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Cinnamon

CEYLON VS. CASSIA





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What many tea enthusiasts and even some industry professionals don't realize is that "cinnamon" on a label can refer to two distinctly different botanicals: Ceylon cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*) and Cassia cinnamon (*Cinnamomum cassia*).

Understanding the difference is important as it has impact on **flavor profiles, health considerations, and regulatory compliance.**

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The Tale of Two Cinnamons



Ceylon cinnamon, often called "true cinnamon," primarily grows in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), which produces about 80-90% of the world's supply. This variety has been treasured since ancient times, once considered a gift worthy of monarchs.

Cassia cinnamon, sometimes called Chinese cinnamon, has a different origin story. Native to Southern China, it's now extensively cultivated across South and Southeast Asia, with major production in China, Indonesia, and Vietnam. We find cassia in Karnataka too, where we are based.

While both belong to the genus *Cinnamomum* in the Lauraceae family, their differences extend far beyond geography.

Sensory Distinctions



As a tea formulator, we've found that understanding the sensory profiles of these two cinnamons is crucial for creating balanced blends:

Flavor Profile:

- **Ceylon:** Delicate, sweet, and complex with citrusy and floral undertones. There's a subtle complexity that doesn't overpower other ingredients.
- **Cassia:** Stronger, spicier, and sometimes slightly bitter with woody or earthy notes. Its robust character stands up well to other bold flavors.

Aroma:

- **Ceylon:** Fragrant and aromatic with subtle hints of citrus and floral notes.
- **Cassia:** Strong, spicy, and pungent—this is the "classic cinnamon" scent most consumers recognize.

Appearance:

- **Ceylon** sticks are light tan-brown, thin, and consist of multiple layers tightly rolled like a cigar.
- **Cassia** sticks are reddish dark brown, thicker, harder, and form fewer layers that resemble a hollow tube.

Texture:

- **Ceylon** is thin, papery, and easily breakable—almost delicate to the touch.
- **Cassia** is rougher, thicker, and tougher to break or grind.

These sensory differences dictate how each variety performs in various tea applications. We've found Ceylon's subtle qualities perfect for delicate white or green tea blends, while Cassia's boldness holds its own in robust chai or spiced black tea formulations.

Health Considerations: The Coumarin Factor



Perhaps the most significant distinction between these two cinnamons lies in their coumarin content. This naturally occurring compound, while responsible for some of cinnamon's pleasant aroma, has been associated with potential health concerns at high consumption levels.

Cassia contains significantly higher levels of coumarin (2000-5000 parts per million or 0.4-0.8%) compared to Ceylon, which contains only trace amounts (less than 0.004%). Research suggests that consuming just one teaspoon of Cassia cinnamon daily could potentially exceed the tolerable daily intake of coumarin, raising concerns about liver, kidney, and lung toxicity with regular consumption.

For our tea blends intended for daily consumption, this difference becomes particularly relevant. While both varieties offer potential benefits for blood sugar management, antioxidant support, and anti-inflammatory properties, Ceylon's lower coumarin content makes it the preferred choice for products designed for regular use.

Market Dynamics: Premium vs. Practical



The price disparity between these two cinnamons reflects their different production methods and availability:

Ceylon cinnamon commands a premium price, often exceeding Cassia by tenfold or more. Premium Ceylon Alba grade can range from \$15-20 per kilogram.

Cassia is considerably more affordable, with wholesale prices typically between \$2.20-5.7 per kilogram. This price difference explains why Cassia dominates the global market by a ratio of approximately nine to one.

For tea manufacturers, this presents an interesting strategic choice: formulate with premium Ceylon for health-conscious consumers willing to pay more, or use Cassia for more cost-effective blends with a bolder flavor profile.

Processing: The Art Behind the Spice



The processing methods for these two cinnamons contribute significantly to their different characteristics and price points:

Ceylon processing is remarkably labor-intensive, requiring skilled artizans. After harvesting stems at precise times following rainy seasons, workers delicately scrape off the outer bark, rub down the inner bark with brass rods, and make careful incisions to remove the inner layer in one piece. The pieces are then air-dried in shade, causing them to naturally curl, before being assembled into "quills" that can reach up to one meter in length.

Cassia processing is comparatively straightforward. **The bark is peeled from stems and branches and set aside to dry, often in direct sunlight.** The resulting quills are thicker and less tightly rolled than Ceylon's delicate constructions.

This dramatic difference in processing complexity is a primary driver behind Ceylon's higher price point and contributes to its status as a premium ingredient.

Regulatory Landscape: What Tea Producers Should Know



For tea companies operating internationally, understanding the regulatory differences between markets is essential:

In the United States, the FDA doesn't require labels to distinguish between Ceylon and Cassia—both can be marketed simply as "cinnamon." This offers flexibility but may not help consumers make informed choices.

The European Union takes a different approach. Since 2008, EU regulations have mandated clear differentiation between Ceylon and Cassia cinnamons, primarily due to coumarin content concerns. Even more significantly, since February 2022, "Ceylon Cinnamon" has been granted Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status within the EU, meaning products labeled as "Ceylon Cinnamon" must originate from Sri Lanka.

For companies exporting tea blends to the EU, this requires careful sourcing, documentation, and labeling to ensure compliance.

Strategic Implications for Tea Formulators



As we've navigated cinnamon sourcing for our business, several key strategies have emerged:

- 1. Quality Authentication:** Implementing visual inspection and potentially laboratory testing to verify the authenticity of Ceylon cinnamon is crucial, particularly given the prevalence of adulteration.
- 2. Targeted Applications:** Reserving Ceylon for premium tea blends where its delicate flavor profile shines and using Cassia for more robust spice blends where its intensity is desired.
- 3. Clear Communication:** Educating customers about the differences between cinnamon types—particularly the health implications of coumarin content for daily-consumption teas.
- 4. Market-Specific Formulation:** Developing different formulations for different markets to comply with varying regulatory requirements, particularly for the EU market.

Final Thoughts



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Understanding the nuanced differences between Ceylon and Cassia cinnamon has been essential for our product development process.

By making informed choices about which variety to use in specific formulations, we can create teas that deliver exceptional flavor experiences and also align with our commitment to customer wellbeing.

Whether you're a **fellow tea formulator**, a **bulk purchaser**, or **simply a connoisseur looking to deepen your understanding of this amazing spice**, we hope this exploration offers some insights for your own cinnamon journey.

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