



THE BANANA AND I



Among the many professional disciplines in existence, the experts in food and nutrition, known as dieticians occupy a place dear to our heart and closer to our digestive system. As eating habits change it is left up to doctors and dieticians to introduce adequate nutritional formulas for the benefit of people of all ages and varied health conditions. My knowledge of this important field could have been summarized in the above phrases. Until I met a lady Dietician.

We met in one of those subdued cocktail parties in Manhattan where people of recognized accomplishments gather to celebrate someone's forthcoming wedding, divorce or publication of a new bestseller. We coincided at once on several areas of interest and subjects that inspired healthy curiosity; as a clinical professional she disclosed her inclinations unintentionally. She could not avoid a passing commentary on the *ors d'ouvres* displayed at the table set up in the terrace and that one in the more formal limits of the lovely dining room.

"It is unusual to see in a party like this one, a table of appetizers that contain more fruit pieces than any other delight."

She was referring to the variety of fruits that accompanied more pedestrian things like those lovely caviar triangles, shrimp, exotic cheeses, hot Strogonoff, delicate asparagus tips, chicken in many forms and other tempting delights. But next to every lovely offering there were fruits. Curiously, bananas seemed to be in every one of the fruit dishes.

"What is with the bananas?" I asked, not expecting a comment.

"Believe it or not, bananas eaten at all times are becoming not only a fad but also an obligatory diet addition, or even a main dish"

I discovered moments later that she was a clinical dietician, had authored a book or two on healthy diets and had also criticized the industry that has been created in the so called Healthy Foods and Healthy eating. Jokingly she said:



“We are constantly reminded of myriad magical diets, nutrition guidelines and even hypnotic disciplines to achieve the perfect diet and the perfect hip motion when doing the Cha Cha.”

For the rest of the evening I tried to direct the conversation towards her person but did not succeed. Her first name was simple enough: Jane and she managed to extract a full biography of mine and my current feelings and inclinations about politics, women astronauts and the worsening traffic in Manhattan. She informed me that she was traveling to London the following week, which I noted with great joy as I was also going to London that week.

“Convention? Important meeting? Seeing some one? “

She answered my questions with a bit of sarcasm as if chiding me for my curiosity: “You won’t believe this but I am going to a Banana Meeting. It is really a Nutrition Seminar that will be also dealing with the growing interest in bananas the world over. Then I am taking a few days off and will probably board the Chunnel and spend a few days in Paris, then Barcelona and then home. We who live looking after people’s eating habits deserve an occasional swing around places where food is more than a necessary interval.”

We had dinner the following evening and agreed to fly to London in the same flight. She planned on staying at the Intercontinental whereas I would stay at my small flat in Mayfair which is not too far from her hotel. No friendly advances were made by either party, conscious that we were enjoying our conversations and avoiding those moments when a look or a gesture betray later intentions. I was careful not to mention that I also had to go to Paris for a meeting with my editor. Sitting next to her in our business class seats on the plane to London I began to learn about bananas. Without expecting it – and not prodded by my concealed interest in her as a warm body – I acquired a legitimate passion for bananas.

Instead of talking about the latest London plays, the new “in” clubs and the charm of the English countryside, we talked about bananas. I discovered that as she talked about the subject, my admiration for her began to increase in an almost frenetic pace. “How can she roll out so many statistics, items of interest and peculiarities of something like bananas in such amusing and informative fashion? How about cactuses? Pineapples? Passion fruit?

“Did you know that in a single banana you get the three key natural sugars needed by the body to keep functioning?” she would ask. Then she would tell me about saccharine, fructose and glucose and how including bananas in her daily diet, Loretta Young had kept her good disposition and lovely figure until an advanced age.



As they served the evening meal on the flight, she pointed at the dishes on the tray and said:

“This is a lovely meal. Fresh vegetables, well baked potatoes, juicy meat and discreet salad dressings plus warm bread. And of course a glass of that marvelous Chambolle Musigny. But, you know, 2 bananas would provide as much energy as this whole meal, Keep in mind that bananas are considered the preferred fruit by top athletes the world over, except those who do not know what to do with the banana peels like underwater divers, parachute jumpers and billiard players!”

We laughed and proceeded to honor the expertise of who knows what Catering Company in Brooklyn was responsible for preparation of the meal.

Once finished with the main course, the attendant brought a basket of fruits for us to choose. Of course the first thing we both reached for at the same time was the bananas. Again we laughed and commented about the ethereal commands that linked a casual mention of bananas to what appeared to be a desperate reach for one. We peeled and enjoyed a sweet banana. Then, she looked at the banana peels in both our trays and said:

“Did you know that banana peels can soothe you if you are bitten by a mosquito?”

