillation.

It is said that the “Golden Age” for Cinnamon in this country was during the three centuries of Portuguese and Dutch occupation, when this fragrant spice long associated with the ‘Spicy breezes’ of Serendib was supplied to the entire world by this tiny island. The first mention of cinnamon being produced in Sri Lanka was by Ibn Batuta who visited – the huge

storehouses or "bangasalas" near the Pettah of today and wrote his impressions of how they were managed by the Moor community which had a monopoly of the cinnamon trade at the time. It is interesting to note that these same "bangasalas" gave birth to "Bankshall Street" which we know today. Later the Portuguese took over the trade in Colombo, having signed a treaty with the king of Kandy in whose kingdom the spice grew abundantly. However the king would often interrupt cinnamon cutting or peeling operations which led to constant feuds between the Portuguese and the Sinhala king over this "Helen of the East" as cinnamon was sometimes called. It was only after the arrival of the Dutch that cinnamon was systematically planted in Sri Lanka. Cinnamon Gardens which today is the most exclusive area in the city of Colombo was once a cinnamon garden, nurtured for the purpose of exporting cinnamon. The cinnamon industry during the Portuguese and Dutch times was so important that its management was solely by the foreign rulers. To be in charge of the cinnamon industry was considered the highest post during the Portuguese administration.

Cutting and peeling cinnamon annual event, was usually a ceremonial affair. Together with the village headman, the Portuguese superintendent would select a site, then summon the "Zchaliyas" or cinnamon peelers who would arrive with flags flying, and carrying gifts for the superintendent, usually a selection of choice fruits. Their rates of payment would be arranged in kind or cash and the quota of quills that each peeler was expected to deliver on a set date. When the Dutch took over the administration of Ceylon, the cultivation of cinnamon was further extended and systematised. However due to exorbitant prices and the drop in demand of the true cinnamon provided by Sri Lanka, the once flourishing market for cinnamon collapsed. The price of cinnamon in the London market dropped from 9s. 6d in 1835 to 1s 3d in 1855. That ended the golden age of cinnamon and ushered in the coffee age. Today, Sri Lanka continues to export cinnamon which is still the leading spice. But other spices have gradually begun to edge out this spice because of a rising world demand. For instance, although Sri Lanka pepper exports are less than 1 % of the total world exports compared to 35% cinnamon exports, the earnings from pepper exports in 1986 was Rs 15.9 million compared to only Rs 5.1 million from cinnamon. While pepper which is now being promoted as a major foreign exchange earner, earned the highest foreign exchange during that year, cloves come a close second. Both these spices, for which there is a good demand in America, West Germany, France and Japan, are produced largely in mixed gardens in the central hill country. Other spices which are also popular export commodities from Sri Lanka are nutmeg, sesame, mace and cardamoms. There are between 200 to 300 varieties of spices consumed all over the world in food and drinks. All these spices are extracted from aromatic plants and are used mainly for their aroma, taste and eye appeal in the food industry. They come from different parts of a plant - the fruit, flower, bark, bud, stems etc. World consumption of spices is currently estimated to be around 350,000 tons annually and

valued at US\$ 1000 million. Eighty percent of such spices come from developing countries like Sri Lanka, while North America and West Europe are among the most important markets for these spices. And as long as Sri Lanka can continue to be a major supplier, she will remain the "land of Spicy Breezes" beckoning the curious tourist from distant parts of the world to enjoy the fragrance of her spices, and view the specially grown Spice Gardens now springing up all over the island.



Spices for sale at Mlesna. (Suresh de Silva)