mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “How is cinnamon made?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hey, it's Jay! Are there foods that remind you of special memories? For me, it's French toast. I can remember the excitement I felt watching my dad toast the bread and warm up the syrup. Then he'd get out the ingredient that made it extra special, a dash of cinnamon. So good. Someone named Stella has a question about cinnamon. Let's give Stella a call now.

[Video Call]

- Hi, Jay.
- Hi, Stella.
- I have a question for you. How's cinnamon made?
- That's a great question.

You've probably smelled or tasted cinnamon before. It's the star ingredient in a cinnamon roll's ooey-gooey filling. It's what makes that brown swirl in a cinnamon raisin bagel or the brown flecks on top of this oatmeal. A touch of cinnamon gives many other foods their delicious taste too. You can call cinnamon a seasoning or a spice. It's something people add to foods to give them a particular flavor. It's tricky to describe a flavor with words, but I'd say cinnamon is sweet and just a little bit spicy. Eating it gives me a warm feeling even when the weather is cold. You already know that most of the foods we eat come from plants and animals, and so do many of the things we use to flavor our foods. For instance, maybe you've seen these packets that come

with pizza. Crushed red pepper is a spicy seasoning made from peppers that grow on pepper plants. You can see dried up bits of the pepper's red skin and its flat round seeds. Or check this out. This is oregano, another seasoning people sprinkle on pizza. If you take a closer look, you can tell it's pieces of dried leaves from an oregano plant. You might not guess it, but cinnamon comes from a plant too, a tree to be specific. Looking at this dusty powder, it's hard to tell what part of a tree it's from. So let's go back one step. To make cinnamon powder, you need to grind up one of these, a cinnamon stick. But don't let the name fool you. It's not like the kind of stick you'd find from a tree branch. It's more like a curled up tube, and it didn't grow into shape. Still, you might find some clues here. Take a close look. What do you notice about the cinnamon stick? What part of a tree do you think cinnamon comes from?

VIDEO 2

Trees can have lots of different parts like leaves, flowers, and roots. So which part does cinnamon come from? To find out, let's take a look at a farm where cinnamon trees are grown, like this one. See all those parts growing at the bottom? This farmer is going to cut some of them off. Next, this person shaves away the bark. A tree's bark is kind of like armor. It grows on the outside, protecting the tree's inside parts. On this cut branch, you can see the bark on the outside surrounding the wood that's inside. And if you look closely, there's a darker ring here. That's a layer of inner bark. That thin layer is what this person wants to get to, so they have to be extra careful not to cut too deep. Once the inner bark is revealed, it's gently sliced and peeled away from the wood. The long strips get packed with smaller bits, then placed on racks where the bark dries out and curls up. Now it's ready to be cut into cinnamon sticks you saw before or ground up into cinnamon powder. So cinnamon comes from the inner bark of cinnamon trees. That's ground up tree bark being baked into treats. Who knew bark could be so

tasty? And let me show you another tree with bark we could eat. Those reddish brown sections on the trunks are where bark has been cut away to make a spice that some people call cassia. Cassia has a sweet and spicy flavor that's very similar to cinnamon. In fact, even if you've never heard of cassia before, it's very likely you have tasted it. That's because in places like the United States, the cassia sold in stores is usually just called cinnamon. That's right. There's more than one kind of cinnamon. The cinnamon we eat is really several varieties that come from different trees. Each variety has a slightly different flavor, but they're all sweet, spicy, and delicious. So in summary, cinnamon is made from the bark of specific trees. Whether it's bark harvested from cinnamon trees or cassia cinnamon trees, the process takes lots of skillful scraping, careful cutting, and patient drying to create the sticks and ground up powders that we use to flavor foods. It's important to remember that only a few kinds of trees produce the cinnamon spices we use. So you should not go around tasting trees. Bark from most trees isn't tasty, and they could even make you sick. But you can uncover the many other plants that add flavor to our food. The next time you're at the grocery store, take a look at the spices and seasonings to see if you can figure out which ones come from plants and which parts of plants were used. Some have clues in their names like sesame seeds, which are seeds, or bay leaves, which are leaves. The ground-up spices might be trickier, but with a little detective work, you may discover you're eating bits of dried-up bark, flowers, berries, and roots at every meal. That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Stella, for asking it.