The world of bananas in Hawai'i: then and now

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Abstract: The World of Bananas in Hawai'i: Then and Now—unique, comprehensive, colorful, authoritative, and readable—culminates nine years of exhaustive library research coupled with painstaking field and agricultural investigations in Hawai'i and other Pacific islands. It is the first book about bananas in Hawai'i and a major contribution to Hawaiian culture. It is also the first attempt to trace banana/plantain evolution within the Pacific. Truly a “banana bible,” it is written in highly accessible prose embracing a broad array of topics. Lavishly illustrated, it covers virtually every edible and inedible banana in Hawai'i, Polynesian introduced and international, including the spectacular ornamentals and fe'i. The World of Bananas reflects a deep respect for Hawaiian oral history and esteemed post-contact literature, reviving long-forgotten traditional foods, chants, crafts, and everyday clothing woven from bananas. As a result of Angela Kepler's 30-year Pacific-wide ecological research, readers will encounter original ideas (e.g., how migrant seabirds likely guided Marquesan seafarers to colonize Hawai'i) and delight in the multihued tapestry of true-to-life banana tales from the nebulous dawn of Hawaiian history to the present (e.g., the rediscovery of legendary banana groves). The authors shed fascinating new light on Hawai'i's little-known "pregnant" banana, mai'a hāpai, and resurrect a long-forgotten minor goddess, Hina-'ea, whose curative mai'a lele banana once healed vitamin A deficiencies in children. Interweaving extensive original research with judicious gleanings from a tiny worldwide network of banana specialists, this book provides new, dependable, and pictorial descriptions for 140 living varieties and 22 kinship groups, illustrated keys separating similar cultivars, hundreds of name synonyms, and information on pesticide-free care and maintenance, nutritional deficiencies, and troubleshooting pests/diseases. The mouth-watering recipe chapter includes savory dishes such as banana mayonnaise and meat-plantain casseroles.

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Every now and then, this professor came to class with the sticker from a banana on his shirt. The brand varied, but the position did not: it was stuck right above the spot where his pen would be, if he had kept it in his pocket the way normal people do. On a trip to Costa Rica, which is a major exporter of bananas, I saw endless banana
plantations and also visited a botanical garden where a botanist shared some fascinating details about banana trees. He said there are about 300 varieties of banana (and their close relative the plantain—pronounced “PLANT-en,” not “plan-TAIN,” by the way), of which only some are edible, and an even smaller fraction cultivated commercially.