“No. I always thought that banana peels were used in those jokes about slipping on them!” I replied. Then she enlightened me:

“Not that I expect that it will happen to you in London, but if you are bitten by a mosquito and you have a banana within reach do two things; one is eat that banana. Two, take the peel and rub the inside part of it on the area where the mosquito had his lunch. You can also tape it on the area affected. In no time the discomfort will have disappeared and you can proceed to eat another banana!”

Arriving in Heathrow at an early hour has the disadvantage that a hundred other airlines have the same idea; the airport becomes a hard to describe crowd of passengers that seem to be hurrying in several directions at the same time. We shared the same taxi to the city and I dropped her at the Intercontinental, having agreed to meet at tea time.

I met her at the lobby of the hotel at 5. She looked refreshed and lovely in a white gabardine skirt and pearl gray blouse. I said so, to which she replied:



“Thank you. It was great to have several hours to unwind. How about you? Did you open the windows, turn on the main power switch and light up the gas heater in you pad?”

“Everything in order. Now, how about some tea? Do you feel like walking a few blocks and have tea at Browns?”

We walked along Green Park enjoying a bright and mild afternoon. Somehow, I could not remove from my mind the banana story. It was becoming the background theme to what appeared to me a most attractive episode. I asked once we were seated and had ordered some of that Earl Grey and the usual canapés:

“You know, I am becoming as fond of bananas as I am of tea. I must confess that for lunch I had a sandwich and two bananas. I did not miss the attractive brunches at the Lanesborough, which is a place where traditional tea is served or the elegant Palm Room at the Ritz. I am sure they would not serve bananas at tea time!”

She laughed and said:

“It is not unusual for writers and authors to become fond of bananas. Did you know that bananas improve mental capacity? We have seen some experiments with students in the UK and in California where students were fed bananas 3 to 5 times a day. After two weeks they measured their mental alertness, memory and speed of reaction to complex phrases. They showed a clear improvement in their ability to synthesized concepts, elaborate on old assignments and display an amazing memory!”

We spent a magical evening talking about many things but always allowing the subject of bananas to introduce a note of humor and a bit of simple but useful knowledge. She seemed to be having a great time and I began to notice that my observation and attention to her was producing in me the beginning of those sensations we all experience when another human being reacts generously to our own vibrations. Besides being a beautiful woman, she was well educated, polite and seemed to have the sweet nature of the girl mother would like to see as her daughter in law!

She guessed what I was thinking and intervened:

“Enough of my comments and enough of bananas. I don’t want to bore you to tears. Tomorrow night we have a reception and dinner at the hotel. The members of several international organizations attending this seminar will be at the



reception. I would like for you to be my guest but must warn you that the topic of this meeting is Health, Diet and Bananas. Are you up to it?"

"On one condition. I have to be in Paris in the next few days and since you are also going to Paris, can I escort you? I know where the best bananas are in Paris!"

She laughed and nodded: "I shall be delighted on both counts. We shall endure the dinner and all the speeches together and day after tomorrow we shall ride into the sunset under the Channel!"

The reception was charming and cheerful and the dinner was superb. Once coffee and liqueurs had been served, Sir Sam Zellner, the organization Chairman made the keynote speech of the meeting. As usual I made mental notes of the matters he discussed. Towards the end he referred to the banana situation throughout the world and cited some interesting statistics. At that point my interest in bananas had matured to a serious intention to write an article about such important fruit and I decided to take some notes on the back of the invitation card. Sir Sam was a great speaker. Convincing, amusing and honest. He started by talking about the origin of the banana. It seems that bananas first appeared or were found in Malaysia around the sixth century. Alexander the Great is claimed to have developed a special predilection for bananas and was responsible for their introduction in Europe. It was an instant success and bananas were quickly established as an exotic fruit with interesting properties. Not long after, bananas were introduced to Africa and eventually landed in the Canary Islands. From there it was an easy hop to Santo Domingo and other places in the Western Hemisphere. But it was the Arabs who coined the name of the fruit. It derived from the word banan, meaning finger. Later, the Spanish conquistadores saw a similarity with the plane tree and gave the plantain the Spanish name of platano. To the amazement of many he mentioned that bananas come from an herb and not from a tree.

He quickly went through a long list of beneficial qualities of bananas. For instance, in the case of anaemia the high iron content in bananas can stimulate the production of haemoglobin in the blood and help counteract anaemia. Then, bananas high potassium and low salt content contributes to the reduction of high blood pressure. This has been recognized by the US Food and Drug Administration that has allowed the banana industry to make official claims of the fruit's ability to reduce the risk of high blood pressure while at the same time reducing the risk of a serious stroke.

