Going bananas! The scientific marketing of a ‘new’ fruit in early 20th-Century Sweden

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ABSTRACT
This paper investigates the introduction of the banana to Sweden in the early twentieth century and how “eating knowledge” of this new and exotic fruit was transferred to consumers through marketing that drew heavily upon scientific discourse. Using a case study of advertisements from Fyffes – the most dominant banana brand of the period – it employs multimodal social semiotics to identify a range of verbal and visual strategies that were adopted to turn the product into a core part of the Swedish diet. It argues that these strategies were critical in educating Swedish people about the link between food and health and shaped their (positive) attitudes toward bananas. The banana, thus, stands as a strong example of how marketing can transport, shape and transform knowledge about food, particularly at a critical time when it is first being introduced into a country.

Introduction
In 1959, AB Banan Kompaniet (BK) celebrated fifty years of business. In a lavish front-page advertisement for Svenska Dagbladet (February 28) (1959), they declared how bananas were practically unknown in Sweden at the turn of the twentieth century. Now, the average Swede consumed roughly 6 kg of bananas per year, turning it into the country’s third most popular fruit after apples (25 kg per year) and oranges (13 kg per year).1 Bananas had become ubiquitous, sold at over 35,000 shops and kiosks across the country, with prices so low that “nobody need abstain” from this fresh and healthy fruit.

But what had happened? How had an exotic fruit cultivated faraway become one of Sweden’s best-loved foods? While technological advancements in the supply chain and improved transportation and distribution ensured that bananas reached Sweden in ever-growing quantities, this did not necessarily guarantee that the public would warm to them. Often skeptical of new products, potential consumers needed to be informed what exactly bananas were, how to eat them and their nutritional benefits. Perhaps then, they would be willing to purchase them.
To transmit such messages, AB Banan-Kompaniet (BK) turned to marketing, employing street sellers with built-on baskets, running pop-up stalls at exhibitions and department stores, and flooding the popular press with glossy advertisements often designed by famous artists (Torbacke 1982). These advertisements relied heavily on science, tapping into growing public knowledge of both nutrition and hygiene to convince Swedes that bananas were a rational food choice. Bananas, they argued, were packed full of vitamins and offered a nourishing alternative to meat. They also boasted protective shells, which kept out dirt and bacteria, thereby keeping children in particular safe. Tapping into the Social Democratic rhetoric of the time, bananas were even framed as suitable for “all classes, all ages, all seasons.” It was these advertising strategies that played a major role in establishing bananas as a popular food in Sweden and led to increasing sales every year from 1920 to 1930 (Guerrero Cantarell 2020).

This paper looks specifically at Fyffes – the most dominant banana brand of the period – and how “eating knowledge” (De Iulio and Kovacs 2022) was employed in extensive marketing campaigns by BK full of scientific discourse, which served to turn this new and exotic fruit into a core part of the Swedish diet. Using a large dataset of advertisements from Svenska Dagbladet, I apply multimodal social semiotic analysis (Jewitt and Henriksen 2016; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006; Ledin and Machin 2018, 2020) to outline the range of linguistic and other semiotic resources (e.g., image, color, typography, layout, composition) that BK drew upon. I argue that, when co-deployed, these resources were critical in educating Swedish people about the link between food and health and shaped their (positive) attitudes toward bananas. Today, Sweden is one of the biggest banana consumers in Europe (Loeillet 2018). Tracing the historical origins of this trend highlights the importance of marketing in consolidating the banana’s popularity with Swedish consumers. In doing so, it also appeals to the recent turn in Food Studies toward material interactions with food and how the strategies underlying such interactions shape our understanding of food products, and vice versa (cf. Association for the Study of Food and Society 2023; De Iulio and Kovacs 2022; Tominc 2023).

Over the last few decades, there has been a growth in research on the history of the banana trade. However, most studies have tended to focus on the politics of major banana companies and the so-called “banana wars” between the United States of America and the European Union (Chapman 2014; Jenkins, 2014; Piatti-Farnell 2016; Striffler and Moberg 2003). There is also a wealth of studies on the production and global supply of bananas (Soluri 2001; Striffler 2001), the working conditions of banana farmers (Coleman 2016; Martin 2018), the origin of the banana (Langdon 1993; Li and Ge 2017) and its associated customs and cultural practices (Permanasari 2017; Rangan et al. 2015). Nevertheless, to date, there remains a lack of research on successful banana markets in non-producing countries, such as Sweden. There are two notable exceptions: Torbacke (1982) who conducted the first historical study of the banana trade in Sweden and, more recently, Guerrero Cantarell (2020) who explored the various factors that made the early Swedish banana trade so successful. In neither paper, however, is marketing the focus, nor how banana advertisements skillfully communicated “complex” scientific ideas to the Swedish public. In fact, the marketing of bananas – whether historical or contemporary – has been surprisingly overlooked, despite offering a rich source of information on a range of interconnected themes, from exoticism and gender to health and race. The only comprehensive study on banana advertisements thus far is a doctoral thesis by
Huang (2018). While valuable, its focus on the cultural imaginings of the banana in the US between 1880 and 1945 offers a limited view of the fruit’s reception in non-Anglo countries.

This paper, thus, breaks new ground in its emphasis on the relationship between banana marketing, science and the promotion of healthy lifestyles, using Fyffes bananas in Sweden as a case study. In doing so, it builds upon a growing body of research in marketing studies on the use of scientific discourse in food advertisements from both an historical (Eriksson and O’Hagan 2021; O’Hagan 2023b; O’Hagan 2021b; Runefelt and O’Hagan forthcoming) and contemporary (Chen and Eriksson 2019, 2022; Fernández-Vázquez 2021; Nelson, Das, and Ahn 2020) perspective, demonstrating how “new” food products offer a *tabula rasa* on which marketers can inscribe meanings and discourses that draw connections with health and nutrition. Its findings also contribute to the critical study of the “strategies and logics underlying food knowledge circulation and mediatisation” (De Iulio and Kovacs 2022, 2), which still remains widely overlooked in Food Studies (for exceptions, see Cramer, Green, and Walters 2011; Flowers and Swan 2015; De Iulio and Kovacs 2022). Understanding how food knowledge is mediatized, circulated and received within a specific social environment can foster understandings of the impact of marketing campaigns on consumer food choices, as well as broader social and cultural impacts. While it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate how individuals “accepted, interpreted, adapted or contested” (De Iulio and Kovacs 2022: 1) the knowledge in Fyffes advertisements, the analysis does provide some insights into how the public embraced the banana and incorporated it into their daily diets and cultural practices.

