

The Sri Lankan Spice Industry

The Origin

Ancient Sri Lanka's economy was always based on trade. According to the historical sources like chronicles, inscriptions and other archaeological findings, Sri Lanka was a main trade center in ancient world. Sri Lanka had all the resources, facilities, knowledge and connections, which help to maintain a better internal and external trade economic environment. The roots of trading in Sri Lanka runs till 3rd - 4th century BCE. The Brahmi rock Inscriptions found in Sri Lanka, which dated back to 3rd century BCE, mention gifts of caves by Navika (Sailors) to the Sanga (Buddhist monks). Special significance is the Duvegala inscription, which ends with an illustration of a Boat. The inscriptions show that navigators sailing the oceans for trade were a significant part of the ancient Sri Lankan society.

In another inscription, King Gajabahu (113-135 CE) grants the income from Port of Godawaya (the mouth of the Walawe river, between Ambalantota and Hambantota in the Hambantota District) to the temple of Godapawatha. The Tamil inscription in Nainathivu by King Parakramabahu (1153-1186 CE) gives rules that must be followed when ships reached the port of Urathota (Kagts). The trilingual inscription in Persian, Chinese & Tamil letters indicates the multinational trade at the Galle Port in the 15th Century.

It was not just trading of goods, but building the Yaathra, large sea going vessels, about 30 meters in length, were in use in Sri Lanka for over two Millenniums as per the writings of ancient Greeks and Romans. Much smaller Oru (small wooden paddle boats) transported the goods from the Yaathra when anchored in deep water.

Manthai (Mannar) was not only a trade center, but also a famous dockyard for constructing ships with wood like Halmilla and Teak. In the 9th century AD Li Chao the Mandarin who wrote Tang Kao Shih Pu reports "the ships from the Lion Kingdom (Lanka) were the largest, with stairways for loading and unloading which are several tens of feet in height".



Ptolemy's Taprobane (Sri Lanka)



Ptolemy's World Map - 2nd century CE

Evolution

The strategic position of the island of Lanka in the Indian ocean, at middle of the maritime silk route from China to Europe, which opened in the middle of the Tang dynasty (618 CE - 907 CE). Crossing the Bay of Bengal, they stopped in Lanka on their way to Europe via the Persian Gulf or Red Sea, and few to the southern coast of Africa, made it a hub for ancient trade. Lanka being at the middle of this trade route grew to be a major hub, contributing valuable exports such as Gems, Pearls, Ivory, and Spices.

Lanka was one of the great emporiums of the East. Merchants imported items both for export as well as for exchange. According to Knox writing in the 17th century, different colored cloths of several sorts, velvets, silks, cotton, ceramics, porcelain, drugs of various kinds, opium, camphor, tobacco, musk, Agarwood; saltpeter, Sulphur, looking-glasses, glass bottles, were imported to Lanka from ancient times. Lanka had indigenous products of high export value such as precious gems, pearls, elephants, ivory, tortoise shell, valuable wood, textiles and Spices, especially cloves, cardamoms, pepper and cinnamon.

The Arab monopoly on the spice trade ended when the Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish and the English took to the seas in the 1500's. They feuded to establish a monopoly on the spice trade and secure the trade route. In 1505, a Portuguese fleet led by Lorenzo de Almeida on a mission to intercept Arab merchants and secure the spice trade, drifted ashore near Galle. They made a happy discovery. They had arrived at the source of the world's best cinnamon.

The Portuguese gradually colonised the coastal provinces of Sri Lanka. As the new cinnamon barons, they increased production targets and expanded the workforce. By the year 1511, the Portuguese were in control of the spice trade of the Malabar coast of India and Ceylon. However, by 1658, the Dutch had defeated the Portuguese and taken control of their territories and cinnamon trade. The Dutch set up cinnamon plantations along the coastal belt. By the time they were usurped by the British in 1796, the cinnamon market in the West was in decline and higher focus was on commercial crops like Tea, Rubber and Coconut.

The Spread

Cinnamon (Kurundu)

Cinnamon refers to *Cinnamomum Verum* or 'true cinnamon,' which is a plant endemic to Sri Lanka. Most other cinnamon (from other countries) is from related species of plants and is called 'cassia'. It is a spice obtained by making shavings (also known as quills) of the inner bark of the cinnamon plant. Cinnamon trade has a very long history and records show cinnamon in the spice trade of Egypt as early as 2000BC. Cinnamon is often used to spice up chocolates, deserts and beverages but also for alcohol flavouring and medicine. 90% of the true cinnamon traded around the world comes from Sri Lanka.



Pepper (Gam Miris)

Pepper generally refers to black, white and green pepper. Black pepper is the unripe fruit of the pepper plant, *piper nigrum*, cooked and dried. Green pepper refers to the dried, but uncooked, unripe fruit of the pepper plant. White pepper, on the other hand, is the seeds from ripe pepper fruits. Pepper is the spice that is most commonly traded in the world. It is used for its strong aroma and for its spiciness as a chilli replacement. In addition to its use as a spice it has medical purposes and is also used for massages (pepper oil). Pepper is native to South and Southeast Asia.



