

The Home Forum.

For more information

Collectors of produce labels have their own newsletter. Every other month, Katie Foster mails 'Please Stop Snickering.' Each issue is loaded with information about newly issued labels, feature articles on collectors, even tours of banana plantations and packing plants. See: khfoster.home.texas.net

Gerri Lorenzo's Banana Catalog is probably the most comprehensive, up-to-date, and authoritative source for banana labels past and present. Where else can you find an exhaustive explanation of the differences between Del Monte labels from Ecuador and those from Costa Rica or Cameroon? See: www.geocities.com/napavalley/1700

Like many produce-label collectors, Joan Weinmayr has her own website devoted to her passion. She named it for her daughter Annie, who is also a label collector. See: www.geocities.com/anniesbananias

Longtime label collector John Kirchner is a professor of geography. Professor Kirchner travels widely in Latin America and has collected banana labels since 1970. He showcases a number of vintage stickers at: bananacarril.com

A simple search on the Internet shows how international this hobby is. Josef Binder, a well-known collector, lives in Berlin. See: home.snafu.de/binder. His site includes a poster for his upcoming museum exhibit on the history of banana labels. (See main story.)

Test your memory skills and admire colorful examples of banana labels from around the world at the Banana Label match game site: www.montanab.com/ctw/images/21conc1.htm

Tips on collecting stickers:

1. Never take labels off fruit without permission; this will only make produce department managers mad. Grocers are your best source for new labels, so be sure to make them your friend. It's best to buy the fruit or vegetable that's attached to the label you want to collect.
2. Develop friendships with collectors in other countries. By trading with label fans in Europe and South America, collectors get access to fruit stickers that aren't sold in their local stores. Find overseas collectors online.

M.M.S.

Stuck on stickers

Collectors latch onto colorful fruit-and-vegetable labels



IN THE EARLY 1960s, Jack Fox was stuck with a slippery problem. The head of the United Fruit Company's Chiquita division was spending a fortune advertising bananas – and all the other banana companies were delighted!

Why? Because they were getting free advertising. To shoppers, all bananas looked alike. Who could tell the difference between Chiquita, Dole, Del Monte?

The bold solution: Put the company's name, or "brand" onto every bunch of bananas. Chiquita's solution has been delighting kids and collectors ever since.

Almost from the time they first appeared, in 1963, the blue-and-yellow ovals attracted attention. Other banana producers quickly followed suit.

But banana labels were just the beginning. In the late 1980s, another type of sticker began to appear on fruits and vegetables: little ovals with numbers on them. Do you know what they're for?

The stickers, called "Pseals" by collectors, are "PLUs," short for "price look-up labels." Numbers on the

PLUs help checkout clerks tell the difference between Fuji and Gala apples, or vine-ripened tomatoes from hydroponic ones.

For many other folks, produce stickers and banana labels are much more than inventory management and marketing tools. For them, the stickers help turn mundane trips to the grocery store into a treasure hunt. They are glimpses into a world of color, variety, changing seasons, and geography.

Sticker and label collectors buy the labeled produce (never simply peel off the labels), paste the stickers into three-ring binders, and scan them onto their web-

sites. No one knows how many people collect produce labels, but worldwide they number at least in the hundreds and probably in the thousands.

"Everyone laughs at me when they hear what I collect," says Katie Foster, who edits and publishes a bimonthly newsletter about produce labels. So many people laugh that she calls her publication, "Please Stop Snickering."

"You just have to wait for people to stop snickering before you can go on to tell them what's so interesting about the stickers," Ms. Foster says. She collects produce stickers from all over the world.

"The last time I checked," she says, "I had over 15,000 Pseals." Her collection is carefully organized into notebooks that fill more than eight feet of shelf space. Her collection is by no means the biggest. Some of the largest collections are in Europe. In fact, about 20 percent of those subscribing to Foster's newsletter live overseas.

It's a fairly new hobby. Foster got interested in it 11 years ago when she saw a small display of colorful labels at a stamp-collectors' meeting. In 1992, the first Pseal convention was held in St. Louis. The first European banana-label convention was in Munich, Germany, last year. Starting Nov. 29, a special four-month exhibit will feature banana labels at Berlin-Dahlem's Botanical Museum.

