

Yes, we have no plantains

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This episode is a tale of two fruits. Or maybe a single fruit with two names. In it, we try to get to the bottom of whether a plantain is a banana — it is! — and whether it has been neglected in Western food culture. It has.

Jessica: Maybe once a month, or maybe even less frequently than that, we would get really excited because he would go to the grocery store, pick up a couple of plantains, and then set them on the counter, wait for them to ripen. Then, usually on a Saturday morning, would be when he would prepare this meal. He's basically frying the plantains first and then adding scrambled eggs, some vegetables, and maybe a little bit of meat and eating it as a breakfast, scrambled. It's delicious.

My name is Jessica Kehinde-Ngo and I live in Los Angeles. I primarily am a writing professor. I teach writing full-time at an art and design college, and I'm also an aspiring food writer on the side, a food studies researcher, and a mom to two young boys.

Jeremy: Jessica Kehinde Ngo is a Nigerian American.

Jessica: I've always felt like plantain was a connection to my father and where he comes from. My dad was born and raised in Nigeria but my siblings and I all grew up in a small town in California called Bakersfield, so all of his siblings, all of my cousins, and everyone's still back in Nigeria. The main way that we connected to his culture was through occasional stories he would tell and then every once in a while, foods he would cook. Plantain was one of the foods that he would cook that we knew was a Nigerian food, and so it was one of the only things that made me feel Nigerian when I was a kid growing up.

Jeremy: As a food writer, not surprisingly, Jessica wrote about plantains and how they connected her to her father's culture but when she showed that story around ...

Jessica: A lot of people who read it, friends and non-friends, people who reached out to me said, oh, they never tried plantain. They'd heard of it, and I was very surprised. I thought everyone ate plantain. I didn't grow up eating it every day, but I definitely knew what it was, and it didn't occur to me that there's a large part of the American population who's actually never eaten it.

Jeremy: Never eaten it and didn't know much about it. But then Jessica discovered that she didn't know much about plantains either.

Jessica: I know a lot about banana. There's been a lot written about banana, but not a lot about plantain, which concerned me. I actually ... I'm in a food studies association, and there's a guy who's in this association and he edits a series of food history books. He's always sending out these emails saying, "We're looking for new topics". And I approached him and said, "You need to publish a book on the plantain," because they've published like, I don't know, 90-something other titles on every topic you can imagine. They have a book on banana, they have a book on foie gras, they have a book on dumplings; anything and everything that you can think of. But they don't have one on plantain.

I told him, "Where's the plantain book?", and he said, "Oh, you're not the first person who's asked me that, but the publishers don't think that it would sell." From there, I just said, "Okay, this needs to be, this is not okay."

Jeremy: That's how I came across Jessica's work through her article saying that plantains don't get the same respect as bananas. Now, my own view, at least at the outset, is not that the book wouldn't sell, but there's not really enough to fill a book, even quite a slim book. No evil corporations establishing banana republics, no ecological destruction, no complex transport and distribution network. Not much in the way of Western popular culture either.

On my own shelves, a few banana books mention the plantain, but only to say, for example, "that they have never been marketed on the grand scale of bananas, and for that reason have not been included". But there's also a much deeper problem, at least the way I see it. Plantains are bananas. There's no real difference between them.

Jessica: There's a controversy as to whether the plantain-- is a plantain type of banana, is it something different and it's a cousin to the banana? That's up for debate depending on who you talk to.

Julie Sardos: A plantain is a banana.

Jeremy: For at least one banana scientist. There's no debate.

Julie: I'm Julie Sardos, I'm a genetic resources scientist, and I work on studying, collecting and conserving of bananas. Plantain is a specific type of banana, so it cannot be different from a banana. It's a bit difficult to describe. Maybe I don't have the proper vocabulary. It's just that when you see them, the shape, how the fruits are arranged together and the longer shape, and its slight curves at the end, you can see there's a movement in the bunch with the bananas that is quite typical to plantain. ... It's a bit poetic, I found.

In supermarkets, you can recognise the fruits because it's thicker, it's longer, it has this very specific curve, and the ridges are sharper than that of these sold bananas in the supermarket. The flesh of a plantain is very hard. It has a higher dry matter content, higher amount of starch even when it's ripe, which make it hard, the flesh is hard. It's not really easy to digest when it's eaten raw because of this high content in starch. It's very well suited to cooking because the flesh stays together when it's fried, or boiled, or roasted.

Jeremy: It's this question of cooking bananas that really messes things up. If you're like me, you've maybe had baked bananas or banana flambé in some fancy restaurant as a dessert. For a lot of people though, for example, in East Africa, cooking bananas are their main starchy staple, but although plantains are bananas that are best cooked, not all cooking bananas are plantains.