**The banana in Sweden: a brief history**

Bananas are thought to have been first domesticated in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific sometime between 5,000 and 8,000 BCE. Early descriptions of the fruit are provided in the writings of Ancient Greek philosopher Theophrastus (371–287 BCE) and fourth-century Chinese scholar Chi Han, while Antonius Musa – personal physician to Roman Emperor Augustus (63 BCE-14 CE) – promoted its cultivation for health purposes (Ng 2015). In the sixteenth century, bananas were introduced to South America and New Spain (North and Central America) by Portuguese and Spanish sailors, who brought the fruits from West Africa and the Philippines, respectively. Over the following centuries, banana plantations began to expand across the Western Caribbean Zone until bananas became a staple foodstuff in many of the regions. By the late nineteenth century, a commercial banana trade had been established, dominated largely by Great Britain and the United States (Koeppel 2018).

In Britain, it was grocer Thomas Fyffe who, in 1878, first experimented with importing a consignment of bananas from the Canary Islands (Beaver 1976, 16). By 1884, his company had begun to purchase land holdings on the islands and, just two years later, imported roughly 50,000 banana bunches to England per annum (Davies 1990, 47). In the United States, on the other hand, United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company (both founded in 1899) controlled the banana market, sourcing their bananas instead from Caribbean and Central American plantations (Jenkins 2014).

As Guerrero Cantarell (2020, 11) notes, technological advancements were key in transporting and
distributing bananas to distant markets. Steamships, railways, refrigeration equipment, unloading machines, electric conveyer belts and purpose-built banana containers all ensured that the fruit arrived in Europe in a timely manner and, most importantly, in a salable condition.

Norway was the second European country to import bananas. This was largely due to the well-established relationship between Norwegian businessman Christian Matthiessen and the directors of Fyffes. Matthiessen supplied Fyffes with custom-built wooden boxes for their bananas, and Fyffes had such good faith in him that, in 1905, they asked for his assistance with introducing bananas to Norway (Lennerfors and Birch 2019). The operation was so successful that Fyffes subsequently asked Matthiessen to investigate the possibility of expanding further into Sweden. Matthiessen sent his son Carl to Gothenburg and, in February 1906, he founded Bananaktiebolaget (Guerrero Cantarell 2020, 12). Although the company folded just one year later, Carl was not deterred. In March 1909, he established The Banana Company AB, later changing the name to AB Banan-Kompaniet to sound more Swedish (Svensson 2020).

The first shipment of bananas to Sweden was a disaster. Packed inadequately, they arrived frozen and black. Consequently, very few were able to be sold (Harrison Lindbergh 2021). However, gradually, transportation methods improved and shipments arrived in better shape. In turn, interest in this exotic fruit rapidly grew and, by 1912, subsidiaries and warehouses were built in Stockholm and Malmö to facilitate more effective distribution around Sweden (Guerrero Cantarell 2020, 14). A July (Anon 1912) article in Dagens Nyheter notes 80 train wagons filled with over 300,000 kg of bananas, demonstrating the sudden demand for the fruit in Sweden. Pleased with Matthiessen’s efforts, Fyffes allowed BK to be sole agents in the country, which enabled the brand to dominate the Swedish market over the ensuing decades.

A groundbreaking moment came in 1922 when Matthiessen partnered with shipping company owner Sven Salén, which gave BK access to Salén’s fleet of ships and business contacts. William H. Muller in Rotterdam granted them SS Caledonia (the first ship with proper adaptations for the banana trade) to transport bananas from Rotterdam to Gothenburg. Taking on more control of their own maritime transport, BK bought their own ship – the Christian Matthiessen – one year later and also established several other feeder services to speed up transportation (Lennerfors and Birch 2019). This transformed the structure of the banana trade in Sweden, meaning that both quantities of produce and timing of their delivery could be better controlled (Guerrero Cantarell 2020, 16). BK also invested in a new storage room in Gothenburg (1923), modernized their facilities in Malmö (1926) and moved their central Stockholm offices to Frihamnen (1928), which had a modern ripening chamber, state-of-the-art ventilation system and automatic transporters (Guerrero Cantarell 2020). By the 1930s, the company also had its own fleet of trucks with isolated containers – and later, refrigerated train wagons – to transport Fyffes bananas around the country.

It was these major improvements that provided the impetus for BK to invest in advertising to expand its consumer base. Thus, the late 1920s and 1930s became characterized by a wide range of innovative marketing campaigns with their own “banana discourse” (Guerrero Cantarell 2020, 20) centered around science, modernity, health and hygiene.
Data and analytical framework

The data under investigation in this study consists of 150 advertisements for Fyffes bananas published between 1926 and 1939 in the Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet. 1926 marked the year when BK developed its first extensive marketing campaign, while 1939 saw the temporary disappearance of banana advertisements due to supply issues caused by the outbreak of the Second World War. Thus, this 13-year period offers a unique opportunity to explore the growth of the banana market in Sweden and how ideas around health and nutrition were transmitted to the public. Svenska Dagbladet was Sweden’s largest and bestselling newspaper at the time. Despite being a right-wing publication, it attracted readers from both the middle classes and skilled working classes. The advertisements were collected through a manual search of Svenska Dagbladet’s digital archive, using the term “Fyffes” and setting the parameters at 01-01-1926 and 31-12-1939.

The rationale behind using just one newspaper to collect advertisements is due to the unique set-up of the Swedish advertising industry at this time. Unlike most other Western nations, it was controlled and influenced by a cartel agreement between the Association of Swedish Advertising Agencies and the Association of Swedish Newspaper Publishers (Åström Rudberg 2019, 53). Thus, in order to market a product, brands employed an advertising agency who was responsible for all contact with the newspapers and worked on a commission of 15–20% from the newspapers where they sold the advertising space (Arnberg 2019). This meant that, even after the work of creating an advertisement was done, the agency earned money every time an advertisement was published, which often led them to publish the same advertisement as many times as possible in different newspapers, regardless of target readership. As there was little or no variation in advertisements across Swedish newspapers, it can be counterintuitive and unnecessarily laborious to use several newspaper archives. Thus, for this study, just one was chosen: Svenska Dagbladet. On the whole, Fyffes produced one or two banana advertisements that were repeated every couple of days over a period of several months in Svenska Dagbladet, as well as in all other major Swedish national and local newspapers.

