



CINNAMON

The Oldest of all Spices

Leonid Enari

CINNAMON WAS ONE of the commodities Egyptian treasure-hunting expeditions brought back from the Land of Punt for their queen, Hatshepsut, around 1600 B.C. The Land of Punt is believed to have been the region on both sides of the lower Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. It not only supplied Egyptians with cinnamon, it also was the source of myrrh, incense, ivory, ebony, eye cosmetics, silks, panther skins, monkeys, baboons, and dogs.

Inasmuch as true cinnamon does not grow in Punt, nor in any other part of Africa, it is reasonable to assume it was brought into the area by a spice-dealing people. Just who these people were is not known.

The southwest corner of Arabia, known to ancient writers as Arabia Felix, seems always to have been the most progressive part of the peninsula. Its people were intelligent and adventuresome. They were sailors and traders from earliest times, and there seems no doubt they were the first to establish contacts with eastern spice lands and the first to bring cinnamon to the Middle East markets.

Cinnamon was imported and distributed exclusively by the Arabs for centuries. To protect their business

interests and to discourage competition, they fabricated and spread stories on the dangers and difficulties in collecting cinnamon. They said that in the country where cinnamon grows, great birds break the branches of the cinnamon trees and carry them away to make nests. The branches are fastened with mud to a sheer rock where no man is able to climb. To get the cinnamon, the Arabs said they had to cut all the oxen and beasts of burden that died in their land into large pieces and carry them into the nesting areas of the birds. When they would withdraw from the area, the birds, swooping down, would seize the pieces of meat and fly up to their nests which, not being able to support the added weight, would break off and fall to the ground. After this, the Arabs would return and collect the cinnamon bark, which they then would sell to other countries.

It was not until the first century A.D. that the Great Roman scholar Pliny the Elder, doubting the story, said it was fabricated by the Arabs only to inflate the price of cinnamon. Pliny, however, gave out his own version of its origin. He said that cinnamon grows in Ethiopia where it could be gathered with the consent of the god Assabinus who per-

mitted its collection only after receiving from the gatherers an offering consisting of the entrails of forty-four oxen, goats, and rams. After the cinnamon was collected, a priest would divide the shoots and set aside a portion of them for the god, after which the gatherer could take the rest. Ancient Egyptians, Hebrews and their contemporaries used cinnamon not for culinary purposes but for making the perfumes, unguents, ointments and holy oils necessary to their way of life.

