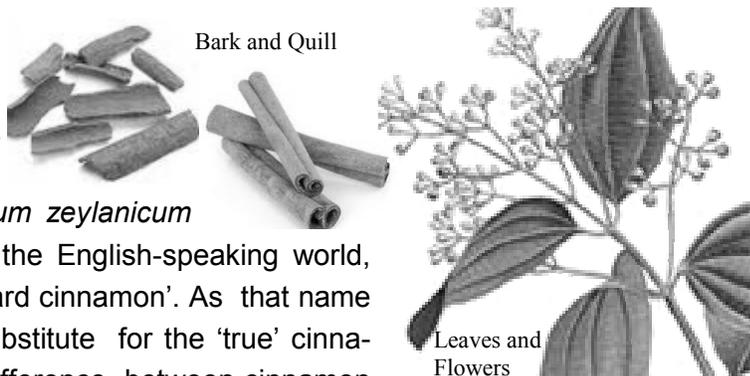


Cinnamon and Cassia

Both spices cinnamon and cassia are the dried bark of tropical, evergreen trees related to the Bay Laurel family. Cinnamon comes from the tree *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* and cassia from the tree *Cinnamomum cassia*. In the English-speaking world, cassia is at times known by its common name 'bastard cinnamon'. As that name implies, cassia is sometimes regarded as a poor substitute for the 'true' cinnamon. However, for the average everyday user, the difference between cinnamon and cassia is hardly noticeable. Some languages only have one name for both, for example, the French word *cannelle* refers to both spices.



The ancient Greeks and Romans probably had both cinnamon and cassia. Cinnamon is said to be among the oldest of spices going back some 2500 years to the land of the Pharaohs where it was used in the embalming process. Hieroglyphics discovered on a temple built around 1500 BC by a Pharaoh queen, indicate that she sent ships to 'The Land of Punt', now Somalia, to bring back, among other things, cinnamon, frankincense and myrrh. Throughout the Old Testament in the Bible, references to cinnamon indicate that it was more precious than gold. The Roman emperor Nero is said to have murdered his wife and to ease his conscience he ordered that a year's supply of cinnamon be burned at her funeral.

Cassia is indigenous to China, Indochina and Burma – it was known to the Chinese as early as 3000 BC, whereas cinnamon is a native of Sri Lanka. Cinnamon is a bushy green tree, usually cultivated as low bushes to ease the harvesting process. The cassia tree is larger. The commercial product comes in two forms: bark and quills; the bark generally comes as flat pieces of dark brown slivers whereas the quills are the 'rolled' inner bark. Cinnamon is light brown to pale tan, its fragrance is warm, sweet, lightly perfumed whereas cassia usually appears darker, more red, its aroma stronger and more lingering.

In countries like England and Australia, most bakers use cassia (ground cassia, often euphemistically called 'baker's cinnamon' or 'Dutch cinnamon') as the two spices are not to be sold indiscriminately, whereas in France, *cannelle* refers to both. In the U.S., there is no restriction on the naming of both spices, but cinnamon is the name most often used. Next time you go shopping for ground cinnamon, have a good look. There are two products, one is plain cinnamon, the other is baker's cinnamon, Dutch cinnamon or sugar cinnamon, which is often a mixture of cassia, cinnamon and sugar. As cassia has a stronger flavour, it has become more popular in baked goods such as cinnamon buns, cinnamon doughnuts, apple strudel, spiced biscuits and fruit muffins.

Medicinally, both cinnamon and cassia have been used for thousands of years in Eastern as well as Western cultures to treat chronic diarrhea, colds, high blood pressure, arthritis, kidney conditions and abdominal pain. The volatile oil of cinnamon and cassia is used in some inhalants, in tonic and as a cure for stomach upsets. It has been known for this inhalant to be given to women in labour as a sedative. The oil is also used in the manufacture of perfume and soap.

Fact or Old Wives' tale?: My forebears believed that a mixture of honey and cinnamon cures most illnesses, from the common cold to arthritis, to obesity. One tablespoon of lukewarm honey mixed with one teaspoon of cinnamon powder is good for curing chronic cough, cold and clearing the sinuses, and, if taken regularly, even chronic arthritis can be cured. And take notes of this: A regular cup of honey and cinnamon tea before breakfast is claimed to reduce the weight of even the most obese person. It is said that this mixture does not allow the fat to accumulate in the body even though the person may eat a high calorie diet!

Well, whether you are a believer or a skeptic, you are sure to make a big impression when you use a cinnamon stick to stir your morning cappuccino or your cinnamon tea - or better still - use a cinnamon stick to scoop up the cappuccino froth well sprinkled with ground cinnamon!