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## Helping Third World One Banana at a Time

By **JULIA MOSKIN**

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**B**ANANAS, always the fashion victims of the produce section, are wearing another new label this spring.

Bananas with "Fair Trade Certified" stickers have been available in the United States since October. They represent the new front of an international effort to help first-world consumers improve the living standards of the third-world farmers who grow much of their food.

Fair Trade coffee, tea and chocolate are well established in European markets, and have been available here at premium prices since 1999. They have gained a solid footing in stores like Wild Oats, where all the coffee is certified Fair Trade.

But by expanding its reach to the produce section (Fair Trade bananas and pineapples are already available, and grapes, mangoes and orange juice are in the pipeline), Fair Trade is now trying to reach the American supermarket shopper.

"Americans are used to the idea of premium coffee and chocolate," said John Musser, chief executive of Jonathan's Organics, a fruit importer in East Freetown, Mass. "But let's be honest, a banana is a banana is a banana."

Fair Trade deals directly with farmer cooperatives it helps organize, avoiding brokers and middlemen. It guarantees higher prices for the farmers' goods and helps them set up schools and health clinics.

Other organizations are trying to minimize exploitation in other ways, by ensuring that crops are raised without child labor, slavery or potentially hazardous chemicals and



Fairtrade Foundation

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Shoppers who buy such products — like those who buy organic — pay slightly more for the privilege of knowing how their food has been produced.

The United States government has no involvement in Fair Trade. Its international governing body, called FLO (Fairtrade Labelling Organizations) International, is based in Bonn and provides standards and certification for nonprofit organizations in member countries. TransFair USA, based in Oakland, Calif., gives American vendors and wholesalers access to the international supply of fair-trade-certified products.

Mr. Musser joined the push for an American fair trade labeling system in the 1990's, he said, after the Fair Trade coffee program took hold. He said that bananas are grown in many of the same tropical locations as coffee, and under the same conditions, where individual farmers have little money and no power to set the price of their product.

"I've been in the banana trade for 20 years," Mr. Musser said. "It's not that pretty. Fair trade is a very direct way of helping out the farmers. We call it `trade, not aid.' "

Bananas are by far the most popular fruit in the United States (apples are a distant second); more than 8 billion pounds were sold last year, or about 84 bananas for each American. When an ordinary banana makes its way from a hillside in Ecuador to the supermarket produce aisle, only a tiny percentage of its cost goes to the farmer. Even before a banana arrives at the store, importers, distributors and even the "ripeners" have taken a cut of the profits. (Virtually all bananas are harvested and shipped while still green; when a banana nears its ultimate destination, it is sprayed with ethylene gas to turn it yellow.)

El Guabo, a cooperative in Ecuador, has grown from 14 farmers in 1997, when the cooperative formed in order to participate in Fair Trade, to more than 300 farmers. Before, the individual farmers were paid about 2 cents per pound for their bananas; since they signed on to Fair Trade, the price has been 18 cents, said Haven Bourque, a director of TransFair USA.

Sales of Fair Trade coffee rose by 90 percent in 2003, to more than \$200 million, Ms. Bourque said. Its visibility has also grown steadily. College campuses with active student Fair Trade Initiatives, like Yale and the University of California at Santa Cruz, have started serving only Fair Trade coffee in their dining halls. (On Saturday, World Fair Trade Day, campuses nationally will be holding protests, drumming workshops and Fair Trade coffee tastings.) Industry giants Procter & Gamble and Sara Lee have dipped their toes in the stuff, starting small lines of Fair Trade coffee within their Millstone and Prebica brands. And Fair Trade got an extra shot of caffeine when Dunkin' Donuts decided that all of the coffee used in its line of espresso drinks, introduced nationwide last month, would be Fair Trade.



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