Goings Bananas
by Christina Nguyen

Christina Nguyen is a Zoology Major from Edmond, OK. She wrote this essay in the “Food and Power” course taught by Bridget Love.

Their bright yellow skin and curved figures catch the attention of a grocery shopper. He slows his pace and then stops altogether to examine the delightful, blemish-free fruits. He scrutinizes them, eventually grabs three or four to put in his grocery cart, and heads to the checkout counter. Content with his purchase, the man begins to brainstorm ways to use the bananas. Maybe he will use them to make a peanut butter and banana sandwich for his daughter or some banana nut muffins to bring to work. Whatever he chooses to do, the bananas will be gratefully devoured in one form or another. In the United States, the banana is cherished by all, young and old. In fact, bananas are one of the most commonly eaten fruits around the world. The versatility of the banana—more specifically the popular Cavendish banana—makes it safe for anyone to eat them mashed, cooked, or raw. In her book, Bananas: An American History, Virginia Jenkins explores how the banana has made its way through almost every American social class. She notes that “bananas have been food for slaves, an exotic luxury for the ... wealthy, a middle-class luxury, and a poor man’s food, traveling a complete circle” (142). Jenkins points out that by weaving itself into these different social classes, the banana has even seeped into the world of popular culture. We all know the old myth that slipping on a banana peel is dangerous, often indicating a joke about unavoidable accidents or just pure bad luck, and we quickly recognize Chiquita Banana and her catchy theme song (Jenkins xiii). Bananas have the power to evoke nostalgic, humorous, and even erotic emotions and thoughts.

We have gone bananas for bananas, but at what cost? Many people do not think about the fact that the bananas sitting on their kitchen tables were grown thousands of miles away in Latin America or the Caribbean, harvested while still green, and shipped to the United States by multinational companies like Dole, Del Monte, and Chiquita to make them available to consumers at their local grocery stores year round. In fact, bananas were originally considered extremely exotic because they were grown in Central America and the Caribbean. The popularity and availability of the banana has made it lose some of its identity as a tropical fruit, even though it depends on tropical climates to thrive. We see this perfect fruit in grocery stores, but barely look into how it actually got there. How does our appetite for bananas in the United States affect the countries that produce them?

To understand bananas, we must become aware of the effects our consumption of them has on banana-producing countries. By doing so, we...
will find that the innocent banana is mainly produced by a small group of fruit companies and corporate interests who have gained control of the globalized banana trade. The near-monopoly power these companies have over production has created strongly negative effects on the countries that produce bananas. Bananas have great nutritional benefits and are versatile ingredients for cooking and baking, but the negative effects of banana production outweigh the benefits we, as consumers, gain from eating them.

Originally grown in parts of Southeast Asia in as early as 1000 B.C., the banana eventually made its way to the United States in the 19th century. At that time, the banana of choice was the Gros Michel or “Big Mike” because it was large and easy to ship. It was viewed as an exotic fruit, and thus a luxurious one for Americans to purchase. As bananas became cheaper and more common, the general public began to buy more of them. Today, bananas are one of the most inexpensive fruits available, with millions of Americans buying and eating them every day. By the 1920s, bananas were not a luxury fruit anymore, but a common one. Many domestic fruit companies realized the potential profits from banana production and attempted to harvest bananas in the southern parts of Florida in order to compete with companies in Central and Latin America. Several factors contributed to the failure of their endeavor to grow bananas in the United States. Jenkins explains that “the reality of the climate and the price of land and labor combined to make U.S.-grown bananas uncompetitive with those imported from Central America” (8). So, American fruit companies began to invest their money in the banana-producing countries of the Caribbean and Latin America.

Banana Wars: Power Production and History in the Americas is a collection of writings detailing the control large American banana-producing industries have over the banana trade in Central and South America. In it, editors Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg analyze how foreign companies gained control of local banana-producing companies in Central America and how those companies drove out smaller independent growers. With the growing demand for bananas in the United States, American fruit companies “could no longer depend on local producers for the majority of their exports and began to establish banana plantations of their own” (Moberg and Striffler 10). Direct production in Central and South America allowed these companies to control nearly all aspects of production, including transportation, communication, land distribution, and labor. Because of the deadly Sigatoka and Panama diseases that affected (and still affect) bananas, American fruit companies purchased large quantities of land to allow for relocation and ensure continuous banana production. Smaller producers did not have the sufficient resources required for such expansive production, and therefore they could not successfully compete with the large American industries. The inability of local banana producers to compete with American fruit industries would later hurt local economies in Central and South America.

