



An Appealing Commitment

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by Olivia Pena

It's 12:50 on a Wednesday afternoon. A student has just left a Community Development and Applied Economics course, feeling empowered by the lesson on fair trade. Today, the student has learned about UVM Dining's commitment to purchasing 100% Equal Exchange bananas.

UVM students have been voicing interest about fair trade products in the dining halls since the mid-2000's. During the 2012-2013 school year, a campus group asserted its desire for The University of Vermont to become a "Fair Trade University." To qualify for that title, every dining outlet needed to offer a minimum of three fair trade items regularly. UVM Dining already served fair trade coffee and tea in all their locations, and the most reasonable third product to add to reach the objective was bananas. Discussions about feasibility and availability ensued with Black River Produce, a local distributor that works with UVM Dining. Black River Produce had already sourced bananas from Equal Exchange for co-ops like City Market. Equal Exchange is the oldest and largest fair trade coffee company in the United States and is well known for pioneering the fair trade movement. Black River Produce was confident that they could secure the volume of bananas needed, and UVM Dining finalized its commitment to fair trade bananas.

The student eagerly traverses campus to the nearest dining hall, looking forward to consuming a fairly traded product. Scanning the fruit bin, the student notices that none of the bananas on display bears a fair trade label. This confusing discovery prompts many to wonder, what's going on with the commitment to 100% fair trade bananas?

Considering that conventional bananas are still the mainstream prevailing practice in the global food system, the supply of fairly traded bananas is significantly less than the conventional counterpart. With a younger and less-defined supply chain than a conventional banana, there are many reasons that fairly traded bananas are not always available on campus.

As an importer, Equal Exchange sources bananas from cooperatively owned small farmer groups in Peru's Piura region, in addition to Ecuador's El Oro region. The conditions under which bananas are grown are incredibly challenging, and being able to access a fair and just supply-chain as a banana



producer is equally tough. Some barriers to constant fair trade availability begin right at the production level, where hot temperatures are required to grow the fruit. Working in the arid climate of Peru or the hot and humid conditions of Ecuador can pose serious physical challenges to farmers during production.

Beyond the initial stages of the banana supply chain, the Equal Exchange farmers work in cooperatives that follow a democratic model and allow access to export markets, where the bananas are shipped in large barges through the Panama Canal and throughout the United States East Coast, finally reaching ports in New York City. Distributors and ripeners receive the bananas from here for further maturation before they are sent out for consumption. Ports can often act as barriers to accessing fairly traded products due to their expansive procedure systems.

For example, winter storms in January 2014 resulted in “backlogs and stoppage” in the arrivals of shipment vessels to ports in New York. A domino effect of increased inspection by the US government, congestion at the port related to labor shortage, and weather-related issues caused Equal Exchange and other companies using the port to disrupt their shipment process. Bananas are perishable fruits, and delays in the importing process can be disastrous for shipments. UVM Dining goes through so many bananas that Black River Produce significantly increased its volume of banana purchases to accommodate them, which only helps strengthen the Equal Exchange supply chain.

Before the banana reaches the on-campus consumers, Black River Produce follows a ripening guide that illustrates the level of ripeness that bananas must reach before being delivered to UVM. Because customers at UVM are purchasing food to eat immediately, not grocery shopping, the bananas offered must be ready to eat. For that reason, Black River Produce sends only bananas that are fully ripe and ready for consumption. These bananas must be a stage five, six, or seven on a ripeness scale.

As a staple food item for many consumers at UVM, bananas play a huge role in the diet of on-campus eaters. Considering that the immensely popular fruit is a delicious choice for complex carbohydrates and on-the-go consumption, UVM Dining decided that *if* and *when* fairly traded bananas are not available, it would still offer a conventional alternative as a backup.

With UVM’s commitment to fairly-traded bananas, so much power has been leveraged to support the Equal Exchange movement. Although barriers exist in the supply chain that can cause decreased availability, it is important to understand that a lot of collaboration ensues in a relatively shorter supply chain that isn’t vertically integrated like in the conventional model of banana trade. Taking this into consideration, the UVM student appreciates still having the option of consuming a banana, although conventional, but decides to add a cup of fair-trade Vermont Artisan Coffee to her lunch.