Julie: In Uganda, and more largely in the east of Africa, the cooking bananas are mostly part of the matoke type of banana, which is another different type of edible banana that is cooked. Though they look better like bananas but still, I don't like to say it's like banana. Every type of banana is very unique in the way it holds its fruit. You have a wide diversity of many different types of cooking bananas that are not plantain.

Jeremy: You've got these fruits, all of which are technically hybrids of two different species called *Musa*. Some are cooked as a vegetable,

some are eaten raw as a fruit, some are called plantains, and others are called bananas, but whether you call them bananas or plantains seems to depend on where they came from.

In recent times, bananas were carried around the world mainly by two countries, Spain and Portugal. The Spanish called them plátano and the Portuguese called them banana.

Here's the thing, plantains did not arrive in Nigeria with the Spanish. They arrived overland from east Africa, and they've been there for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. In fact, botanists like Julie Sardos do recognise a group of West African bananas that they call true plantains.

Julie: Plantain are very specific type of bananas that reached Africa millennia ago and they really were adopted by people. Then progressively people selected different varieties of plantain. Now, there's a wide morphological diversity of plantain, which makes plantain very unique in the evolution of crops, because there's hundreds of plantains in West Africa.

If you analyse them genetically, we haven't found a way yet to discriminate them at the genome level. A single clone was introduced in Africa, and then it was propagated, and planted, and selected for the different types emerging and a wide diversity of plants now exists because of these millennia of selection by humans. This is a very beautiful story about Western Africa and their plantains.

Jeremy: Yes, Nigeria and West Africa does have this huge diversity of bananas known as true plantains, but they certainly didn't arrive with the Spanish. Why are they called plantains? That remains a mystery. Julie did tell me that in most countries, people use just the one word derived from either plátano or banana. How about in Nigeria?

Jessica: This is a good question that I'm trying to think back to. I need to follow up with my dad because I wasn't necessarily looking up the word for the food itself. I know that there's particular dishes they cook, like dodo, that was what they call fried plantain. In the Yoruba language, in particular, I'm not 100% sure what the word is that they would use.

Jeremy: Jessica did in fact, check with her dad and he said that in Yoruba — and I'm bound to mangle this — in Yoruba, banana is ogede and plantain is agbagbo.

Jessica: My perspective is that whether we're saying it's distinct from an edible, non-cooking banana versus cooking banana, I don't think that it really matters at the end of the day because it has a very distinct cultural purpose and significance to so many people. I think that most people know what you're talking about when you refer to this particular food, and it holds a particular place for them. That fruit that holds the role of the cooking banana, or whatever you want to call it, isn't addressed as widely as the type of banana that we're more used to in the West. You can call it what you want, but at the end of the day, I still think there's not enough coverage of this particular staple food.

Jeremy: Fair point, maybe I am being too pedantic in insisting that a plantain is a banana. Perhaps, if you do the practical thing of treating cooking bananas and true plantains as essentially the same sort of thing, perhaps there is enough there to fill a book. But in my opinion, there is actually another deep-seated reason why cooking bananas have been ignored in the West. That's because they're eaten by people who've long been thought of as low status. In general, we don't pay much attention to low-status foods, especially of so-called immigrants.

Jessica: Yes. I 100% agree with you. I do think that that's part of the issue. Now's the time to start raising awareness so that people know that it exists, so that they'll try it. But beyond trying it, I think that one of the things that happens a lot is that we'll taste something but we don't go beyond that. We don't realise that everything has a story behind it, that there's actual people [for] who this particular food is their world, is their livelihood.

There's this aspect of people just simply not knowing about it because those stories have been hidden, and my interest is in bringing those stories to the forefront so that people will learn the stories, and I think that can make them even more likely to have an interest in eating the food.

Jeremy: Yes, I agree. I don't think I've ever seen a plantain in Rome. Probably at one of the markets. If I want to go and cook my first plantain, how should I be doing it?

Jessica: Most of the time when you buy plantains at the grocery store, well, most people will buy them when they're not completely ripe yet, and a plantain is best consumed when the skin is starting to get brown spots all over it. That's when you know it's going to be sweet. When you pick it up at the grocery store, if it's still green, it's not ready yet. You've got to take it home, let it sit on the counter for a few days, and then you peel it and you slice at a diagonal, maybe about a quarter of an inch thick, slices of plantain.

Slice them up and then when they're all ready you get a pot, put it on the stove. Put some cooking oil in there and get it really, really nice and hot, and you start sliding them in and frying them. Fry them for a few minutes on one side. Flip them over. Few minutes on the other side and they'll start to get this nice brown outer layer, and start to get a little crispy on the outside but then they're still juicy on the inside. That's the way that I like them.

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