

# HARVESTING 'TRUE CINNAMON'

## THE STORY OF THE CEYLON SPICE



Inside the main building in Carlton estate, cinnamon quills are placed on ropes under the roof for drying.

A worker stuffs cinnamon barks with small cuttings of the bark called quillings to make one 42-inch cinnamon quill. Pictures by Nathan Mahendra for Al Jazeera

### Part 1

ZINARA RATHNAYAKE

It is 9.00 am in the Carlton estate in Thihagoda, a small town about 160 km (100 miles) south of Colombo, and the July sun hides behind inky clouds. The air is thick and hot. Two men walk to the main estate building carrying piles of cinnamon branches. Inside, a group of women sit on the cement floor, chatting as they peel cinnamon.

Since 2000, workers here have planted, harvested and peeled cinnamon, sending batches of the fragrant sticks to a factory in Kamburupitiya, a 15-minute drive away, where they are cut, packed and loaded onto shipping containers for export.

Cinnamon harvesting usually takes place from June to December when the monsoon skies burst into downpours. But here at Rathna Producers Cinnamon Exports, it is produced throughout the year on the 42-acre (17 hectares) estate. "When we are done harvesting one acre, the next acre is ready," says Chamara Lakshith, 28, the estate's visiting officer, whose job involves coordinating between the estate and the main office in Kamburupitiya. "But sometimes for a few weeks, the bark is so hard that you can't peel cinnamon. We know it by looking at the trees; young leaves turn striking red."

The family business that began in 1985 is run by Ravindu Runage, whose late father started in the cinnamon trade with Rs. 7,000 to buy cinnamon from small farmers and sell it to bigger traders.

Now, Runage says the company is

**"It's a craft you have to master for years," says Piyathilake. "I started peeling cinnamon when I was 12. It took me several years to strip off thin layers of the inner bark without damaging it."**



Cinnamon saplings grow for one year at the Carlton estate.



**"We grew up with cinnamon," says Ravindu Runage. "We lived in a two-bedroom house. We slept in one room. In the other room, my Thaththa stored cinnamon."**

Cinnamon branches are soaked before they are peeled.



Heenipellage Chandra has been peeling cinnamon since the 1970s.

other spices like nutmeg and black pepper to 56 countries. Apart from growing organic cinnamon, the company also sources it from 8,000 individual and small-scale farmers and exports more than 30 containers of cinnamon a month.

"We grew up with cinnamon," says 36-year-old Runage, at his office in Kamburupitiya, surrounded by several industry awards his family has won over the years. "We lived in a two-bedroom house. We slept in one room. In the other room, my Thaththa stored cinnamon."

Once they were in the business, the Runage family learned that Mexico is one of the biggest cinnamon consumers. "So Thaththa learned English and visited Mexico in 1998 to find a buyer," says Runage. "But they spoke Spanish. So Thaththa sent his business

card to companies he found in a telephone book."

"Five months later, we sold our first container of cinnamon to Mexico."

#### World's best cinnamon

There are two types of cinnamon in the Western market: Ceylon cinnamon (named after the title British colonisers gave to Sri Lanka) and cassia. Ceylon cinnamon is native to Sri Lanka; it has a lush, inviting scent and a sweet taste, and its quills are soft and light brown in colour. Cassia comes from other Asian countries like China, Indonesia and Vietnam; its bark is sturdy with a rough texture, it is dark brown in colour and is stronger and hotter in taste. Cassia is considered lower quality, while Ceylon cinnamon often triumphs as the pure, 'true cinnamon'.



Ravindu Runage's late father started Rathna Producers Cinnamon Exports in 1985; they have now won several industry awards

The process of producing this cinnamon includes several laborious, time-consuming steps. This is also why Ceylon cinnamon is expensive in the market while cassia is cheap, Runage says. At the estate, seeds are planted in grow bags. After one year, saplings are cultivated. Harvesting begins four years later.

For harvesting, farmers cut down the branches of cinnamon trees at an angle, which allows cinnamon bushes to regrow. Young and tender twigs are thrown away. Once branches are soaked in water and are moist enough, peelers remove the outermost layer of the cinnamon bark. To produce thin cinnamon quills, they spend hours stripping off the inner bark of the cinnamon branch in sheets.