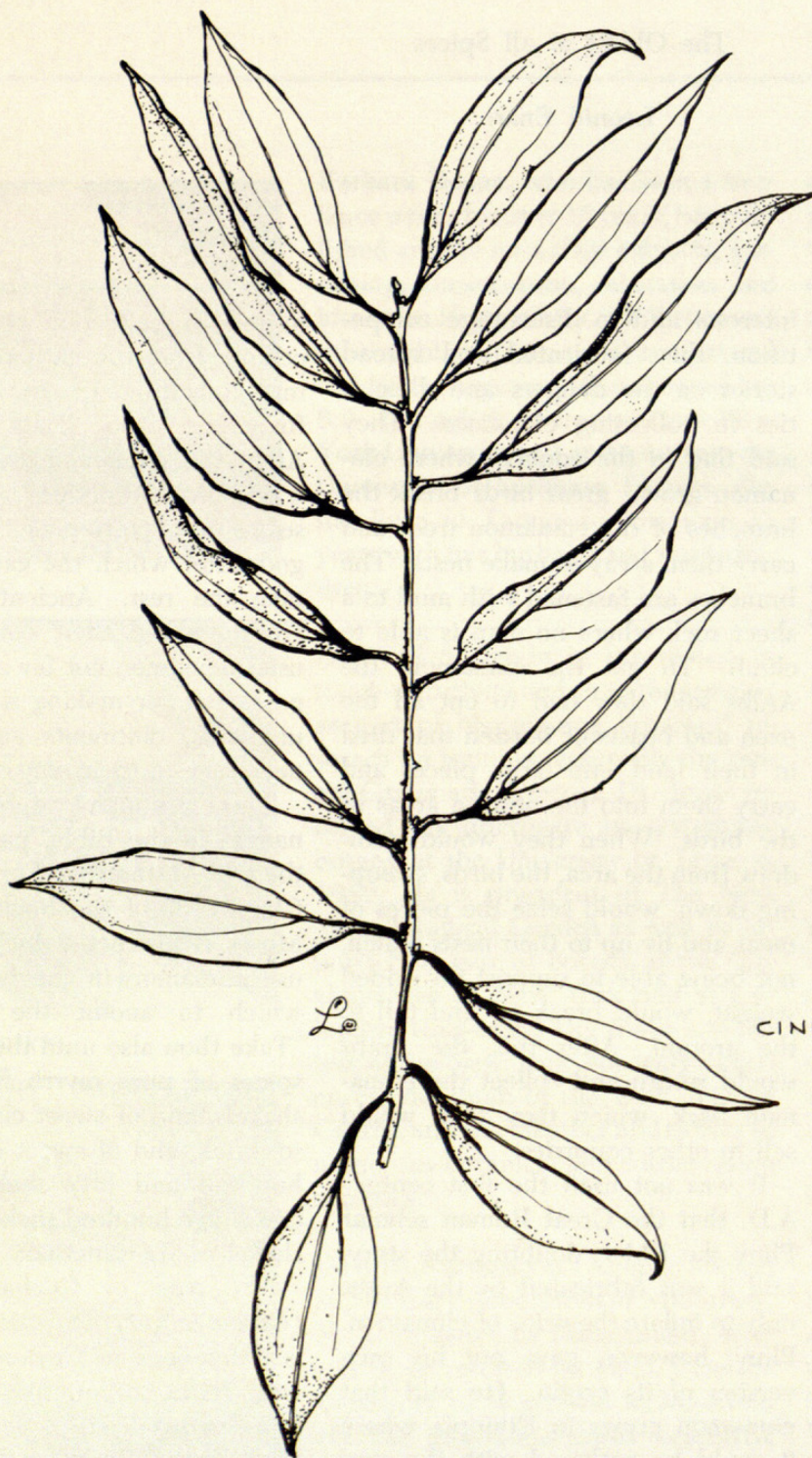
There are many references to cinnamon in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. For example, in Chapter 30 of the Book of Exodus, Moses is instructed by the Lord to use cinnamon in the holy oil with which to anoint the tabernacle: "Take thou also unto these principal spices of pure myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet cinnamon half so much, and of sweet calamus two hundred and fifty shekels, and of cassia five hundred shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary . . ."

The true, or Ceylon, cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum* Blume) is indigenous to Ceylon and southwest India, although it is now also found naturalized in Seychelles and Madagascar. In the wild state, cinnamon trees grow to 30 feet high.

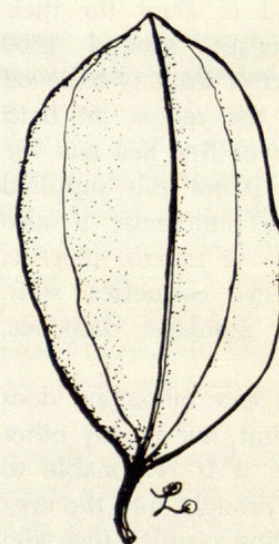
The leaves of the Ceylon cinnamon are simple, ovate to elliptic, entire up to 4 inches wide, stalked, opposite, glabrous, leathery, and prominently three-veined from the base. They are reddish when young, turning dark green above and somewhat bluish-green beneath. The flowers are yellowish-white, small,

about 1/8 of an inch in diameter, stalked, and are arranged in lax, terminal or axillary clusters. Each flower has 6 sepals (perianth segments), 9 stamens in 3 whorls, 3 staminodes and 1 pistil. The fruits are fleshy, berry-like, 1-seeded, black, ovoid and up to 4/5 of an inch long.

Under cultivation, cinnamon is grown as a coppiced bush, not higher than 6 to 8 feet. The shoots are ready for cutting 2 or 3 years after planting, and the greater part of the crop is from 2-year-old shoots. After removing the tops, side branches and leaves, two longitudinal slits are made with a sharp



CINNAMOMUM CASSIA



CINNAMOMUM ZEYLANICUM

knife, one on each side of the shoot, permitting removal of the bark in two strips of similar dimensions. The pieces are then put together, the outer side of one piece against the inner side of another, bundled, closely bound together, and allowed to ferment a day or so. Then, each length of bark is placed over a cylindrical stick and the outer bark removed with the aid of a curved knife. The barks are then put together as before, cut into lengths of about 12 inches and left to dry. As the bark dries, it contracts, curls inwards, and gradually acquires the form of a pipe, or quill. The bark is graded according to the thickness, appearance, color and aroma before quilling. The various grades are identified by a series of zeros and numbers as follows: "0000", "000", "00", "0," 1sts, 2nds, 3rds, and 4ths, the first mentioned grade being the finest. Broken quills are exported as "quillings" and the inner bark of twigs and twisted shoots as "featherings."

