

Bananas: All That Potassium And Carmen Miranda Too!

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By Marjorie Dorfman

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"...We have old-fashioned tomahto, Long Island potahto, but Yes, we have no bananas. We have no bananas today.." – Folk song by Frank Silver and Irving Cohen (1923)

Whether you are off to Rio following the colorful trail of Carmen Miranda's fruit-filled hat or seated on your couch contemplating the universe, the banana can always come along for the ride. There are so many aspects to this strange and wonderful fruit. Even its shape is a bit mysterious; conjuring images of tropical islands and sun-filled days. Did you know that the word "banana" originates from the Arabic and means finger? Doesn't that make you wonder where the rest of the hand is? I have been hooked on bananas ever since I was a child, and Miss Chiquita, drawn by Dik Brown who also created the Campbell kids, used to sing to me through the television in my parents' living room. (I always wondered why she never had her own show. She was so much cuter than Ed Sullivan.) You remember her words:

I'm Chiquita Banana and I'm here to say

Bananas need to ripen in a special way

When they are flecked with brown and have a golden hue

Bananas taste the best and are the best for you.

The banana is so popular in America today that four million tons of them are imported every year. Not to compare apples to oranges, but rather apples to bananas, a banana has less water, fifty percent more food energy, four times the protein, half the fat, twice the carbohydrate, almost three times the phosphorus, five times the Vitamin C and iron and at least twice the other vitamins and minerals as a

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single apple! The average American eats 33 pounds of bananas a year. An excellent source of potassium and carbohydrates, they can be eaten any time of the day because of their digestive properties. Natural sugar provides energy for those sports requiring endurance and low proportions of sodium chloridium render a good recommendation for salt free diets.

That's all quite impressive, I know, but where did the banana come from in the first place? Did it arrive as a conundrum along with the chicken or the egg, or did both of them precede it? Buddhist texts from 600bc mention the banana for the first time in history. Alexander The Great tasted bananas in the Indus Valley in 327bc and in his day they were called pala. China records the presence of banana plantations as far back as 200ad (way before the birth of Scarlet O'Hara). In 650 ad Islamic conquerors brought bananas back to Palestine and through trade spread them all over Africa. They were unknown to the New World until 1516 when the first root stocks were brought here by Spanish missionary, Father Tomas de Berlanger.

So much for traveling. How do they grow? The whole matter is extremely confusing. The banana tree itself (even though it is not a tree but a giant plant) is by definition an herb. What is an herb? Without passing go or collecting \$200, the answer is a flowering plant with a fleshy, rather than woody, stem. Each stem consists of ten to fourteen hands, each carrying from eighteen to twenty bananas. The stem, however is a false one, formed by tightly wrapped overlapping leaves, resembling stalks of celery. The plant belongs to the same family as lilies, orchids and palms and the fruit is a berry. By definition, a berry is a simple fruit having a skin surrounding one or more seeds in a fleshy pulp. A banana cut lengthwise will reveal very tiny black seeds within its center. Therefore, a banana is a fruit, herb, berry and plant all at the same time. The expression "going bananas" probably came into vogue during the time all of these terms were being defined, don't you think?

There are about four hundred different varieties of this fabulous fruit, but don't tell Carmen Miranda. (Apart from the fact that she is dead and you couldn't possibly, there is no way the woman could fit one more piece of anything on top of one of her hats!) The three chief imported brands are Chiquita, Bonita and Fyffes. The Chiquita (according to her whom I trust implicitly) is always a guarantee of quality. Its production sites are located in Honduras, Panama, Costa Rica and Columbia. The Bonita banana hails from Ecuador and is the cheapest of the three, but only because it is never advertised. Fyffe's founded in 1888, has the distinction of being the oldest fruit brand in the world. These bananas are produced in Belize, Columbia, Honduras, Suriname, Jamaica and The Windward Islands.

Harvesting is a race against time that starts while the banana is still green. From harvest to delivery at the supermarket twenty days remain before spoilage occurs. Transportation is done with specialized refrigerated cargo ships, each containing some 250,000 boxes of bananas collected the day before. The bananas are stocked in "ripening rooms" for six to eight days at a temperature that can not exceed 14.5C. This temperature allows a homogenous ripening of the bananas of different sizes.

The color of a banana's skin indicates its degree of ripeness, but here is a more precise guide. Green bananas are not ripe, but can be safely used in soups and stews. Yellow with green tips indicates the fruit is partially ripe and it can be broiled, baked or fried. All yellow bananas are ripe and are best eaten raw or baked into cakes or pies. Yellow bananas with brown freckles are fully ripe and can be eaten raw, in a salad or in any other dishes calling for uncooked fruit. All brown bananas are over ripe, but if

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the flesh is firm they are still in prime eating condition. Blackened areas indicate bruised fruit and should be avoided.

Bananas can be utilized in hundreds of dishes prepared in as many ways. Roasted, fried, broiled, par boiled, baked, sautéed or eaten raw, the results are always delicious. They wear many hats, so to speak, and can serve as relishes, stuffing for goose, duck, turkey or chicken, sauces, spreads, jellies, jams, candies, cake and pie filling, flour for breads and fresh fruit in salads. There is little that one cannot do with a banana (except maybe pay a utility bill.) I am sure that Carmen Miranda loved bananas in every way, but dying as she did at such an early age, I wonder if she didn't put more of them on her hats than she ever ate. Chiquita could have told her the truth, but would she have listened? Somehow I tend to doubt that those two would have ever gotten along!

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) features many well researched and humorous

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Cider Vinegar: A Good, Natural Source of Potassium.

By Rupert Malone

Cider Vinegar is a very good natural source of potassium and potassium is an essential ingredient for normal growth and the replacing of worn out body tissues. It can also help prevent the hardening of blood vessels.

Causes of Potassium deficiency in the body can be caused by certain medical conditions, including something as simple as a bad case of sickness and diarrhea. Even some medications, can purge the body of this much needed mineral.

It is interesting to note that problems with splitting fingernails can be an indication of a potassium deficiency in the body. Tooth decay can also be caused by the same deficiency. Of course, if you do have bad teeth, and happen to be eating several dozen chocolate bars a day, then it is probably safe to say that Potassium deficiency isn't the problem.

If your sweet-tooth hasn't got out of control, and you do have a problem with decay, then perhaps cider vinegar, with its high Potassium content, might be your answer. Yes, that apple a day will keep the

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doctor away and a glass of cider vinegar might keep the dentist away.

Potassium deficiency, or Hypokalemia if you want to use the correct terminology, can have a lot of negative effects on the body; some of them are a lot more worrying than tooth decay. In severe cases the deficiency can cause heart problems to develop or a condition called Hypokalemic Paralysis that renders the entire body stiff.

Fortunately, Potassium is present in a lot of foods apart from apples, so in the normal course of events most people should have no trouble in getting enough of this important mineral. Good sources of Potassium include fish, chicken, beef, bananas, apricots, melons, and lima beans. There are many others too, including chocolate, strange to say, so you can have your tooth ache if you want it, without having to worry about your Potassium levels falling.

Rupert Malone

Versatile Vinegar

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