One by one he described both the specific effect of bananas on a series of situations such as recent survey undertaken by several reputable institutions in



the US and Germany amongst people suffering from depression, many felt much better after eating a banana. This is because bananas contain tryptophan, a type of protein that the body converts into serotonin known to make you relax, improve your mood and generally make you feel happier. A bit of humor was introduced to the discourse when he added to the above: “This capacity to help dissolve depressive feelings also aids in removing or alleviating constipation, which in some cases that are known to most of us can be the cause of depression!”

The Chairman earned an applause and a toast when he mentioned that the effects of a hangover can be mitigated, if not eliminated by ingestion of a banana milkshake, sweetened with honey. The banana has a calming effect on the stomach and, with the help of the honey, helps to restore proper blood sugar levels, while the milk has a soothing effect and contributes to re-hydration of the system.

I had filled out two of the cards with notes and I began to wonder what sort of article I had to write to devote a great deal to bananas. I decided not to worry and turn my attention to my lovely companion.

Once the program was over, we moved to the ample lobby and ordered another after dinner drink. This time we opted for a B&B, or Benedictine and Brandy, and thanked those Benedictine monks a couple of centuries back for having devoted some time to the creation of such delightful drink. I was introduced to some of Jane’s colleagues and their wives and spent a pleasant interval talking about books, writing and authors. Jane did not fail to mention the fact that I was a writer and some of my more impressive accomplishments. There was a bit of pride in her tone when she mentioned them.

A little past midnight she accompanied me to the exit of the hotel. She had to be up early the next morning to register at the seminar and to assume her role in one of the panel discussions. We said goodnight with a non compromising kiss on the cheek.

The following day I confirmed her reservation in the Eurostar High Speed Paris Chunnel train leaving at noon from Waterloo Station and made one for me making sure that we had adjoining seats.

We met at six at her hotel. She was very happy to have attended the seminar. She felt that some of the new techniques could be easily applied in the US where personal care continued to grow in all directions. But she was also exhausted:

“Great seminar but more than two days and it would begin to feel like punishment. I am looking forward to that Chunnel to Paris day after tomorrow. Did you get my reservation?”



“Also mine. You have a great seat next to a window; for the most part of the trip you will be able to admire the view of the tunnel walls without interruptions!”

On an impulse, she grabbed my face and kissed me on the cheek.

“You are the best escort I have ever had. Not even those Park Avenue services I use have gentlemen like you!”

We laughed happy to be together again. That kiss did affect me.

We had a light dinner at Ginocchios, the “in” trattoria off Regent Street and ended up at Muir’s an elegant jazz place between the British Museum and Covent Garden. We listened to some great renditions of some of the classic instrumental pieces and danced a few numbers. Holding her close in my arms forced me to focus my thoughts on Disraeli’s arguments against the philosophical basis of emerging political regimes in Southeast Asia. The temptation to embrace, kiss and caress was both delightful and strong. I just whispered in her ear that Disraeli might have been wrong!

She guesses what was going on and whispered back: “You are crazier than I am!” and she kissed me on the lips.

As usual I was up at five and knowing that she had to return to the hotel, change clothes and go to her seminar by 8 am, I rushed into my small kitchen and busily prepared a breakfast of mixed Orange and Passion Fruit Juices, cereal and a poached egg on toast. Again, I had to battle the temptation to forget about breakfast and jump back into bed with her, remembering my father’s advice: “Business before pleasure is a fallacy promoted by train conductors and electricians!”

The seminar closed with a lunch offered by the Rector of one of the Cambridge University London institutes and took place at the Governor’s Mansion. She did not get back to the hotel until late afternoon. She called me a while later and I walked to the hotel.

“How about dinner and a play in the West End?” I asked her.

“Fine with me, what play do you have in mind?”

“I thought a musical might do. There is one called Mamma Mia that is receiving great reviews. Shall we?”

Since the day was warm and pleasant I thought we could eat in one of those pubs in the periphery where their terraces are inviting and the food is excellent.



We hailed a cab and went to a converted mansion near Edenton. The place met our expectations. The restaurant is located in a former manor and also has rooms for guests. We walked around the beautifully kept grounds and admired a pond that seemed to be stocked with some restless fish.

The dining room was artfully extended to include an attractive set up on the main terrace with a distant view of the Edenton church towers, the pond and a carefully manicured lawn that invoked skillful games of croquet.