The best quality cinnamon is produced in southern Ceylon where it thrives in deep sandy soil in sheltered situations up to 2,000 ft. The average temperature in the area is about 80°F. and the average rainfall from 80 to 100 inches.

Cinnamon bark yields approximately 0.5 to 1.5 percent of an essential oil used in the flavor and perfume industry. Its chief constituent is cinnamaldehyde.

The ground bark of cinnamon has been used since antiquity as a breath sweetener, a tonic for stomach, liver, kidneys, gall and nerves, a remedy for nausea, diarrhea, and heartburn, and as a sedative for expectant mothers during childbirth. Because of these impressive qualities, cinnamon has been included in many medical preparations and patent medicines, such as laudanum,

aromatic tincture of arnica, licorice water, Frescator's "Diascordium," Garus's "Elixir," Chaussier's "Antiseptic Elixir," and Todd's "potion." Some of these preparations helped the cinnamon along with a generous dose of alcohol. But modern medicine still grants some merit to cinnamon, including "no contraindications." In other words, if it does not do you any good at least it will do you no harm.

Today cinnamon is a familiar baking spice, used for flavoring cakes, breads, cookies and the like.

When we order cinnamon toast we should, to be correct, ask for "cassia toast," since cinnamon in the United States has almost entirely been replaced by cassia. The U.S. Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act. of 1938 permits the term "cinnamon" to be used not only for the true cinnamon bark (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*) but also for the cassia bark. Cassia spice is obtained from the bark of Chinese cassia (*Cinnamomum cassia* Nees & Eberm.), Padany cassia (*C. burmanii* Blume), Saigon cassia (*C. loureiri* Nees) and probably some other species. Like the true cinnamon, they belong to the laurel family (*Lauraceae*) and should not be confused with the ornamental cassias of the pea family (*Leguminosae*).

Cassia bark resembles the true cinnamon bark but has a higher essential oil content and a more intense aroma but is not so delicately flavored. Also, ground cassia bark is reddish-brown, while ground cinnamon bark is tan in color. For flavoring food and culinary uses, cassia is just as good as genuine cinnamon. In fact, it is doubtful if one person in a thousand could distinguish one from the other although in fifteenth century England cassia was only for "commyn people" and cinnamon for "lordes."

The United States imported 4,955,000 pounds of cinnamon bark in 1974 and 11,539,000 pounds of

cassia bark. However, most of this imported cinnamon is exported to Mexico.

An Enchanted Evening

A FUND-RAISING DINNER at Descanso Gardens has been set for Friday evening, September 22. Titled "An Enchanted Evening" by its sponsors, the Southern California Camellia Council and The Descanso Gardens Guild, the benefit will raise funds for a new garden-center building at Descanso. According to Mel Gum, President of the Camellia Council, last year's event was so popular that the 500 tickets available for this season are expected to go quickly.

The "Enchanted Evening" will feature dancing under the stars in the fairylike setting of ancient oaks and candlelit tables in Descanso. The evening's menu will include a selection of fruits and salads and will feature barbecued beef as the entree. The beef will be prepared under the supervision of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens Director Francis Ching. Volunteers from the Guild and the Camellia Council will be doing the table arrangements, serving the food and hosting guests. Committee members are Tom Hughes and Judy Simmons of the Southern California Camellia Council and Nancy Dunn and Randi McDonald, officers of the Descanso Gardens Guild.

Raffle prizes announced by Tom Hughes include a 10-day cruise to the North Pacific for two valued at \$2,500 and original oil paintings and water color pictures. Additional valuable prizes are anticipated by Tom who is spearheading the committee seeking raffle prizes.

The Enchanted Evening will begin at 6:00 p.m. and the charge will be \$25.00 per couple with all proceeds earmarked for the building fund. For further information call 790-5414.

Dr. Leonid Enari is a senior biologist on the Arboretum staff.



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