The sampled advertisements are approached from a multimodal social semiotic perspective (Jewitt and Henriksen 2016; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006; Ledin and Machin 2018, 2020). This implies that the advertisements are analyzed as choices that marketers make according to a set of semiotic resources. These resources have meaning potentials (i.e., communicative affordances or constraints), which are deeply embedded in sociocultural norms and sociohistorical contexts (Machin and Mayr 2012). The choices made – i.e., choices of language and different visual elements – work together to create meaning, linking certain ideas and values in order to convince the public to consume the marketed products. In this case, I deconstruct how language, image, color, typography, layout and composition are used in Fyffes advertisements to introduce the banana to the Swedish public and educate them on its nutritional benefits. Specifically, I explore the use of vocabulary, grammar, metaphor and rhetoric; the depiction of people, actions, perspectives, angles and distances; the symbolic and cultural connotations of certain typefaces; and the application of visual salience, framing, coordination and hierarchies.
The following analysis is split into four sections that capture the core aspects of Fyffes marketing strategy over the 13-year period under study: (1) introducing bananas to the Swedish public; (2) explaining bananas to the Swedish public; (3) scientifically rationalizing the banana; and (4) nutritional primitivism and the banana. A selection of prototypical Fyffes advertisements is presented in each section to support the arguments made.

**Introducing bananas to the Swedish public**

As Guerrero Cantarell (2020, 9) points out, it is rather astounding that the banana market grew so rapidly in Sweden, given that “none of the prerequisites of the trade were present.” Sweden was far from banana sources, had no colonies in the West Indies and, at the beginning of the twentieth century, had no shipping companies with refrigerated ships nor ripening facilities. Furthermore, bananas were completely unknown in the country. Marketing, therefore, became essential in spreading the word about the fruit to the public.

Fyffes were “European pioneers in advertising” (Guerrero Cantarell 2020:8). BK, therefore, had important experience to draw upon, adapting tried-and-tested methods to the Swedish market. They developed guides for wholesalers and shopkeepers on how to set up attractive window displays, produced banana cookery books and held banana cookery exhibitions and even launched their own magazine *Banan-Bladet* in November 1921, which was distributed to retailers across the country and made available to the general public. *Banan-Bladet* sought to democratize knowledge of this new and exotic fruit, with opinion pieces, news articles, recipes and even jokes. The popular press was also regularly filled with articles and full-page advertisements promoting the health benefits of the fruit. Lay knowledge of bananas was furthered in 1923, with the release of Axel H. Blomgren’s *The Wonderful World of Bananas (Bananboken: Bananens underbara värd)*. In this illustrated 60-page volume, Blomgren drew upon nationalist rhetoric, urging Swedes to purchase bananas for “the sake of the country” (Guerrero Cantarell 2020, 20). Through these strategies, BK aimed to shape public understanding of the benefits of banana consumption, making use of a range of materials and settings with the ultimate aim of advancing their own (financial) interests (De Julio and Kovacs 2022, 1).

In these early days, advertisements tended to describe the bananas as “Jamaica-Bananas” and showed images of Black men in traditional dress (i.e., large-brim Panama hats, red guayabera shirts and baggy white cutoffs) holding machetes. Such images sought to both exoticise and authenticise the banana, framing it as a mysterious fruit cultivated by “strange” people in distant lands (Ramamurthy 2017). While such portrayals of Black people were often stereotypical and showcased an imbalanced power dynamic with the viewer, here, the figures are used as sources of authority. Again tapping into nationalistic concerns, the men inform readers that “the health of the Swedish nation is in our hands” and that bananas are “nourishing, easily digestible and vitamin rich”, thereby infusing them with scientific expertise. At this time, appeals to nationalism were common in advertisements for other food products, such as coffee substitutes, although the extent to which such appeals were effective in increasing sales is unknown (Runefelt Forthcoming).

Early advertisements also feature testimonials from mothers that espouse the benefits of Jamaica-Bananas, such as the story of a 1-year-old girl who, having suffered from rickets and whooping cough, weighed the same as she did at just three months. After following a banana diet, she gained weight rapidly and is now
happy and healthy (Svenska Dagbladet, 1 December 1926). The testimonial is signed by the mother, her signature acting as a form of legitimacy that grants her “role model authority” (van Leeuwen 2008, 107). In this way, other mothers are encouraged to follow her example and give bananas to their children (cf. O’Hagan 2021b for similar findings with Virol). The presence of such testimonials in advertisements suggests an immediate desire for BK to engage with the public. By asking consumers to share their experiences directly with the company, BK creates a “network of trust” that stands in for the traditional advice networks previously offered by family and friends in local communities (O’Hagan 2021b).

By 1928, bananas had become so popular that they had their own music hall song “Ingen dag utan Jamaica-Bananar” [No Day Without Jamaica-Bananas] and were being marketed as the “ideal treat for radio parties,” with images of guests sat around a gramophone enjoying the fruit. Bananas also received a boost of free publicity when Josephine Baker came to Stockholm and performed her famous banana dance. Thus, one year later, BK made the decision to rebrand their bananas as “Fyffes Bananas,” taking out a full-page in the national press to inform readers of this decision (2 May 1929). Under the title “A History and a Transition,” BK offered a step-by-step guide to their banana supply line, accompanied by images of steamships, dockers unloading bananas at the ports and a Black farmer eating a banana. The text explained that Jamaica-Bananas were known as “Fyffes” across the rest of Europe and had become synonymous with “best quality.” Hence, from now on, they would be known as “Fyffes” in Sweden.

This caught on very quickly, thanks in no small part to the introduction of the “Fyffes boy” (Figure 1) who became a frequent sight in major cities, dressed in a yellow and green uniform and selling bananas from a wicker basket. The slogan, “Have you got Fyffes at home today?” became disseminated across the country and rapidly turned “Fyffes” into a generic trademark for a banana. This marked a semantic shift, with Fyffes becoming part of the public lexicon (Linford 2015); now, Swedes talked of eating a “Fyffes” much in the same way as today we might ask for a biro, band aid or chapstick.

