

The Marvels of Cinnamon

Don Mercer
Associate Professor, Food Science
Kemptville Campus University of Guelph

For as long as I can remember, cinnamon has been my favourite spice. Cinnamon buns just out of the oven fill the house with what has to be one of the most pleasant aromas imaginable. Even “good old” cinnamon toast is a perennial favourite in many homes, including ours.

It’s funny how thinking about something as simple as cinnamon can bring back memories. Each autumn when our kids were small, we would make a trip to the apple orchard after school on a Friday afternoon, and I would make a big batch of apple sauce Saturday morning. Of course, cinnamon was an essential ingredient. Then we would all sit down and have a big bowl of warm apple sauce. Some of the apple sauce was put in jars and frozen for use through the winter, and there was always a big bowl in the fridge to eat that weekend.

One year is particularly memorable for me. That was the year of the “mutiny”. Forgetting that my wife and kids do not share my appreciation of cinnamon, I apparently added a bit too much. Admittedly, the apple sauce did have a flavour intensity rivalling that of cinnamon heart candies. At the time, I didn’t think it was really all that bad. However, it obviously made an impression on the rest of the family, since I still get teased about it twenty years later whenever the topic of homemade apple sauce comes up. This became “Dad’s Batch” and another trip was made to the orchard the following week for a second bushel of apples to make a less flavourful batch of apple sauce.

Cinnamon comes from the bark of a species of evergreen laurel tree that is native to Sri Lanka. It is not a particularly special-looking tree. Once peeled from the tree, the bark can either be ground into a powder or rolled into cinnamon sticks. It is one of the oldest spices in the world. There are references to its usage appearing in ancient Chinese herbal texts from almost 5,000 years ago.

In addition to its appeal as a popular spice, cinnamon has a number of other benefits. Scientific studies have shown that cinnamon can help reduce the growth of microorganisms in various food products and juice products such as apple cider. This being the case, there was certainly not much danger of microbial growth in the infamous batch of apple sauce I made. However, my excuse about using the cinnamon as a preservative didn’t quite cut it with the rest of the family.

Cinnamon-flavoured toothpaste is attributed with having antiseptic properties to kill bacteria which can promote tooth decay and gum disease.

A routine search of the Internet for the health benefits of cinnamon gave numerous “hits”, with a few surprising results. Some articles claimed that cinnamon is effective at reducing blood sugar levels, curing toothaches and migraines, and even lowering cholesterol. It has been reported that simply sniffing cinnamon can enhance memory and cognitive functions.

One study indicated that cinnamon could aid in the relief of arthritic pain. This was accomplished by taking half a teaspoon of powdered cinnamon mixed with a tablespoon of honey the first thing each morning for a week or so. Cinnamon also has the apparent ability to act as an anti-clotting agent in the bloodstream, and can provide fibre, iron, and calcium in the diet.

However, don't be too quick to jump on the cinnamon band-wagon. There are a few possible negative effects that some people may experience if they are allergic to cinnamon powder.

Cinnamon oil especially should be used with great care. It may cause redness to develop if it contacts the skin, or it may even cause burning of the skin. There are also potentially serious health problems that may result if it is taken internally, so caution is advised.

From a personal perspective, I enjoy the simpler things about cinnamon - its warm aroma, its appealing flavour, and the associated memories. However, it is comforting to know that something you enjoy so much may actually be good for you. Now, with autumn here once again, it may be time for another trip to the apple orchard.