THE BANANA TRADE HAS A SORDID HISTORY. WHY THE COOP'S BANANAS ARE DIFFERENT

June 16, 2026

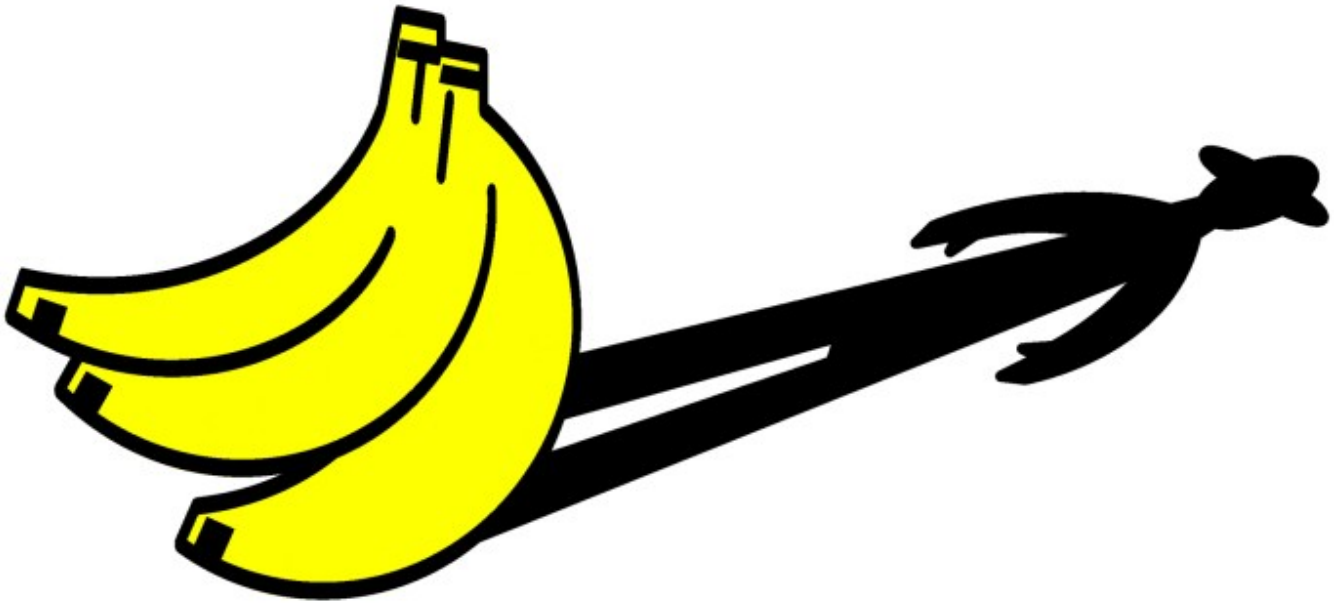

ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

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By Dan Bergsagel

In the United States, we eat a lot of bananas. Each year, over 5 million tons of bananas are imported, about 27 billion bananas in total.

That's 25 to 30 pounds per person each year, the equivalent of each of us eating one banana every four or five days. Nearly all the bananas eaten in the United States are grown in a handful of Central and South American countries, with 40 percent imported from Guatemala, and 50 percent imported from Ecuador, Costa Rica, Colombia and Mexico.

The weird and wonderful story of how bananas get from boats to the grocery stores of New York City has been covered by *The New York Times*, but what is the story of the

Coop’s bananas?

Not all bananas are grown and harvested under the same circumstances.

The banana-growing industry “is rooted in power imbalance” according to Equal Exchange, the Coop’s banana distributor. Historical practices that abuse laborers in banana-growing regions have included granting tax-free land to foreign multinational corporations, forced labor under paramilitaries and the promotion of farming chemicals dangerous to humans.

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The term “Banana Republic” described the consequences of a small state, usually authoritarian, becoming economically dependent on the export of bananas, to the detriment of its population.

Where the Coop buys our bananas is crucial if we wish to avoid this tarnished supply chain. For 20 years, Equal Exchange has been sourcing organic fair-trade bananas, importing 37 million in 2025 (approximately 1 in every 730 bananas imported to the

US).

According to Jessie Myszka, Equal Exchange's National Sales Manager for Fresh Produce, 782,880 of its bananas were sold to the Coop in 2025, a 7 percent increase on our banana purchases in 2024. At just over 2 percent of the total bananas Equal Exchange distributes, the Coop is its largest single-unit customer.

If, like me, you struggle to visualize what 780,000 bananas look like, it's nearly 10,000 cases, filling 204 pallets. That is four packing pallets of bananas per week. "That's a lot of bananas for one store," Myszka said.

Of the bananas consumed by the Coop, around 250,000 are grown by Cooperativa Rio y Valle (RyV) in the northwestern Piura region of Peru.

Bananas are weird. They are not the fruit of a tree, like an apple, but technically the berries of an herb. Commercial bananas are sterile—they do not reproduce from seeds, but are instead propagated from offshoot stems, much as you might grow a house plant from cuttings.

"The little sprouts at the base of the banana plant are referred to as babies and the big one is the mother," said Myszka. "When they prune the plant they take away all but two of the babies."

When bananas are prepared for export, layers of foam or newspaper are placed between the layers of hands in a bunch, and this bunch is covered with a plastic bag for weeks to protect it from spores.

Carrying bananas in a cradle. (Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange.)