However, the key moment in consolidating the reputation of Fyffes came in 1930 when the brand took part in the Stockholm Exhibition. Under the slogan “Accept!” the Exhibition aimed to show a “modernist view of Swedish domestic life” (Whidden 2016) and promote a healthy lifestyle based on the acceptance of mass production. Fyffes bananas became embedded into this modernism, framed as a “new” and exciting food suitable for a contemporary Sweden. Visitors were invited to find a “quaint Banana Boy” and “buy a pinch of energy from him.” The idea of the banana as a “pinch of energy” tapped into the link between diet and physical vigor. By the early twentieth century, through exposure to popular nutritional discourse, most Swedes were aware of calories and the idea of the body as “mechanomorphic” (Cullather 2007, 338), i.e., having the qualities of a machine. Thus, Fyffes bananas were framed as offering a quick source of “fuel,” replenishing the body’s sugar and potassium levels. In a bid to show the provenance of their bananas and imbue them with a sense of authenticity, Fyffes employed Black vendors at the Exhibition. Echoing early advertisements, these vendors wore traditional dress, tapping into the “cult of the picturesque” (Van der Grijp 2009, 10) and firmly situating the banana as an exotic delicacy. The bold African colors of Fyffes stall also reflected this exoticism, further emphasized by the strapline that Fyffes “gives colour and life” to the exhibition (18 May 1930).
Modernity was also a key aspect of this scientific discourse in newspaper advertisements for Fyffes. A case in point is an advertisement published on 15 June 1930, which shows an impressively long train passing through Stockholm, identified by its famous landmarks of the Royal Palace, City Hall, Riddarholmen Church and Storkyrkan (Figure 2). The train is painted yellow and follows a crescent-shaped track, thereby visually connoting the banana. A bold headline notes that “Over 3 million Fyffes Bananas to Sweden,” while the accompanying text informs the public that 2 June will “always be remembered as a red-letter day in Swedish fruit trade history.” It emphasizes that “for the first time, a specially built 5,500-tonne transatlantic banana steamer” reached Sweden with over 3 million bananas and that 41 train carriages were filled with Stockholm’s quota. The sheer size of the statistics sounds imposing, while the emphasis on modern forms of transportation serves to highlight the banana as a fashionable product and invest it with a moral authority that entices consumers to
buy into the lifestyle and desires that it promises (O’Hagan 2022, 447). The advertisement goes on to claim that these figures are “clear evidence” that Swedish people find the “banana diet unbelievably worthwhile” and that Fyffes is a mark of “first-class quality, good taste, great nutritional wealth and equal access” – the latter tapping into the social democratic ideology of the period (cf. O’Hagan 2023b for similar findings with Samarin).

**Explaining bananas to the Swedish public**

Once Fyffes had established its place on the market and emphasized its status as a food for the modern Swede, it turned toward the role of guide and adviser, using its advertisements to help consumers “make sense” of the banana. Specifically, it focused on the banana’s appearance in terms of healthiness and hygiene, the introduction of labels as a mark of quality, the multiple ways to prepare the fruit, its convenience and its production process. Women’s magazines and family almanacs also played a large role in shaping (female) consumers’ decisions to purchase and experiment with bananas in their cooking. Throughout the late 1920s, almost every weekly edition of *Idun* and *Hertha* mentioned the fruit, suggesting exciting recipes for housewives to “spice up” their daily meals, from fruit salad and banana compote to fried...
bananas with poached eggs and jelly with banana cream. The benefits of bananas were also exalted in Hälsovannen – a popular health magazine – and Nordisk familjebok – a family encyclopedia. Even an etiquette guide for wives (Äktenskapets etik och hygien) outlined the importance of giving the family bananas for breakfast. Such widespread dissemination of banana discourse beyond official Fyffes advertisements strongly implies that demand was there to learn more about this fruit. The public were fascinated by its novelty and actively sought to find out what they could in order to make the most of its nutritional properties and make it part of their (aspiring) middle-class lifestyles.

An advertisement from 1 November 1931, for example, reassures consumers that the brown spots on a banana are not a sign of spoilage (Figure 3). As Palmer and Schloss (2010) note, brown is a color typically associated with mold, feces and rotten fruit. Thus, Fyffes is keen to challenge this perception with its allaying heading “The best bananas have brown ripening spots.” The heading is printed in blue and bends playfully across the page, both color and curvature offering a “sense of nurturing and caring” (Ledin and Machin 2020, 130). To support this bold statement is an image of two bananas, one of which is viewed through a magnifying glass, thereby accentuating its blemishes and

Figure 3. The Best Bananas Have Brown Ripening Spots. Credit: Svenska Dagbladet, 1 November 1931.
imperfections. The magnifying glass not only represents scientific expertise, but also carries strong connotations of transparency and honesty (Ledin and Machin 2018, 102), thus encouraging consumers to view Fyffes as trustworthy and credible. The accompanying text further serves to mitigate the anxiety of consumers by explaining that:

A spotty fruit usually means a bad fruit. But Fyffes is the opposite. The brown ripening spots appear when the banana is best. It has its full nutritional value and its full aroma then. The brown ripening spots are a sign that tells you now is the right moment to enjoy the easily digestible, nourishing and vitamin-rich fruit that carries the name Fyffes.

This text breaks down the complex scientific fact about why bananas turn brown (i.e., they contain the enzyme polyphenol oxidase, which causes a chemical reaction when interacting with oxygen) into a user-friendly explanation that positions the color as the “right moment” to enjoy the fruit at its healthiest. In doing so, it seeks to gain the trust of skeptical Swedish consumers who may be put off by the fruit’s appearance. The advertisement is framed with a red and yellow border that taps into the color code of warning signs in order to draw attention to its important message (Ledin and Machin 2020, 90). Later advertisements continue to emphasize that “brown spots are a merit and not something wrong” and “a sign that the banana is fully ripe” (3 April 1935), suggesting that consumers continued to be concerned about the banana’s color.

In other advertisements, the banana peel – or shell (skal) in Swedish, which gives it a stronger connotation of protection – is upheld as “a patented packaging that keeps out dirt and bacteria” or as “nature’s own patent” (29 November 1931). In the 1930s, germ theory – i.e., that certain diseases are caused by the invasion of the body by microorganisms – was still dominant in Sweden (Lazuka, Quaranta, and Bengtsson 2016) and bacteria was frequently mentioned in the popular press as a source of concern. Thus, advertisers often tapped into these fears, emphasizing the bacteria-fighting properties of their products (cf. O’Hagan 2022 in the context of Stomatol toothpaste). The banana peel, therefore, offered a natural defense mechanism against the dangers of bacteria. This natural aspect was important, framing bananas as innately healthy because of their protective casing. Other benefits of the banana peel included not getting one’s hands dirty and not getting stains on one’s clothes.

Fyffes broke new ground in 1929 when it became the first company to put a label on its fruit. Such labels offered “assurance of consistent high standards from a trusted source” (O’Hagan 2020) and became an integral part of a code of practice in commercial relationships. In an advertisement from 25 January 1931 (Figure 4), Fyffes tells consumers to look out for “the blue label on the golden fruit,” the descriptor “golden” tapping into notions of wealth, sophistication and finesse (van Leeuwen 2015, 428). The label is emphasized in an elaborate window display that showcases aesthetically appealing banana bunches; of note here is the fact that the label itself is now the Fyffes brand logo. The accompanying text tells consumers that “wherever you go in Europe, you’ll notice the blue Fyffes label,” which is “a guarantee of first-class quality, good taste and great nutritional value.” In later advertisements, Fyffes states that the label is a “legally protected trademark” and often make use of arrows to point directly to the labels and remind consumers to always check the brand. The advertisement in Figure 4 also offers the first indication of Fyffes as a healthy breakfast choice. In a circular frame is an inviting table setting, which shows a bowl of Kellogg’s Corn Flakes topped by a sliced Fyffes banana.
Corn Flakes had only been introduced to Sweden two years earlier (Kellogg’s 2023). Thus, blending the two food items together offered a new and exciting combination for Swedes to sample.

