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SALON DAILY NEWSLETTER

When bananas ruled the world

Intrigue. Power. Corruption. Death. Sex. The history of oil has nothing on that of the yellow fruit.

By Katharine Mieszkowski

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April 19, 2008 | On a trip to Honduras, journalist Dan Koeppel caught the banana bug. Researching an [article](#) for Popular Science about attempts to breed a disease-resistant banana, the American journalist wandered the grounds of the old Chiquita compound, amid the fading colonial mansions and golf course, where he stumbled upon the cheery yellow fruit's unsavory past.

"I went out for drinks at the old country club, and this old-timer turns to me and goes, 'In this room, governments were overthrown.' It was like something out of a movie," Koeppel says.

Flipping through an old Chiquita guest book, Koeppel saw the scrawled names of United States senators, scientists, CIA agents and Honduran presidents. "Everybody was in there," he says. Browsing through the research facility's library, the journalist paged through a chipper recipe book featuring the Chiquita banana girl, who was shown topless, as she always was, giving instructions on how to prepare such delicacies as "banana coconut rolls." "I found these strange Chiquita cookbooks a hundred yards away from where massacres were planned," he says.

For generations, the banana has been embraced and celebrated in pop culture: "Yes, we have no bananas. We have no bananas today!" But it took muscle and outright carnage to turn this fragile tropical treat into the most popular fruit in the United States. The banana is "the yin and yang of American culture and blood," Koeppel says. The fruit became his obsession and the subject of his book, "[Banana: The Fate of the](#)

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Fruit That Changed the World."

Surprisingly, Koeppel isn't the only journalist of late to light out to the tropics and come back with tales of the banana's bloody role in history. For Peter Chapman, a Financial Times reporter, who spent years covering Latin America, the great banana company, United Fruit, which later became Chiquita, prefigured the rise of the modern multinational corporation. "It's interesting, isn't it, that something we would imagine as innocuous as bananas has produced as many exercises in regime change as has ever been enacted in the name of oil," says Chapman, whose book is called "[Bananas: How the United Fruit Company Shaped the World.](#)"



The banana we eat today may be natural in the sense that it grows on a plant, but it's as much a mass-market product as a Big Mac, designed to be cheap, sweet and reliable. Yet the human affinity for bananas goes back 7,000 years, long before pesticides, refrigerated shipping, transportation networks and branding, like the Dole sticker on the peel of the supermarket variety.

"It shocked me to see that the history of this fruit goes hand in hand with the history of humanity," says Koeppel. "Wherever people went, the banana accompanied them." Some biblical scholars argue that the fruit Eve tasted in the Garden of Eden was not an apple, but the much more suggestively shaped

banana.

The mass-produced banana first came to the United States in the 19th century. As the next century rolled on, buccaneering banana men pioneered such innovative business practices as propping up puppet heads of states throughout Latin America, keeping them in power through corporate largesse, and exploiting local workers, when not actually encouraging local governments to enslave or kill them. By building railroads, in exchange for land for plantations, United Fruit tightly entwined itself with the economies of many countries, and came to own huge swaths of Central America. Its reach was so extensive that it became known as "the Octopus."

When local leaders threatened taxes or complained about the company's abysmal labor practices, such as paying workers exclusively in company scrip to be spent only at the company store, United Fruit threatened to leave the country, taking its business next door. Mere bribes to local officials were strictly junior varsity in this jungle.

In some countries, United Fruit blatantly paid no taxes at all for decades. In others, when troubled by local officials, it simply installed a more sympathetic government. In Honduras in 1911, the banana men not only staged an invasion to depose the current regime and put in a new one, they had the audacity to demand the new government

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reimburse the costs incurred in the invasion!

United Fruit was not to be crossed. In Colombia in 1928, 32,000 banana workers went on strike, demanding such niceties as toilet facilities at plantations. In a massacre later immortalized in literature by Gabriel García Márquez in "One Hundred Years of Solitude," the military killed 1,000 unarmed striking workers and their families in the town square in Cienaga after Sunday church services.

The banana men, however, saw themselves not as ruthless corporate overlords but as a force for all that's good in civilization. In 1912, in Guatemala, while clearing the jungle for banana plantations, the company uncovered the Mayan ruins of Quiriguá, and paid for archaeologists to restore it, welcoming comparisons between the great lost civilization of the Mayans and the new one the company was building in the jungle.

"They thought they were bringing back the era of the Mayans, returning Central America from the savages back to its glory days of empire," says Koepfel. The company used that notion to buff its image at home and abroad. As Chapman explains, the companies "knew how to use such methods to ingratiate themselves into the minds of ordinary people, and come across appearing on the side of light and justice."

Today, when the business buzzword "corporate social responsibility" is so commonplace that it has its own acronym, CSR, it's sobering to remember that the banana czars themselves invented the term. "Now, we are expected to entrust our futures to the free market and better-behaved companies as a result of this new doctrine of 'corporate social responsibility,'" says Chapman. "But it does make you wonder, given the very inventor of the concept represented itself as a paragon of virtue, which didn't stop it from committing all manner of abuses."

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