The meal was outstanding and, sure enough, ended with a magnificent banana flambé. As we finished the last traces of the dessert, we looked at each other and both exclaimed at the same time:

“We missed the musical!” So we sat in the terrace and enjoyed the soft music mysteriously piped to speakers hidden in the massive flower pots.

In the morning she beat me to the kitchen. I was awakened by the smell of freshly brewed coffee and the other ingredients of what the English call a Fry Up. She had added a wise enhancement in the form of a tall champagne glass full of a blend of bubbly and orange juice. Fortunately she was able to find all the necessary elements to celebrate a rather nutritious breakfast. Since I visit London two to three times a month, my freezer and refrigerator are usually well stocked.

She had gone overboard. She had followed the proper cooking etiquette of an English Fry Up, which immediately reminded me of the fact that her mother was English. She accepted my admiration with joy and said:

“The real way to greet any new day includes bacon, sausage, fried eggs, fried bread, tomatoes, fried potatoes and a field mushroom that I found in your kitchen and which I suppose is a left over from the spaghetti sauce you made yesterday. Bacon, real English bacon is cut from the loin which helps to obtain a crisp rind and the also allows for the meat to retain some of its tenderness and juices.”

“What! No bananas?”

We laughed and recalled the interesting comments made by the Chairman.

As I sat down at the table she warned me:

“The beverage that goes with an English Fry breakfast is tea, but since we are both from a coffee-drinking country I took the liberty of brewing some coffee. Any objections?”



After breakfast I arranged my travel bag and accompanied her to her hotel. She was to pack and check out so that we could get a cab to take us to Waterloo Station. As we waited in the lobby she turned to me and said:

“Listen, this has been a lovely week. But I do not want you to feel obligated to play the escort indefinitely. I love being with you but do not wish for you to feel that you have to stick around at my beck and call.”

I could not resist and took her in my arms. I kissed her and replied:

“The question is, how long can you stand me? As far as I am concerned I have never found a woman like you. You are that unique combination of charm, intelligence and a great disposition!”

She smiled and observed:

“Let us not get into ethereal discussions. We have some wonderful days ahead of us and we should concentrate on enjoying them, or I beat the hell out of you!”

I laughed and replied: “Jane, let me tell you a secret. I have a car waiting in Paris. After a few days there in your company, I plan to drive to Cannes, stay for a day or two at the Majestic and then continue to St Remy de Provence where I wish to check the latest painters. As I always do I plan to stay at Les Antiques, which is more than a country hotel and worth a visit any time of the year. I would love to invite you to share with me a dinner at la Maison Jaune!”

“What is so special about the Maison? Don’t they have a good Wendy’s in Saint Remy?”

“Well sort of but instead of a luscious cheeseburger you try their Faisan a la Massena, or Roast Pheasant Stuffed with Wild mushrooms, a dish dating to the Napoleon’s era. Tough competition for Wendy’s!”

“That part of the trip sounds terribly exciting. Tell me about it.”

“I am not a very good travel agent or tourist guide but I will try. You see, this charming, Provençal town is associated with Van Gogh, who found in its light and landscapes enough inspiration to produce more than 150 paintings. Artists love the place of course, and there are a number of art galleries. On the dramatic side Saint Remy was also the birthplace of Nostradamus, whose prophecies continue to be interpreted by the wise, the curious and the idle.”

“What next?”



“We continue to the Costa Brava and then Barcelona. I assure you that there are bananas in every stop. Will you join me and help me watch my diet?”

We had a great trip. She was the most accommodating companion and seemed to find beauty and enthusiasm in every incident along the way.

We were pleasantly surprised when we arrived in Gerona, about 60 miles from Barcelona and found that there was a Banana Festival that week. It reminded us of the yearly Festival de Citroen in Menton on the French Italian border. Exhibition tents, outdoor restaurants and tasting stands had been installed on the sides of the River Ter. There was music, contests of all types and the unique cheerful energy of the Catalanian people.

We were more or less forced to taste the varieties of bananas from various parts of the world. We ate the Amazonian Manzanitos, the tasty Ninos, the Burros, the red or Platanos de la Isla and the Canary Islands strains. Of course we accompanied the bananas with local seafood, cheeses and the outstanding wines of the region like the famous Marques de Alella and Bugader.

We did not get to Barcelona that day. We were lucky to get a room in the Hostal of S’Agaro right on the beach where the gentle sound of the even gentler waves induced long and peaceful sleep.

As the plane left the runway in El Prat Airport in Barcelona, she turned to me and said:

“For you these days might have been another adventure but for me they have been a magical discovery. Have a good trip!” She reached over and kissed me.

Epilogue. Jane and I are going to Boston this week. My mother wants to meet her!