In 1899, the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands International), emerged as the world’s largest producer of Cavendish bananas. Within the first decade of its existence, the United Fruit Company acquired vast holdings in “many fruit-producing regions of Central and South America, systematically acquiring or destroying competitors in all its areas of operation” (Moberg and Striffler 10). United Fruit met its match in 1924 with the reorganization of the Standard Fruit Company, known today as Dole Food Co. In the decades before World War II, both United Fruit and Standard Fruit purchased strongholds in Honduras, Nicaragua, Jamaica, and several other countries (Moberg and Striffler 13). Jenkins notes that “in 1930 United Fruit owned 63 percent of the 103 billion bunches of bananas imported” to the United States (20). As non-local banana companies gained control over the banana-growing regions of Latin America, Central America, and the Caribbean, local and small-scale growers could
not keep up with American demand and were almost completely driven out of competition.

Along with Del Monte, based in San Francisco, these companies have today become so large and vertically integrated that it is nearly impossible for smaller companies to market their bananas. According to Banana Link, an organization campaigning for a fair and sustainable banana trade, five companies currently control nearly 90 percent of internationally traded bananas: Dole Food Co., Chiquita Brands International, Fresh Del Monte Produce, Exportadora Bananera Noboa, and Fyffes. Dole and Chiquita have been competing with each other for over 80 years, and both are still leading traders of bananas, “each [accounting] for just over a quarter of all bananas traded internationally” (Banana Link). Vertical integration has given these companies dominance in the banana trade because, as the activists at the Banana Link website explain, it “means they own or contract plantations, own sea transport and ripening facilities, and have their own distribution networks in consuming countries.” While supporters of vertical integration might point out that it allows companies to have better oversight of their products, letting them know exactly what is going on in all aspects of production, the enormous capital investment it requires has minimized competition in the field by forcing non-integrated producers to either sell to the large, integrated producers or fail.

Countries that harvest bananas have become extremely dependent on the successful production and distribution of the fruit to sustain their populations’ livelihoods. Journalist Ed Hamer uncovers the reality behind the banana trade in his article in The Ecologist magazine, “Bananas: From Plantation to Plate” (2008). Hamer argues that “Due to the early success of the banana trade, many small nation-states were monopolized by plantation economies, resulting in the decline of secondary industries and services” (25). Because banana production requires large amounts of land, secondary businesses were often pushed out to give fruit companies more land for production. By depending solely on the banana trade to provide income, these nation-states were left with weak economies when the giant banana companies decided to relocate their massive infrastructure to countries with richer land, a more reliable climate, or cheaper labor. In fact, the people in banana-producing countries never truly benefited economically from the companies they were working for. In the 1920s, when the United Fruit Company expanded its business to Central America and the Caribbean, much of the profit from banana production went directly to the company. Instead of building their country’s economy from within by purchasing local goods and supplies, “banana workers spent their wages in company stores.” This benefited the company itself but left the host country with an unstable infrastructure (Jenkins 19). In reality, only governments and the fruit companies benefited from banana production. The term “banana republics” was coined to describe the enormous influence fruit companies had over the economy and government of banana-producing nations. “Banana republics” like Guatemala and Honduras did not have control over their own government or economic security. If and when banana companies decided to leave a country, that country’s economy would have to start over and find new means of financial stability.

While these large corporations profited from the sale and distribution of bananas on a global scale, the laborers working for them suffered in silence. When an American company decided to grow bananas in Central America or the Caribbean, the work required to create suitable banana-growing land was tremendous. Companies had to “import a labor force, construct company towns, provide stores, hospitals, and schools, construct telegraph and telephone systems, and generally build the entire infrastructure for a modern community” (Jenkins 18). Such work not only changed the environment of the country, but also changed how native peoples traditionally earned a living. Instead of creating or maintaining their own businesses, native people and even imported
workers were hired to do unfamiliar work for companies whose owners they had never met, but who now controlled their land. When and if these companies decided to leave banana-growing areas, laborers who depended on banana production as their sole means of income became displaced and had no choice but to migrate with the fruit company or else find a new line of work.

Workers not only risked their employment but also their health through banana labor. As United Fruit and Standard Fruit gained power over banana-producing countries and the global banana market, their laborers risked contracting malaria and getting bitten by the *barba amarilla*, a venomous snake whose bite can result in “temporary blindness, bleeding, paralysis, and, if untreated, death” (Soluri 141). Laborers also perform strenuous tasks such as lifting heavy banana stalks, washing hundreds of bananas in tanks of water most likely rife with chemicals, and sorting them into boxes to be exported. American fruit companies and their consumers continue to benefit from banana production while the laborers work under these conditions for very little pay.