Once produced, Ceylon cinnamon quills are graded based on their width; the thinner the quills, the higher they are in value. Alba is the highest form of cinnamon, with a diameter of six millimetres. H1 is a lower grade of cinnamon, with a diameter of 22mm. In the export market, Alba costs twice as much as H1.

#### A generational craft

With a hearty smile, Suduhakuru

**Cassia is considered lower quality, while Ceylon cinnamon often triumphs as the pure, 'true cinnamon'.**



Suduhakuru Piyathilake has worked as a peeler for the last 43 years.

Piyathilake holds a large batch of cinnamon quills. Piyathilake and his wife have been living in an old, dilapidated house next to the estate's main building for 10 years now.

At 5.00 am every day, Piyathilake heads off to the plantation. After collecting branches from about 15 trees, he plods back to the water tank in the main building, drops them off for soaking and returns to the plantation. He must make several trips back and forth before he begins peeling.

"When it's moist, it's easy to peel," says the 55-year-old. "That's why we cut them early in the morning and soak them."

When the clock hits 10.00 am, Piyathilake comes back with the last batch. After five hours, he has collected the branches of 200 trees. Sweat trickles down his forehead. A resident kitten swats at his feet, but Piyathilake ignores it and rushes in for a shower. After a two-hour break, he sharpens his knife by scraping the outer bark of the branch and then he gets to work. "This is what my father and his father did," he says. "Now my sons are cinnamon peelers."

Piyathilake has been peeling cinnamon for the last 43 years. He learned the craft from his father in their village in Elpitiya, 70km north of the Runage family estate, where his children live with his mother. At home, cinnamon trees adorn their back yard, Piyathilake says. "But it's a small garden so we can't harvest cinnamon every day of the year. We don't make much money there. So I work here with my wife. We only see our children once in every four months."

Piyathilake is so adept at work that

he can masterfully strip off extremely thin barks of the cinnamon branch by merely measuring them next to his index finger. After peeling the outer bark, he makes two cuts on two opposite sides before peeling off the inner bark. A half a length cut of your small-cutting is for Alba, Piyathilake says. For 'rough' or H1 cinnamon quills, Piyathilake uses the length of two bones of his index finger.

However, even for experienced generational peelers like Piyathilake, making extremely thin Alba cinnamon is profitless. By 10.00 pm - when he sets off to sleep - Piyathilake can have peeled about five kilos of lower grade cinnamon, earning about Rs. 2,500 per kilogramme. "But I will only make just one kilo of Alba for the whole day," he says. "Alba is smaller and lightweight so you need to make more quills to make up a kilo - that earns me only Rs. 4,300 rupees."

When Piyathilake removes the inner bark, it curls up within a few minutes under the shade. These barks are then stuffed with small cuttings of the bark called quillings to make one 42-inch (one metre) quill. Quills are placed on ropes under the roof for drying. After three days, peelers pack them into bales and send them off to the factory.

For Piyathilake and his family, cinnamon is their bread and butter, but it is also much more than that. "It's a craft you have to master for years. I started peeling cinnamon when I was 12. It took me several years to strip off thin layers of the inner bark without damaging it," he says.

#### Skills shortage

For producers like Runage, however, it is not always easy to find skilled labour. At the Carlton estate, Piyathilake is one of their last experienced peelers. Runage feels that finding generational peelers is one of the biggest challenges in the business today.

"Peeling cinnamon requires hard labour, so the younger generations don't want to do it anymore. They prefer office jobs. It doesn't necessarily mean that these office jobs will pay you more than peeling cinnamon, but an office job has a better social image today," says Runage. "People consider peeling cinnamon as a low-level job, so it's difficult for us to find experienced peelers now."

Back at the estate's main building, grey-haired Heenipellage Chandra sits on a floor mat, her eyes focused on the cinnamon bark she peels. For 10 years, the 62-year-old has walked to the estate daily to peel at least three kilos of cinnamon. Chandra recalls Runage's father visiting her house in the late 1980s. "He came to meet my father-in-law and buy cinnamon from him."

Chandra has been peeling cinnamon at home since she was married. "Somewhere in the late 1970s," she says, trying to recall her wedding day, "My husband's father and his father, all of them peeled cinnamon."

But Chandra's children do not peel cinnamon any more. Both her 20-something sons do office jobs, says Chandra as her eyes twinkle with a smile. She is proud of her sons. They have climbed the social ladder.

(To be continued...) (AJ Jazeera)