

A photograph showing a stack of cinnamon sticks resting on a white, textured surface, possibly a piece of parchment or a block of cheese. The sticks are curled and show the characteristic bark texture. The background is dark and out of focus.

As one of the numerous aromatics the Spice Islands are known for, cinnamon has had a long history recorded as far back as 2,000 BC in ancient Egypt. Various plants belong to the genus *Cinnamomum*, but the ones we are most familiar with are true cinnamon from Sri Lanka and cassia from Indonesia. True cinnamon is mostly cultivated in Sri Lanka, while cassia is more widespread. The latter has a stronger, harsher flavour and is a darker brown and more reddish than Sri Lankan cinnamon.

Cultivated from two-year-old tropical evergreen trees of the same name native to China, India and Southeast Asia, the stems are coppiced and processed immediately, while the inner bark is still moist. The outer layer is scraped off and the inner layer is revealed by beating the stem. The bark is then carefully peeled off in long rolls, which are dried for four to six hours, during which it curls into thick, brown rolls (also called quills). They can be left as is, ground into a powder, or processed as fragrant oil for flavouring, or medicinal and beautifying purposes.

Western chefs fancy it used sparingly in desserts and breads and Mexicans like it in chocolate. In Asia, cinnamon is used with a harmony of other spices such as nutmeg, turmeric and cloves. It has the

A spice of life

A vital addition to any pantry, cinnamon is valued for adding an effectively piquant punch and warming perfume to both sweet and savoury dishes.
By Eunice Lew

extraordinary power to make stews, soups or marinades sing with its subtle warming aroma. The spice also lends the dish undertones of sharpness and sweetness. Its piquancy is nothing like that of chillies; the bark arouses the palate without setting it on fire, but still tickles the throat.

Sous chef I Gusti Nyoman Kaler, who oversees Kintamani Indonesian Restaurant at Furama Riverfront with chef Noldy Herling Bawiling, extols cinnamon's pungent but sweet fragrance. The native Balinese hails the bark as a lynchpin spice of Asian cuisine. "It's used in so many



I GUSTI
NYOMAN
KALER

dishes—*pisang apek*, bak kut teh, braised meats as five-spice powder, or even with grilled banana and cheese," Kaler raves. "But I love it most in traditional Balinese dishes such as the oxtail soup and rendang, because these are the foods I grew up with in Bali."

Kaler warns that the spice has to be carefully used, especially when it is still in bark form. "Cinnamon can turn bitter if cooked for too long or too hurriedly," he says. "That's another reason why cinnamon-infused stews and soups are simmered and not boiled." The bark and powder can be consumed directly, but can present a choking hazard due to its robust flavour.

PEHA KAMBING BUMBU BALI (BALINESE SPICED LAMB SHANK)

Serves 2 Prep time 10 minutes

Cook time 1 hour

150g broccoli, cut into florets
100g cauliflower, cut into florets
100g carrots, sliced
1 salam leaf (Indonesian bay leaf)
5g cinnamon stick, about 10cm long
300g lamb shank
200ml coconut milk
salt and pepper, to taste

herbs and spices

50g shallots
20g garlic
15g red chilli paste
10g ginger
10g turmeric, pressed
10g blue ginger
10g candlenut
10g cloves
5g nutmeg powder
1 stalk lemongrass
1 kaffir lime leaf



- Blanch broccoli, cauliflower and carrots for 5 minutes. Set aside.
- Blend all herbs and spices till smooth in a blender. Sauté paste in pan till fragrant. Add 300ml water, salam leaf, cinnamon and lamb shank.
- Cook over a slow medium fire until tender, about 1 hour.

- Add coconut milk and blanched vegetables and simmer till thickened to desired texture. Season to taste, then serve.

Kaler says: "Cinnamon perks up this dish by giving it a kick of warm spiciness that is quite unlike that of chillies." >



DAGING RENDANG SUMATRA (BEEF SIMMERED IN THICK COCONUT GRAVY)

*Serves 10 Prep time 10 minutes
Cook time 4 hours*

herbs and spices

5g cinnamon stick, about 10cm long
10g cloves
20g shallots
5 cloves garlic
10g turmeric powder
10g ginger
1 tbsp sea salt
20g red chilli paste

1kg beef knuckle, cut into 4cm by 4cm cubes
2½ litres coconut milk

1cm blue ginger, sliced
5g garlic, sliced
2 sticks lemongrass, smashed
1 turmeric leaf

- Blend herbs and spices till smooth.
- Add herbs and spices, beef cubes, coconut milk, blue ginger, garlic, lemongrass and turmeric leaf into a wok over a medium flame. Keep stirring until it simmers and it starts to thicken.
- Reduce heat to low, stir occasionally and simmer until beef is tender and gravy is thickened and dry, about 4 hours. Serve.

Kaler says: "Though the spiciness of rendang mainly comes from chilli and ginger, Indonesian cinnamon, or cassia, is the background player that boosts the heat of the dish."

SOP BUNTUT (OXTAIL SOUP)

*Serves 2 Prep time 15 minutes
Cook time 1 hour 30 minutes*

5g shallots
5g garlic
150g oxtail beef, sliced to 1-inch thick pieces
1 litre beef stock
10g potatoes, cubed
10g carrots, cubed
5g cinnamon stick, about 10cm long
½ tsp cinnamon powder
5g leek, thinly sliced
10g celery, sliced thinly
5g ginger, smashed
½ tsp nutmeg powder
¼ tsp cloves
salt and pepper, to taste
2 young coconuts

condiments

fresh lime
garlic and red chilli, blended
sweet soy sauce
fried shallots
chopped celery

- Blend shallots and garlic till smooth, sauté till fragrant. Set aside.
- Boil oxtail in beef stock for about 1 hour, adding cubed potatoes and carrots midway.

• Add blended shallots and garlic, cinnamon stick and powder, leek, celery, ginger, nutmeg powder and cloves into oxtail soup. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

- Empty young coconuts of water. Ladle soup into coconut cavities and steam whole for a few minutes, then serve.

Kaler says:

"Cinnamon's fragrance masks the overpowering gaminess of the meat to make it more palatable." **e**