The widespread use of chemicals in banana cultivation also has direct—and dire—consequences for the health of banana laborers. The banana’s vulnerability to disease led to the development of pesticides and herbicides, which are sprayed on banana plants to ward off insects and stop the spread of weeds. There are also chemicals that ward off pathogens, chemicals that give the Cavendish its pure yellow color and blemish-free skin, and chemicals to speed up and slow down the ripening process. Bananas are sprayed with ethylene gas just before they ship to grocery stores to make them ripe and appear more uniform (Jenkins 60). This means that workers at all stages of production are being affected by pesticides and herbicides. Anthropologist John Soluri explores how the growth of the banana trade has damaged laborers in his book, *Banana Cultures*. He points out that “by the early 1970s virtually every phase of production—from plant propagation to boxing operations—involved chemical inputs” (Soluri 195). There are countless stories of workers being permanently affected or even killed because of the chemicals being used. For example, in 2002, Dole was sued for its use of the chemical Nemagon. Nemagon was found to have side effects including birth defects, kidney damage, and sterility (Hamer 25). Hamer explains, “Despite being banned in the US in 1977 on health grounds, Nemagon continued to be supplied to banana plantations in the tropics” (25). While banana laborers are damaged by all of these chemicals, the fruit companies employing them continue to reap the benefits of their labor and disregard the fact that human health is deteriorating because of these chemicals.

The use of chemicals in banana production not only damages human health, but it also destroys the environment. While it is true that the trace amounts of chemicals in bananas cannot cause major health problems for consumers, the pesticides used in their cultivation can cause damage to the surrounding environment, as the chemicals eventually soak into the soil and contaminate water sources in the producing countries. Water contamination in turn kills fish and can harm humans who drink the water. The excessive use of pesticides has now “[fostered] a dependence on pesticides” (Hamer 26). Bananas have evolved, and their tolerance for pesticides has increased. As a result, bananas need to be sprayed more often in order to ward off pathogens. Extensive chemical use has even caused pathogens to evolve into chemically-resistant diseases.

Proponents of pesticide use point out that without such pesticides, banana production would dramatically decrease. Curtailing their use would not only drive up the cost of bananas, but also significantly damage the economies of banana-producing countries. But while it may seem impossible to successfully produce bananas without harmful pesticides, there are ways to grow bananas organically. Organic bananas are grown with natural fertilizers and insect barriers to prevent pests. If fruit companies were to switch
to strictly producing organic bananas, there would be several side effects. Banana production would indeed decrease, and consumer costs would also increase, but more importantly, the health and the environment of the workers would greatly improve. Regarding the economies of banana-producing countries, growing organic bananas would reduce the production of bananas and enable local economies to create secondary industries. This would make banana-producing countries less dependent on bananas and allow them to invest money into the local economy instead of the fruit companies. Thus, the long-term benefits of reducing or even eliminating the use of inorganic pesticides strongly outweigh the short-term affects.

Beyond the use of chemicals, though, the farming methods of the banana industries also contribute to the deterioration of the land. After fruit companies clear large plots of land for plantations, “soil fertility quickly declines as natural leaf litter is no longer available to feed nutrient cycles in the soil” (Hamer 25). This loss of nutrient-rich soil leads to erosion and loss of top-soil. When the soil becomes damaged beyond its capacity to grow fruit, companies move their plantations elsewhere and repeat the cycle. Furthermore, Hammer notes that “according to the World Wildlife Fund, the banana industry produces more waste than any other agricultural sector in the developing world” (26). Since large fruit companies are vertically integrated, they control how banana waste is handled—and they choose to use whatever method is fastest and most cost-effective rather than methods that are environmentally friendly. Large, vertically integrated fruit companies want the immediate gratification of profit and do not look at the future damage their practices will have on the environment. They view composting the unused parts of bananas as too time consuming. Banana waste therefore continues to build. The use of plastic also points to these huge companies’ irresponsibility in managing waste: they still use large blue plastic bags to protect bananas from pests and weather changes and to prevent the banana stalks from collapsing under their own weight. While plastic bags cost efficient and easy to use, they are made of indestructible material that may take ages to decompose, further adding to environmental degradation.

Bananas have only been available in the United States for 200 years, yet we’ve seen dramatic changes occur in the banana trade during that time. By taking a deeper look into the details of banana production, we find that the development of the “perfect” blemish-free banana was not so perfect. The most shocking negative effect is the overbearing power that fruit companies have over every aspect of production, from the location of growth to hiring laborers to using pesticides. The banana trade in its current state discriminates against small-scale banana companies, takes advantage of workers, and does long-term damage to the environment in banana-growing countries.

Even though we as consumers are thousands of miles away from the source of this conflict, we can help to change how these large companies operate. Though organizations like Banana Link, we can campaign for a fair and sustainable banana trade. A fair banana trade requires better working conditions, sustainable production, and
fair opportunities for local farmers. Even simply choosing to buy organic bananas will tell conventional banana companies that we want this industry to change. Organic bananas are smaller and bruise more easily than conventional bananas grown with chemical sprays. They are also slightly more expensive than conventional bananas. But organic banana companies use a lot less pesticides, which is better for both workers and consumers. The companies themselves can change by creating a more loosely vertically integrated business. By allowing more players to be involved in different aspects of production, companies can pinpoint exactly where the flaw in production is. By taking small, active steps like these, we can slowly transform the banana trade into one that is safer for the environment, its workers, and its consumers.

Works Cited