The bunches are then cut down when they are still green and put carefully on a large cushion (referred to as a cradle). The bunch is then hung, sprayed and trimmed to the group of 5 or 6 bananas that we see in the store. They are washed in a big tank and then packed in cases for export.

Packing bananas. (Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange.)

Because banana plants are sterile, “once the mother’s fruit is harvested, the mother has to be cut down,” explained Myszka. One of the babies will grow in her place. Banana plants require moist soil to grow, with the soil staying within a goldilocks moisture range that is neither dry nor waterlogged, but evenly and consistently damp. And in death, the mother can still provide for her babies.

“The plant stem holds a ton of water in honeycomb-like cells, so after they cut down the mother they slice open the trunk and put that on the ground face down so it can drain. In an area where there is not much water, that’s really important,” Myszka said.

With this unusual growing and harvesting cycle, it can be hard to manage the quality of banana produce. This is one of the key traits of Rio y Valle, and why it is one of only three primary banana-supplying cooperatives trusted by Equal Exchange.

RyV has been commended by Equal Exchange's third-party quality oversight for its superior banana quality. At RyV, after harvest the bananas are carefully transported from the fields to a local packing facility, "either through limited cableway systems or manually by workers carrying bunches on their shoulders," described Edgar Talledo, a banana grower and Certifications Manager at RyV, "before being moved in cooperative-owned trucks to a central palletizing site. There, the bananas are packed into containers, sealed and transported by road to the port."

The quality was attributed to a "work ethic that … is difficult to replicate," he said.

"The cooperative faced serious quality issues during its early years, even receiving ultimatums from buyers that threatened to halt exports," Talledo said. "In response, the entire organization—from leadership to field workers—committed to raising standards through continuous training, close supervision and a shared sense of responsibility among producers and staff."

A meeting of Rio y Valle co-op members. (Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange.)
RyV is a cooperative formed by 343 small producers. Unlike large commercial banana plantations of hundreds of hectares, or even regional fair trade cooperatives formed of producers with an average of 7 hectares each, the farmers within RyV each manage less than 2 hectares. This collaboration of many small farmers is particularly important for managing the water resources in the region.

“Río y Valle’s name reflects the landscape where it was born: the Chira River and the Chira Valley in northern Peru. This region offers particularly favorable conditions for banana production, with a warm, stable climate that supports consistent growth and good yields,” Talledo said.

Yet the land was not always like this. The President of RyV, Juan Ovieda, described the land when they established the farms in the mid-1980s as “dusty, dry and not productive.”

Water management is crucial, but it’s hard with a collection of small farmers. “At that scale, it’s not practical to address the water needs of a plot. Together, this modest group of growers successfully requested permission to install an irrigation system,” explains a blog on the Equal Exchange website.

Exporting bananas requires a lot of plastic—both between the layers of hands of bananas and to enclose the bunches. RyV now operates a plastic recycling factory.

“The co-op coordinates picking up the plastic from the individual farmers, and it goes to a little factory where it gets pelletized and extruded into pallet corner boards,” Myszka said. This is a win-win outcome, where the cooperative is reducing waste in its environment and producing an item that its members need for shipping bananas, allowing them to buy from their own facilities at a much lower price.

Cooperativa Rio y Valle’s work is inspiring, but there are broader problems with the banana trade.

“All the bananas that get exported are the same variety, called Cavendish. The local market has many types of bananas, but only the Cavendish can travel,” said Myszka.

Cavendish bananas are grown as a monoculture, and because they are sterile and propagated from other plants, they are essentially clones. Without genetic diversity, they are susceptible to pests and disease.

This is not a hypothetical concern. Up until the 1950s, the export banana trade dealt with a different cultivar, Gros Michel, until swathes of plantations were destroyed by a fungus causing a wilt called Panama Disease. Gros Michel was replaced with Cavendish, a variety that was resistant to the fungus.

Today the Cavendish is under threat from two fungi. In Ecuador, banana plantations are being affected by Black Sigatoka. In Peru, the threat is a fungus called TR4, which is a strain (Tropical Race 4) of the same Panama Disease that finished Gros Michel.

“The scary thing about TR4 is that it gets into the soil and stays there for a very long time, decades. It kills the banana plant and stops you growing new banana plants on the same land,” said Myszka. Climate change is not helping. Plants that are under water stress are weaker and less able to resist the fungus.

As a consequence of TR4, “a different group near to Rio y Valle has decreased from shipping well over a dozen container loads of bananas per week to just one. They used to be the strongest banana coop in the region and that is no longer where they are.”

There is a small silver lining for organic fair trade co-ops.

“Even the general banana industry is saying there is no conventional spray pesticide solution for TR4,” Myszka said.

Organic techniques that maintain good microorganisms in the soil are the best re-

sponse to TR4, which lends itself to organic co-ops, particularly those who receive a fair trade premium for their produce. “We are applying large amounts of liquid biofertilizer and beneficial fungus Trichoderma; this is helping us significantly, as are applications of guano and compost. These measures are helping to extend the lifespan of our plants just a little bit longer” explained a banana grower named Santos Gutiérrez.

“We aren’t going to eradicate it—no, the plants will still eventually die—but with the right management, we can at least delay that outcome for a little while longer.”

“I don’t know what the future holds—I can only hope, and pray to God, that the plants eventually develop some form of resistance—but as of now, there isn’t a single plant variety that is either resistant or tolerant to it. Unless a resistant plant variety emerges, this whole operation will come to an end within a couple of years.”

Dan Bergsagel is often mistaken for someone else.