Cardamom (Enasal)

Cardamom, also known as Cardamon, is a small spindle shaped seedpod with black seeds inside. The covers are thin and pale green (*Elettaria*) or dark brown (*Amomum*). It is the third on the list of the world's most expensive spices, right behind vanilla and saffron. Cardamom is used as a cooking spice as well as flavouring (mainly for tea and coffee). It is also used in medicine. Cardamom is native to India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. A few other countries, like Sri Lanka, have also taken up cultivation.



Clove (Karambunatti)

Cloves, which are the flower buds of a form of evergreen tree, originate from the Maluku Islands, Indonesia. They are primarily used as a spice, but are also used for medicine, fragrance (pomander) and clove cigars. Cloves are harvested and traded mainly in Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Pakistan, Tanzania and Zanzibar. When it comes to culinary purposes cloves are used in Asian, African, Mexican and Middle Eastern cuisine. They are most often used to add depth to meats, curries and marinades.



Curry Leaves (Karapincha)

The Curry Tree (binomial name: *Murraya koenigii*) is a tropical tree native to India and Sri Lanka. Its fragrant leaves are called curry leaves as they are popular for spicing up curries. They are mostly used as seasoning in the cooking of Sri Lanka, India and their neighbouring countries. Curry leaves have many medicinal properties including being anti-diabetic.



Turmeric (Kaha)

Turmeric (binomial name: *Curcuma longa*), once processed from the rhizomes, is a deep orangish yellow powder. It is used mainly to impart colour or in other words dye foods. When it comes to flavour, the spice tastes slightly bitter and peppery with undertones of earthy flavour. Though used mainly as a powder, turmeric is also used fresh in its rhizome form in certain regions of the world. Turmeric is grown in Southeast Asian countries due to their tropical climates but is native to southwest India.



Lemongrass and Citronella (Sera)

Lemongrass is a culinary herb which has a subtle citrus flavour. It is very popular in Asian cuisine and can be used fresh or dried and powdered. Lemongrass is used as a medical herb, pesticide and preservative as well. When it comes to citronella grass, it is from the same family of plants and is a very close relative to lemongrass. It is used in soaps, candles and insect repellent sprays. East Indian lemongrass is from Sri Lanka, India, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. West Indian lemongrass is native to South Asia and the Southeast Asian islands.



Nutmeg and Mace (Sadikka and Wasawasi)

Nutmeg is the seed of a type of evergreen tree (*Myristica fragrans*), while mace is the reddish netlike covering surrounding the seed. Nutmeg and mace are used as a flavouring for many sweet dishes from the cuisines of various countries, and as a spice in many savoury dishes. Nutmeg is also an essential ingredient in many Christmas favourites such as mulled cider, mulled wine and eggnog. Nutmeg is also used for perfume and medicine. The common nutmeg is native to the Banda islands of Indonesia. The plant was a lucrative trade spice throughout history. Therefore, after the Napoleonic war it was transplanted by the British to Sri Lanka, Penang, Bencoolen and Singapore. However, records show that the plant existed in Sri Lanka even before this.



Vanilla

Vanilla is a word that has Spanish origins and comes from the word 'vaina', literally translating to 'little pod'. It is a flavouring extracted from orchids of the Vanilla genus, mainly the Mexican flat-leaved Vanilla. Since the only natural pollinator is a Mexican species of bee, hand pollination is required to grow it in any other countries other than Mexico and South America. Due to this labour intensive cultivation, Vanilla is the second most expensive spice in the world. Vanilla may be sold as whole pods, powder, extract or as vanilla sugar mix. There are many types of vanilla due to the related species of orchids that produce vanilla; Bourbon Vanilla, Mexican Vanilla, Tahitian Vanilla, West Indian Vanilla. Sri Lanka has Bourbon Vanilla.



Ginger (Inguru)

Ginger is the root of flowering plant. It is used as a spice for food, flavouring for beverages or in folk medicine. Ginger originated in South China and later spread all over Asia followed by the African continent. The spice was introduced to Europe from India in the 1st century AD. Today it is a very commonly used spice globally.



