

count their bananas.

Why pick bananas at night?

It's elementary, once you know a basic banana fact: The fruit stays green until removed from the tree. Once the bunches yield to machetes, it's a race against time to load them onto ships and into supermarkets before they go yellow and then brown. In the days when Port Antonio marked the center of the banana world, boats had no radios to signal their approach to port. Instead, workers waited for the vessels to appear on the horizon, and then a frenzy of cutting ensued. Finally, workers would get paid for each bunch they'd harvested and would then be free to spend their wages in the dark corners of the boomtown.

PORT ANTONIO'S SLEEPINESS THESE days isn't by choice: It resulted from a banana tragedy. The fruit that the workers sang about reached its peak of production in the mid-1930s. That was the banana that built the town, built companies like Chiquita and Dole. It's the one your grandparents grew up eating. But it isn't the one you eat today.

That banana was called the Gros Michel, and it was bigger, sweeter and harder than the one we now find in the produce section, which is called the Cavendish. As superior as it was, the Gros Michel was susceptible to

a fungus. Almost as soon as the fruit arrived in Jamaica, the incurable disease did, too, and the malady spread across the Caribbean and Latin America. By 1960, the Gros Michel was virtually extinct, and the banana industry teetered on the verge of collapse. Only at the last minute was the Cavendish, considered an inferior banana, adopted. Jamaica's banana industry — already

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reeling from frequent hurricanes that blew down thousands of banana trees at a time — never recovered. Today, it mostly grows Cavendish for itself (and a small export trade).

While I was researching a book about bananas, I was told, over and over how bland the Cavendish is. I even found some old Jamaican songs that extolled the virtues of other kinds of bananas over Cavendish varieties. In Asia and in the Pacific, I sampled bananas that were, to the Cavendish, what super-premium ice cream is to big-tub vanilla. What they say is true: The Cavendish is pretty plain.

But visitors to Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean shouldn't despair. I get letters from readers who insist that the

fruit they've tasted on their Caribbean vacations must be the old Gros Michel, because it's so much better than what they get from the grocery store at home. True enough — almost. Even though all Cavendish bananas are the same — genetically identical — there's no doubt that a Jamaican Cavendish truly does taste better than one eaten in Los Angeles, or Cincinnati or Boston.

The reason, again, is found in the old song. Remember, bananas start to ripen when they're picked. Typically, a Cavendish takes seven days to go from green to brown, but it takes longer than that for the fruit to reach your supermarket.

Banana companies delay ripening by keeping the fruit cold and by storing it in special rooms that contain a gas that slows the process. But that delicious Jamaican — or Dominican, or St. Lucian — banana has never been chilled, nor has it been gassed. Someone might even have plucked it that day from a tree on the grounds of your hotel; if so, it's a full week fresher than the one you peeled this morning. It may not be the legendary banana of "Day-O." But here, on vacation just a few hours away from home, it's as close as we can get.

C-T+

Dan Koeppel is the author of *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit That Changed the World* (Hudson Street Press).

BRING IT HOME

HANDY CRAFT

"The art of basket making is dying in St. Vincent," laments George Barbour as he deftly demonstrates his skill. "I learned when I was a little kid," the wiry craftsman says proudly.

Barbour first gathers *wis* vines from the mountains "when the moon is dark, so no insects trouble them." Then he soaks the vines in seawater, which, he claims, promotes pliability and acts as a preservative. "The smaller the basket, the finer you split them," he says. Barbour's most popular products are square and oval carryalls and woven baby bassinets, but he has recently turned his artisanal hand to crafting other utilitarian necessities: forks, spoons and hair ornaments fashioned from coconut shell.

Barbour's work is available in Tortola at Aragorn's Studio in Trelis Bay; 284-495-1849; aragornstudio.com. In St. Vincent he sells at the Saturday market in Kingstown. Baskets range from \$25 to \$200; hair ornaments are \$10; spoons and forks cost \$25. — Joan Tapper



STEVE SIMONSEN