

## The Story of Ginger

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Would you not like to know about the romance of ginger other than the stereotyped information about its cultivation and marketing?

A considerable number of people in England make their living by distilling essences from ginger. So does every mineral water maker. Ginger has a story which reaches back to the long forgotten past. "It has associations which make the story of George Stephenson and the romance of the founding of Marine Insurance by the Italians."

Let us trace the word 'Ginger' back through ages and see what the philologists have to tell us:—

Modern English	— ginger
Old English	— gingiber
French	— gingembre
Latin	— zingiber or zingiberi
Greek	— zingiberis
Arabic	— zingibil
Hindustani	— zunjubeel
Sanskrit	— Sringa vera (horn shape)
Tamil	— Injgi

Thus the interesting fact is established that the early Hindus described it by comparing it with the horns or antlers of certain animals. A glance at a fully grown piece of ginger will easily prove the aptness of the name.

The following information would enable any one to deduce many interesting facts about ginger. We can see, for instance, that the ancient Romans and Greeks knew this wonderful spice. We find corroboration of this in the pages of the Roman historian Livy who believed that ginger came into Europe from Arabia by way of the Red sea. Moreover as Sanskrit was a dead language as early as the 3rd century B. C., it follows that ginger must have been known and used over two thousand years ago, establishing the claim of antiquity.

The fact that there is a word for ginger in old English also shows that the English forefathers knew and used this spice. But we have more precise information than this. Ginger is often referred to in the Anglo-Saxon leech-books of the 11th century, that is, before the Norman conquest.

Apparently then the medicinal virtues of ginger have been recognised even in England for at least 900 years. Its use has persisted to the present day with the sanction and approval of the medical men of every age, country and nationality.

Ginger root is frequently mentioned in the history of the Middle ages. It was an important item of commerce between East and West. Documents

exist to prove that it was included in the tariffs levied at Acre in Palestine in 1773 and at Barcelona in 1211. Marseilles in 1228 and Paris in 1296

In the 13th and 14th centuries it was in very common use, being next in value only to pepper. Indications are not lacking that the acquisition of these valuable spices played a considerable part in the Crusades, as a motivating factor.

The Elizabethan historian Gerarde writes 'our men which sacked Domingo in the Indies digged up ginger there in sundry places wilde..... Ginger groweth in Spaine, in the Canerie Islands and the Azores. It is most impatient of these our northern regions, as myself have found by proofs for there have been brought unto me at severall times sundry plants there of, fresh, green and full of juice, which have sprouted and budded fourth greene leaves in my garden in the heat of somer; but as soon as it hath bin but touched with the first sharp blast of winter it hath presently perished both blade and roote.'

Leaving the historical associations of ginger aside for a moment, let us consider the root itself. What we know under this name is the rhizome of *Zingiber officinale*, a perennial reed-like plant growing from 3 to 4 feet high. This plant rarely flowers and the fruit is unknown. It is not found in the wild state but is believed to be a native of the warmer parts of Asia from where it has spread to the West Indies, S. America, Western Tropical Africa and Australia.

In commerce ginger is used in various forms. As a spice or a flavouring agent it has been always popular and one may safely prophesy that it will always be so. It finds a way into the confectionary (gingerbread etc.), and it is eaten as a sweet (crystallised or preserved ginger). We should not in this connection forget the *Injimuraba* and the *Sukku karuppotti* of the Tinnevely District prepared with ginger and jaggery. Ginger is largely introduced as the main flavouring constituent of aerated waters, ginger beers, cordials, wines, etc. The principal varieties of ginger are from Jamaica, Cochin, Africa, Ceylon, Malabar and Barbados, the two first named being the most used for the various ginger drinks.

The medicinal values of ginger have long been recognised. Its principal constituents are (1) starch, (2) a volatile oil to which its characteristic aromatic odour is attributed, (3) gingerol to which it owes its pungency and (4) resin.

The flavouring principles were first made completely soluble by Mr. William Hay of Hull, England, some 50 years ago. In medicine ginger is mainly used as a stimulant and carminative. Ginger is put to a score of medicinal uses in India and it is one of the plant products always exploited by ayurvedic and allopathic doctors to cure patients. For the production of non-alcoholic drinks the ginger root is being almost entirely superseded by ginger essences. A beautifully clear ginger ale or ginger beer is very common now-a-days. Of course its fore-runner the cloudy 'Stone' ginger beer is still popular in parts of England.