Chili Pepper (Miris)

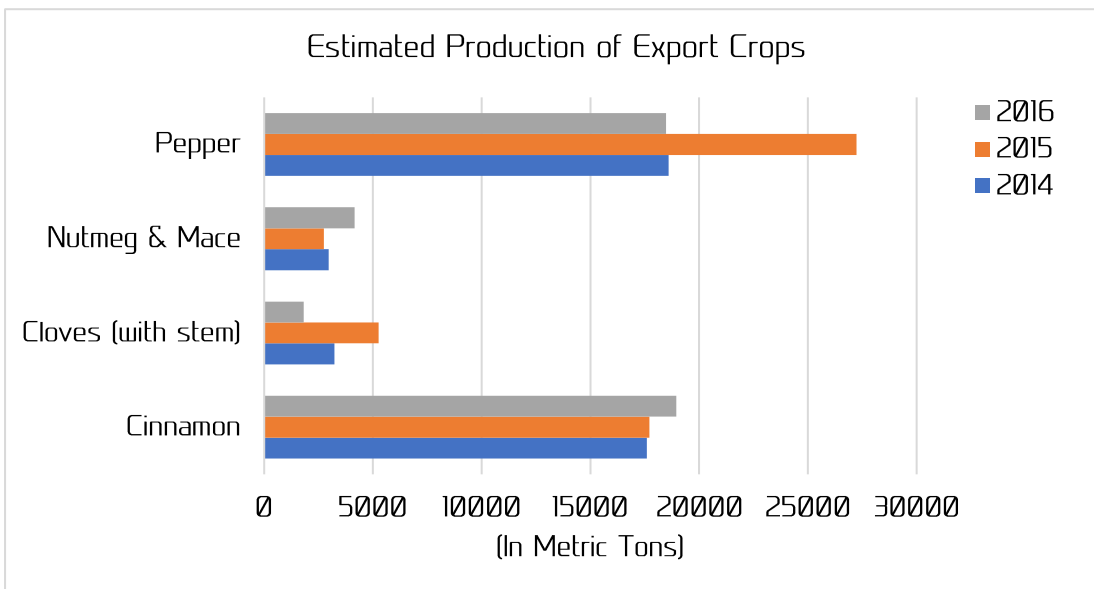
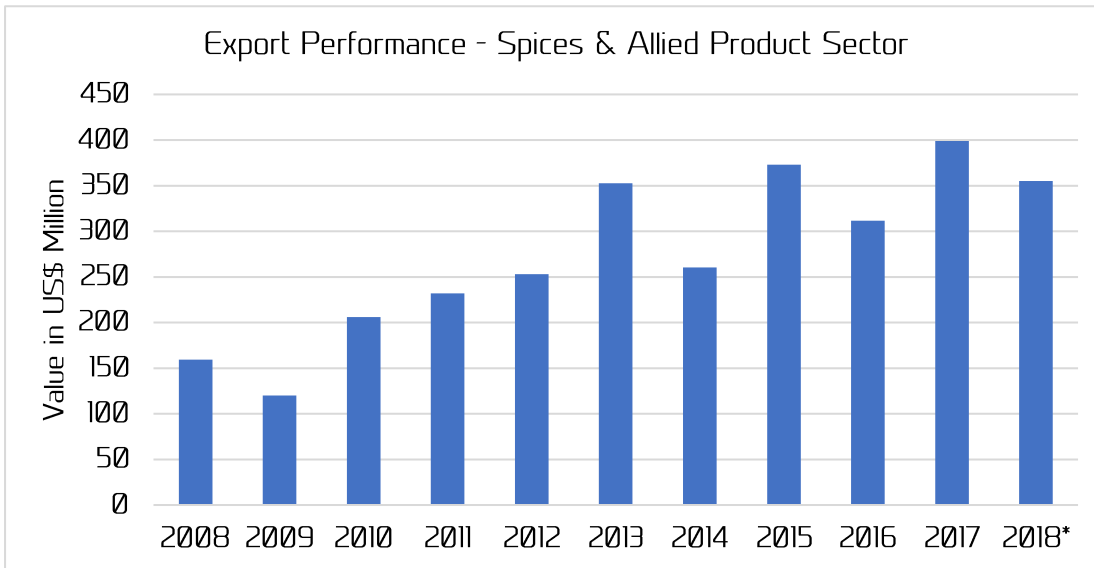
Chili peppers-the ultimate spice for any Sri Lankan dish. The dried red varieties are used whole, or they are turned into chili powder, of which there are different grades: burnt and unburnt. Each one has a distinct flavor. Green chili peppers are used to add a fresh taste to the spiciness of the dish and are sometimes added at the end of the cooking process.



Demand and Supply

The Spices and Seasonings industry has also suffered a certain impact, but still maintained a relatively optimistic growth, the past four years, Spices and Seasonings market size to maintain the average annual growth rate of 5.20% from 10920 million \$ in 2014 to 12715 million \$ in 2017, The analysts believe that in the next few years, Spices and Seasonings market size will be further expanded, we expect that by 2022, The market size of the Spices and Seasonings will reach 16380 million \$.

Sri Lanka has a sizable share in the world spice export market; especially in the Cinnamon and Pepper markets. Since 2000's, the export industry started using latest technology while processing these spices and aqua ring global standards, which has given a significant boom to the overall export market.



Reference Sites:

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