With consumers unsure how to eat or prepare a banana, Fyffes stepped in, promoting its own book 100 Ways to Add Bananas in an advertisement dated 21 June 1931. To emphasize the benefits of cooking with bananas, Fyffes draws on cutting-edge nutritional advice, telling consumers that “the latest findings of nutritional physiology” have revealed that “raw food is today’s solution.” Consequently, fresh fruit has “enormously increased importance” for households. There is no explanation of these studies, nor supporting evidence as to why raw food is best nor what it provides a solution for, but drawing on the new scientific field of nutritional physiology gives it legitimation (van Leeuwen 2007). In their advertisement, Fyffes was alluding loosely to the recent work on raw food diets by Dr Paul Kouchakoff at the Institute of Clinical Chemistry in Lausanne, Switzerland. Kouchakoff found that the body’s “normal” toxic reaction to eating only occurs when ingesting cooked food, leading him to conclude that digestive leukocytosis (an increase in white blood cell count after eating) does not occur when eating raw

Figure 4. The Blue Label on the Golden Fruit. Credit: Svenska Dagbladet, 25 January 1931.
Fyffes simplified this new nutritional knowledge and translated it back to consumers as Fyffes being “the ideal edible fruit” and, thus, encouraging the adoption of a “healthy Fyffes diet.” The Swedish public was strongly familiar with the concept of raw food, Kouchakoff’s work having been widely reported in the national press. A Svenska Dagbladet article on 13 April 1930, for example, entitled “Food for Modern People” boasted “expert” raw food recipes, described as the “best medicine” for health complaints, while a later piece written by a prominent physician explained how raw food both could “cure and prevent disease” (12 April 1931). Several months later on 25 October, Fyffes enlisted the services of popular Swedish actor and food writer Erik “Bullen” Berglund to endorse their product. Bullen released the book Fyffes Delicacies by Bullen, packed full of creative banana recipes. Here, Fyffes capitalizes upon Bullen’s status as a “living model of trust” (Schweitzer 2004) to both give credibility to Fyffes and form an emotional attachment with consumers. This credibility is accentuated by the accompanying photo of Bullen and a signed testimonial, where he states the various health benefits of Fyffes and encourages the Swedish public to pick up a copy of his book and give his recipes a try. The use of first-person pronouns, value-laden phrases (“dear, little recipe book”) and abbreviations (ä’ instead of är, for example) creates a warm and friendly tone, disseminating nutritional advice in a palatable format.

Fyffes was also eager to showcase how the banana was suitable for all types of people. An advertisement from 29 November 1931 begins with the image of a baby lying on a set of scales. Alongside is a horizontal line rising from 1 to 7 and the heading “The weight curve goes up.” While the line is not a realistic representation of a baby growth chart and its numbers are arbitrary (cf. Chen and Eriksson 2022 for more on infographics in marketing), it is a powerful way of visualizing the supposed effects of Fyffes. To read the text block itself, however, we learn that it is “a well-crushed Fyffes with a little cream or milk” that is responsible for “the organism’s health development,” not the banana alone, as is implied by the image. The advertisement also repeats the argument of the peel protecting from dirt and bacteria, but adds that the peel also makes the banana an ideal source of “energy and go-ahead spirit” when doing winter or summer sports. This is emphasized by an image of two people taking a momentary pause from stavgång (Nordic walking) in the snow to eat a Fyffes. Yet, Fyffes also argues that the banana brings “a flicker of festive cheer to everyday meals,” as showcased by the image of a mother carrying the fruit bowl filled with Fyffes to the table, much to her family’s delight. In fact, the fruit bowl was a central item of many Fyffes advertisements, serving as “a constant reminder to include fruit in your daily diet” (26 April 1931). According to Fyffes, “nothing is so handy and appreciative as inviting guests for fruit.” However, it must be “the fruit of all fruits, the beautiful sunkissed Fyffes”) Tapping into the long history of fruit bowls in still life, the bowls are bursting with vibrant colors and often feature accouterments of fine taste, such as bottles of red wine, white tablecloths and lace doilies (O’Hagan 2022).

Fyffes advertisements also outline the advanced technology deployed by the company to ensure the quality of its bananas. However, this is nuanced by a simultaneous emphasis on the banana’s natural origins in Jamaica. This merging of science and nature is a common feature of early twentieth-century food marketing and stemmed from a desire to keep a mythical aura around products and suggest their naturalness, even though they were now part of a complex production and transportation process (O’Hagan and Eriksson 2022). This is achieved in an advertisement on 25 June 1933
entitled “The sun of the tropics makes up half [and] Swedish labour makes up half.” Under each part of the heading is a supporting photograph, the former showing a smiling Black farmer carrying a long pole knife and a large bunch of bananas over his shoulder and the latter depicting a large factory conveyor belt filled with bananas and men in uniform quality controlling them. Ramamurthy (2012, 369) claims that such images of farmers romanticized labor and signaled worker empowerment, thus creating a positive relationship between the farmer and the consumer (and in this case, the factory workers in Sweden), much in the same way as fairtrade products today (cf. Bryant and Goodman 2004). An arrow runs from each image to a peeled Fyffes banana in the center, creating a directional flow that suggests “causality” (Ledin and Machin 2016). In other words, it visually implies that the two actors together (i.e., the Black farmer and the Swedish workers) are directly responsible for the finished product. This notion of collaboration is less apparent in the accompanying text, however, which emphasizes Swedish knowledge:

In order to turn the green and inedible raw material into a ripe, tasty and healthy banana, all the subtleties of heat, cooling and humidification technology are used. Swedish workers have been trained for ripening, cutting, sorting, packing, transport, etc. Just as industrial products depend on careful execution, the quality of bananas depends on experience in processing.

By drawing attention to the experience and training of Swedish workers, the importance of Caribbean farmers in the production process is undermined (Ramamurthy 2012), and the Swedish public is encouraged to view Sweden’s “superiority” in science as a core reason for Fyffes’ success.

Indeed, as the banana’s popularity grew, so it came to be increasingly incorporated into everyday Swedish cultural practices. By the 1930s, Fyffes were commonly sold in cinemas and at football matches (Guerrero Cantarell 2020). It was also familiar enough to give its name to a popular Swedish comic strip The Beef and the Banana (Biffen och Bananen), the “Banana” being the nickname of the small, smart, vegetarian character. References to bananas also started to be used in vernacular Swedish, such as halka på ett bananskal (to slip on a banana peel) meaning “to succeed by chance.”

