

Client: Jonathan Cape
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Ripe for the picking

How one man built an empire from the humble yellow berry



The Fish That Ate the Whale: The Life and Times of America's Banana King
by *Rich Cohen*

Jonathan Cape, 270pp
£17.99 £14.99

Melissa Katsoulis

There's nothing quite like a banana. Submit it to a game of word association and your head will soon be full of willies, monkeys, politics and puddings. And you can't say that about many fruit. Only it's not a fruit, it's a berry. And its tree is not in fact a tree, but a herb: the planet's largest grass. In many ways the banana is a miraculous thing. It grows not from seed but rhizomes — chop a plant into bits and each one will make a new clone. It can grow 20 inches in 24 hours. Add to this its status as nature's most portable, pre-sealed, nutritionally supercharged snack, and it's no wonder that soon after it was displayed at the 1876 World's Fair it became America's most popular fruit.

Quick to pick up on all this was a Russian immigrant, Samuel Zemurray, living in the Alabama river port of Selma in the early years of the last century. Tough, determined, canny and optimistic, this young

man would nevertheless have found it impossible to believe he would become a key player in Central American coups, the foundation of Israel and the seismic shift in the American way of doing business. For the story of the banana's rise is inextricably linked to the incredible life of one of the 20th century's most powerful but little-known businessmen.

Sam earned his foothold by realising the value of "ripes" — stems that had started to brown on their trip from Central America. Only "greens" were acceptable to most buyers, because of how quickly ripens would degrade. But Sam realised he could sell the slightly spotted fruit to markets a few stops down the line from Selma and turn a profit. This was just as steam was taking over from sail power, and refrigeration was becoming a reality, and his business grew as fast as a banana stem. Before long he was importing to New York (a city where "the funnel of a steamship was still the tallest object on the skyline") and ten years later he was fabulously rich in a world where the banana men were sweaty, rum-soaked, lawless dudes. Sam lived for most of the year in Honduras, crossing the country on mule, machete in his hand, and winning the respect of those whose native knowledge he knew would ensure his success.

By 1931, his firm, Cuyamel, had merged with United Fruit, a behemoth whose power and close links with government made it the Halliburton of its day. The waspish heads of the firm never liked Sam with his thick accent and straight talking — so one day he simply overthrew the board, instantly becoming one of the most powerful people in the land. He would soon be donating heavily to the foundation of Israel, and it was no coincidence that at the time of the vote on the partition of Palestine, certain Central American countries who had intended to abstain suddenly swung in favour of the Jewish state.

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Sam was now at the top of his game, using his contacts on the isthmus to manipulate regime changes in countries whose policies were unfriendly to American business. Yet always he kept to the South, to his

spectacular stuccoed mansion in New Orleans, never feeling comfortable in Boston where his business was now based.

These are the facts of Zemurray's life but for a writer as lyrical as Cohen, what matters is that Sam had an adored son who died in that wealthy, adored son's way, flying his plane; that Sam had a stout little wife at home ("she was young, but only for a minute") who wrote Mrs Beeton-ish books full of intricate, creamy recipes; that while his wife was recommending jellies and sabayons, he kept to astonishingly restrictive diets and stood on his head for 15 minutes after each meal.

This remarkable book, despite its odd title and uninspiring packaging, is a beautifully written homage to a man whose pioneering life mirrors so much of America's beauty and beastliness. The life of Sam the Banana Man, in Cohen's eloquent hands, is as nourishing and odd as the bendy yellow berry that made him great.

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TOP BANANA The Russian-born American businessman Samuel Zemurray, Boston, 1951