**Scientifically rationalising the banana**

While scientific discourse was always a core part of Fyffes advertisements, this became increasingly explicit throughout the 1930s. With increasing numbers of consumers now savvy on how to recognize the ripeness of bananas and how to use them in recipes, Fyffes turned their attention instead to the internal properties of the banana and how it could fit into a scientifically rational modern lifestyle. Essentially, this strategy sought to persuade consumers to make a change to their diet and start replacing traditional foods with bananas instead. However, as de Boer and Aiking (2021, 1) warn, such proposals for a diet shift will “fall short without broad social legitimation, aimed at a change in social norms.” Thus, Fyffes relied on the latest nutritional knowledge to make their case.

By the end of the 1920s, meat and dairy products made up 75% of the Swedish diet (Morell 2022). However, there were mounting concerns about the healthiness of these foods, sparked by the public’s “new bodily awareness” (Frykman 1994, 72) that brought about a rise in vegetarianism and a growing interest in raw food diets. As a result, Fyffes began to emphasize the “meat problem” in their advertisements, using a classic “reason why” format (Apple 1995).
Here, they set up the “meat problem” in an indisputable manner by boldly claiming that “the long-term detrimental effect of an excessively abundant meat diet on the human body is now a scientifically established fact” (1 December 1933). They then followed this statement up with a list of problems that excessive meat consumption can cause both in the short term (i.e., “fatigue, loss of energy, bloatedness after meals and unwillingness to work”) and in the long term (i.e., “overloading of the metabolism [which] produces harmful substances that can cause serious diseases”). Some advertisements even went so far as to warn that meat was “poisoning” the human body and could produce “serious damage to the body’s vital organs” (7 October 1933).

To combat this “meat problem,” Fyffes was then put forward as a solution. Protein was traditionally seen as an energy source, they argue, but now it is understood that carbohydrates – in the form of sugar – provide “10 times more energy than meat” (1 December 1933). While the paradigms are assumed to be based on a fixed measurement, there are no details of where these figures come from, their relative status or whether meat and sugar are comparable in this way. Nonetheless, it sounds convincing (cf. O’Hagan 2021a for similar findings with protein-enhanced foods). This conviction is furthered by claims that bananas provide “natural fruit sugar in large quantities,” thereby preventing the body’s “slag products” from building up (7 October 1933). In likening harmful toxins in the body to “slag products” – a recognizable analogy for the public, given Sweden’s long history of mining and metal refining – Fyffes aids readers’ comprehension of a potentially complex idea. Later advertisements also state that the banana has “around 20% sugar” (31 May 1934) – yet another confusing statistic that seeks to “communicate transparency and scientific logic when there is none” (Chen and Eriksson 2022, 301). Alluding to the growing market for vitamin supplements, Fyffes also puts itself forward as a “natural defence remedy” (13 October 1933) and “daily health supplement,” encouraging consumers to “no longer believe in beef’s superiority over bananas” (1 December 1933).

Being in charge of the household budgets, mothers were perhaps unsurprisingly the core target of these advertisements. Drawing upon the “scientific motherhood” (Apple 1995) strategy, Fyffes guided mothers on how best to care for their children and ensure their health and wellbeing. Scaremongering tactics were often used for such purposes, with mothers warned that “a wrong diet always means danger” (31 May 1934) and “don’t let children suffer for your mistakes when choosing food” (27 October 1933). Accompanying these headlines were evocative images of young children looking directly at viewers and crying. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 126) describe this gesture as an act of “demand” because it creates a visual form of direct address by acknowledging viewers explicitly and forcing them to enter into an imaginary relationship with the figure. In doing so, it elicits an emotional response from viewers who feel inclined to stop the child’s suffering; in this case, by buying Fyffes bananas – “one of the greatest advantages” for children growing up today (14 February 1931). While it is hard to ascertain how effective this strategy was in gaining female consumers, Apple (2014) points out that it did succeed in denigrating women’s role in decision-making about their children’s health and leading them to place trust instead in the hands of marketers. Mothers are frequently told that meat causes a “dangerous overload of metabolism in our body” (27 October 1933) and “makes the body heavy and thoughts sluggish” (14 February 1931). They are also asked rhetorical questions as if they are incapable of child-rearing without expert intervention: “Do you ever think about this for your children? Do you understand what this means for them, their health, their work ability and their normal development?”
(27 October 1933). Referencing the “culture of speed” in modern life, Fyffes also encourage mothers to “help [their] children with the world’s quickest breakfast” (4 March 1935). In such appeals to mothers, numbered lists are frequently used:

1. Fyffes bananas are nourishing and easily digestible. Their sugar is assimilated unusually quickly into the blood.
2. Fyffes bananas are vitamin rich.
3. Children like Fyffes. They think Fyffes are “good.”
4. Fyffes are easy to transport and can be eaten wherever and whenever.

While the points are not linked to one another, their relationship in a system of logic promotes them as part of a mutually dependent process, thereby connoting technical order (Ledin and Machin 2018, 165). Thus, children liking Fyffes is seen as a direct result of the bananas being nourishing, easily digestible and vitamin rich, even though most children are unlikely to think of these qualities when eating the fruit. The list acts as a clear example of the “technologisation of discourse” (Fairclough 1992), whereby signs are codified, broken down and placed into an easy cause-effect relationship with one another. Fyffes’ slogan “fruit and food” (introduced on 29 September 1933) is also problematic, offering little linguistic sense as a fruit is a sub-category of food, not a separate entity. Nonetheless, similar incohesive phrases can be found throughout food marketing and work symbolically to emphasize the supposed health-restoring properties of a product to consumers (Chen and Eriksson 2019, 439).

The importance of instilling good habits in children while they are young is exemplified by Figure 5 (20 September 1931), which shows a quaint scene of three dolls lined up in a row eating a hearty bowl of Corn Flakes topped with slices of banana. The middle doll is Black and wears a banana skirt – a deliberate allusion to Josephine Baker – while the Fyffes label features prominently on the dolls’ bodies, the blanket and the banana peels. The symmetrical arrangement of the food acts as a visual syntax, bringing coherence, harmony and balance to the image (Ledin and Machin 2018, 327). Alongside the dolls is a larger bowl of cereal and bananas, visually connoting the absent child who is eating with them and encouraging the viewer to inhabit the image, thus turning the desire of the protagonist (i.e., the child) into the desire of the viewer (O’Hagan 2020). Viewers are encouraged to “read” the advertisement from top to bottom in a conventional linear reading pattern (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). Thus, the scene of children playing – located below the main image – implies a causal link, i.e., eating Fyffes bananas will give you energy and strength. This claim is further augmented by the accompanying text, which claims that fresh fruit every day is a “health rule.”

Away from the “meat danger,” other advertisements instead focused on the link between poor diet and illnesses. Throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, scientists had identified a link between nutritional deficiencies and certain diseases, such as rickets, scurvy and beriberi. This, in turn, led to the discovery of vitamins, which accelerated interest in nutri-quantification. The nutritionism paradigm – defined by Scrinis (2013, 2) as “a reductive focus on the nutrient composition of foods as the means for understanding their healthfulness, as well as a reductive interpretation of the role of these nutrients in bodily health” – increasingly infiltrated public understanding of food and dietary health. This is apparent in a Fyffes advertisement from 5 April 1934, which begins:
We’ve come a long way in terms of public and private hygiene. We have healthy homes and airy workplaces and keep our bodies clean on the outside. Sport, fresh air and water gives us more energy. But we still lack one thing – a regular healthy composition of our food. According to all modern nutrition research, this is perhaps the most important remedy to health.

It then goes on to state how so many illnesses are caused by poor diet and that this can be resolved by Fyffes, which contains vitamins A, B, C, E and G, as well as “many important minerals that the body needs.” The benefits of vitamins are then provided. By placing full attention on one component of the banana (i.e., vitamins), the advertisement suggests that an adequate quantity of a certain nutrient is all that is necessary for good health. However, as Scholliers (2018) warns, this can conceal the actual production and processing quality of foods, as well as fail to take into account broader contextual factors that may determine bodily health. At this time, Sweden was gripped by “vitamania,” with the public exposed daily to vitamin discourse in newspapers (O’Hagan and Eriksson 2022). Thus, emphasis on vitamins in Fyffes advertisements tapped into this nutricentricism, with consumers more likely to “accept, embrace and internalise” (Scrini 2013, 32) this nutricentric understanding of bananas in a pressure to “keep up” to remain healthy.

Figure 5. Habits That Are Good Habits. Credit: Svenska Dagbladet, 20 September 1931.
Another key feature of Fyffes advertisements from this period are images of doctors. In all cases, the doctor is an elderly male with spectacles and a white coat; his age, gender and clothing imbue him with high status and “expert authority” (van Leeuwen 2007, 94). The doctor is often depicted handing a prescription to a patient, the prescription unsurprisingly being for Fyffes bananas. While this is an unconventional and unrealistic prescription, it works rhetorically to signal Fyffes as a healthy food choice. It is rather ironic then that such advertisements often contain the statements that “all factual information was first reviewed and approved by prominent medical experts” and that “Fyffes would never print anything that was not scientifically correct.” Clearly, this rule did not apply to scaremongering – and questionable – headlines, such as “Should your daily meal be an enemy to your success?” (20 October 1933), “Free yourself from the sins of your daily diet” (7 October 1933) and “Fight the bad powers in your body” (13 October 1933). The link between diet, work ability and success tapped into the Social Democratic folkhemmet (literally “people’s home”) rhetoric of the time, which viewed society as a family where everybody contributed, but also looked after one another. As O’Hagan (2022) has shown in the case of toothpaste Stomatol, latching onto the notion of folkhemmet proved successful in increasing product sales.

**Nutritional primitivism and the banana**

Despite the heavy emphasis on science in their advertisements, Fyffes also advocated the notion of going “back to basics,” framing the banana as a return to a traditional way of life. While this may seem like a paradoxical strategy, this co-existence of science and tradition was a common feature of early twentieth-century food marketing (cf. Hobart and Maroney 2019; O’Hagan and Eriksson 2022). It tapped into broader desires of the Swedish public at the time to “flee from the pressures of society” and seek a “source of strength from nature,” channeling energy into their bodies from their surroundings (Frykman 1994, 66). This “back to basics” approach fits with what Knight (2015) calls “nutritional primitivism” – a nostalgic longing for the diets and eating habits of pre-civilised peoples. However, as O’Hagan, (forthcoming points out, the fetishization of indigenous foods often serves as a mirror through which “modern” people express dissatisfaction with certain elements of modern life and scientifised ways of understanding nutrition. Thus, “primitive” cultures are not understood in their own right, but rather as a way of critically examining “modern” society.

A case in point is a Fyffes advertisement from 24 May 1934, where readers are told that “a savage unconsciously chooses the right option” and that “civilisation has put us on the wrong track.” Just who the “savages” are is apparent in the close-up image of a Black girl eating a banana and wearing a seashell necklace. In a backhanded compliment, Fyffes explains how “the savage’s instinct to protect itself from dangers is far superior to the civilized person” and that they “know instinctively what they need and they eat it.” Then, drawing on scientific rationality, Fyffes states that science has demonstrated “just how wrong our daily food is” and calls on readers to become part of a “reform” necessary for real health, a reform that naturally involves eating more Fyffes bananas. Through its words and image, Fyffes privileges “a nostalgic search for authenticity” in terms of diet and food outcomes, contrasting this with food and health patterns “tainted by complex modern technologies” (Loyer 2016, 236). While bananas are indeed a “natural” food,
rather ironically, they would not have reached a Swedish market without technological advancements.

A similar example – albeit even more explicit – can be seen in Figure 6 (11 May 1934). Entitled “An appeal to our health instinct, which is supported by our common sense,” it shows a medelsvännson (typical Swede) in a suit and hat, alongside a native African man. The African is barefoot, dressed in tribal clothing (e.g., hoop earrings, choker necklace, grass skirt) and carries a spear, standing in direct contrast and offering a powerful demonstration of “tradition” meets “modernity.” The Swede is leaning toward the African who grabs his lapel and whispers into his ear, seemingly giving him advice about his diet. In drawing on the “authority of tradition” (van Leeuwen 2007, 96), Fyffes aims to legitimize a banana diet by suggesting that this was “natural” until modernity led people to make more unhealthy food choices. The text alongside states this implied point explicitly, outlining that “the earth’s products – fruit and vegetables – have a natural attraction for most people,” then asking, “how many people actually follow this health instinct?” It continues by stating the dangers of our current diet – all of which have been proven by “modern nutrition science” – and again suggests Fyffes as a way to counter these “dangers.” These verbal and visual devices are rather slippery if we consider that

Figure 6. An Appeal to Our Health Instinct. Credit: Svenska Dagbladet, 11 May 1934.
bananas were, in fact, first cultivated in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, not Africa, and that Fyffes bananas in particular come from Jamaica. Nevertheless, tapping into the “Cradle of Humankind” notion is a clever way of offering a “fetishised, ahistorical representation of nature-made food” (O’Hagan and Eriksson 2022, 181) that suggests a traditional way of life far removed from modern technology.

In other advertisements, nutritional primitivism is portrayed through images that call to mind the African savanna. However, these images somewhat suspend reality and acquire a fantastical element in making their claims. An advertisement from 29 September 1933, for example, shows a stereotypical Swedish couple with a baby looking out over a landscape filled with elephants, giraffes and gazelles. The glorious sunshine, fertile soil and the baby’s nakedness allude to the Garden of Eden, thereby simultaneously framing the landscape as a biblical paradise and, in turn, transferring these qualities to Fyffes. Similar types of images can be found in early twentieth-century advertisements for radium-infused foods (Eriksson and O’Hagan 2021) and cod liver oil (O’Hagan and Eriksson 2022), and served to create a halo of mystery that stripped the product of its nutritional values and instead imbued it with quasi-magical properties. This idea is further carried in the Fyffes advertisement by the heading, “If we only knew what nature could give us,” implying that the abstract concept of nature itself is responsible for “true health.” The rest of the advertisement contrasts “true health” with “poor health,” arguing that the only way to achieve this is through a return to nature, as offered by Fyffes bananas.

**Conclusion**

This paper has investigated the introduction of the banana to Sweden in the early twentieth century and how “eating knowledge” (De Iulio and Kovacs 2022) of this new and exotic fruit was transferred to consumers through marketing that drew heavily upon scientific discourse. Using a case study of advertisements from Fyffes – the most dominant banana brand of the period – it draws upon multimodal social semiotics to identify a range of verbal and visual strategies that were adopted to shape consumer understanding of bananas and turn them into a core part of the Swedish diet.

In its early days, Fyffes was promoted in Sweden as “Jamaica-Bananas,” using stereotypical images of Black men in Caribbean dress in their advertisements. Their stall at the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 provided an opportunity to authenticate this experience, with real-life “banana boys” employed to sell the fruit directly from baskets. From the get-go, modernity was a core part of Fyffes campaign; advertisements offered impressive statistics on the number of bananas delivered to Sweden, along with details of the state-of-the-art steamships and trains used for their transportation. Once established on the Swedish market, Fyffes then turned its attention to educating the Swedish public about the banana. Advertisements offered simple explanations about the brown spots and the bacteria-protecting peels, as well as advice on how to prepare bananas and who they were suitable for. They also emphasized the complex production process and the introduction of labels as a mark of quality.

Playing upon the latest nutritional advice on raw food diets and the “meat danger,” Fyffes also positioned bananas as a scientifically rational choice for consumers. Through numbered lists, value-laden words, rhetorical questions, references to vitamins, pseudo-scientific facts and images of doctors, Fyffes created a general sense of anxiety –
particularly amongst mothers – about what to consume and buy in order to safeguard their children’s health. By not just telling consumers about the benefits of bananas, but also connoting their consumption as part of a “good” and healthy way of living that stood in marked contrast to meat, Fyffes was, thus, able to incorporate bananas into a daily Swedish consumerist lifestyle. However, along with scientific rationale also came appeals to “go native” and reject modernity in favor of nutritional primitivism. To this end, advertisements featured fetishized African people as role models, but their culture and traditions were only used to express dissatisfaction with modern diets rather than any attempt to understand them in their own right. Despite these seemingly conflicting strategies, Fyffes’ marketing campaigns were highly successful. Between 1926 and 1939, banana sales increased significantly (Guerrero Cantarell 2020), while the Swedish public increasingly sought out new knowledge on the fruit through the popular press, whether in the form of recipes, nutritional advice or the latest research. The fruit had also infiltrated cinemas and football grounds as a healthy snack, and was culturally incorporated into songs, cartoon strips and even popular expressions.

In their studies of vegetarianism in early twentieth-century Sweden, Jonsson (2022) and Nilsson (2023) suggest a paradox in attitudes: the food trend emerged as a reaction to the unnaturalness and unhealthiness of modern life, yet at the same time it characterized modernity and a rational approach to diet. As this study has shown, the banana itself can be seen as a microcosm of this broader food movement, being both an alternative to the “unnatural” and “unhealthy” diets caused by the fast pace of modern life and a symbol of a modern, rational lifestyle. Through extensive marketing, Fyffes advocated the banana as a solution to the “meat problem” and an opportunity to return to nature. However, the banana was also the “world’s quickest breakfast” (4 March 1935) whose nutritional benefits were only known due to scientific advancements. Indeed, the banana would not have even reached Sweden without modern technology. The idea of tradition being fundamental to modernity was a core aspect of Swedish marketing in this period, offering a way of “declaring a nation was forward-thinking yet in touch with its roots” (O’Hagan 2022, 20).

The banana, thus, stands as a strong example of how marketing can transport, shape and transform knowledge about food, particularly at a critical time when it is first being introduced into a country. It raises key questions over the role of different media and mediators in this process and how they seek to shape “beliefs, values and practices around health, food traditions and culinary practices” (De Iulio and Kovacs 2022, 2). It also emphasizes how these knowledge circulation strategies can shift over time as consumer understanding of a product grows and new needs arise. While the modern age may have accelerated the reach and speed of knowledge available, as the case study of Fyffes shows, a wide variety of actors in different social spaces were at work some 100 years ago, paving the way for the fruit’s growing reputation throughout the ensuing decades. By 1988, bananas had overtaken apples as Sweden’s most popular fruit – a position they have held onto ever since (Jordbruksverket 2006). An enduring sign of the country’s love for the fruit came in 2009 when PostNord released four official stamps to mark the centenary of the banana’s arrival in the country, while 2018 saw the first official Banana Day, now celebrated annually on 4 March. Today in Sweden, approximately 100 bananas are eaten per person each year (Naturskyddsföreningen 2021). This striking figure – far above the European average – represents a success story in which early marketing efforts were pivotal in shaping public perceptions of the fruit and its broader health benefits. As was also the case with toothpaste (O’Hagan 2022) and margarine (O’Hagan...
in Sweden, marketers found canny ways to teach people about new products and create a demand for them. In the case of bananas, science – specifically nutrition science – was essential to this. By harnessing scientific discourse in their advertisements, Fyffes was able to turn vast percentages of Sweden onto an unfamiliar product, thereby building a large and stable consumer market and fostering a modern era of exotic fruit consumption.

Notes

2. The Social Democrats came into power in Sweden in 1932 and were continuously in government until 1976.
3. In 1902, United Fruit Company acquired a 45% share in Fyffes; by 1913, Fyffes became a completely owned subsidiary.
4. Unless otherwise stated, all advertisements come from Svenska Dagbladet.
5. University of Gothenburg holds a large archive of historical Swedish women’s magazines, which is fully accessible at the following web address: http://www2.ub.gu.se/kvinn/digtid/. It was used to search for instances of “banana” between 1926 and 1939.

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