Most produce-label fans became interested in the stickers through other types of collecting. Foster, an avid stamp collector, brings many of the disciplines and paraphernalia of that hobby to her pursuit of fruit labels. The same plastic pages used in stamp albums are often used for sticker collections.



COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS: Mango-sticker (top) collectors are a subgroup; a banana label from Denmark (above); squash labels (above, left) are large – some even contain recipes; a watermelon sticker (far left) has a patriotic theme.

"I got interested in it through bird-watching," says Joan Weinmayr, a collector from Lexington, Mass. (See photo on this page.) Years ago, on a bird-watching trip to Mexico, a friend told her about collecting banana labels. She was hooked. Ms. Weinmayr and her daughter Annie (then in junior high) began collecting stickers. Annie is now finished with college and grad school, but the two still share an interest in produce labels.

What's the attraction?

The labels are colorful, especially the larger ones found on melons and squashes. Banana labels may list the country of origin, providing a mini geography lesson. The seals may even include the name of the grower's farm. And labels change with the seasons, so collectors can search out new ones every year, or even every few weeks.

"SINCE I started collecting," Weinmayr says, "I've become more conscious of the seasonality of different fruits and vegetables. It's a lot like birding that way." Melons in the summer, apples and squashes in the autumn, and new stickers for all of them, too.

Collectors build friendships and communities, often over the Internet, and occasionally at trading conventions. Most collectors try to develop trading friendships with collectors in other parts of the world so they can acquire stickers that will never appear in their own grocery stores.

"The spirit of it is very sharing," Weinmayr says.

From the beginning, collectors have intentionally tried to keep money out of it. A few very rare stickers do turn up on Ebay, but the vast majority of sticker transactions involve no money at all. Instead, label fans

Continued on next page



PHOTOS BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN – STAFF

BIRDS TO BANANAS: Joan Weinmayr first began collecting banana stickers on a bird-watching trip in Mexico. The stickers on this page are all from her collection.

How a banana-label joke became a genuine reality

ONE of the first banana-label collections happened by accident – the result of a teenage practical joke that got way out of hand.

It began harmlessly one day in 1965 at the cafeteria of the private Kingswood Cranbrook School in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. Two girls peeled the labels off their lunch bananas and playfully stuck them on their foreheads. When their friends asked why they'd done it, Jamme Hilder and Chris Darwall (two self-described class clowns) concocted an elaborate story on the spot: "We're saving up for a sports car," they said. The Chiquita banana company, they explained, would give them a car if they collected 1,565 banana stickers. After winning the car, they added, they planned to sell it and use the money for a scholarship so a Latin American could attend Kingswood.

To the girls' amazement – and chagrin – the banana-sticker campaign was an instant hit. Their friends, teachers, and families were so taken with the idea that they started collecting stickers, too. In a week they had 300 labels. At that rate, the girls ruefully calculated, it wouldn't be long before their phony goal would be reached. Then what would they do?

Evidently, telling the truth and calling off the fake contest wasn't an appealing option. Instead, Jamme and Chris wrote to the president of Chiquita.

Could you please send \$2,500 to set up a real scholarship fund for their school? the students asked. In a remarkably well-composed four-page letter, the pair enthusiastically stated their case: Such a gift would give Chiquita "the best publicity you ever had."

But in the event that reasoning wasn't persuasive, the girls also described the

gravity of their predicament: If people found out there was no contest and no car, their schoolmates' disappointment would be so great that "they might even kill us," they insisted. "Please write soon!" they begged. "We're going crazy!"

"They sounded pretty desperate," recalls Thomas McCann, then Chiquita's vice president of public relations. After reading the letter, he phoned the girls. He told them that he would *personally* fly out to the school and talk to the headmaster about a remedy for their plight.

Visit Kingswood? Tell the headmaster? Now the girls were truly panic-stricken. They begged Mr. McCann not to come. Tear up their letter!

But McCann's offer turned out to be even better than the one they'd made up.

"We agreed to make it a real contest," McCann says, "and pay for a scholarship to the school. But Chiquita made a few changes to the rules." For one thing, the girls' original goal of 1,565 stickers was far too low. Second, the contest was turned into a national advertising campaign, not just a



BRANDED: It all began with a sticker like this.

Detroit-area event. Once word got out about the contest, people from all over the United States mailed banana labels to the girls. The students of Kingswood Cranbrook collected more than 80,000 stickers.

And the scholarship? In the fall of 1966, a young girl from El Salvador named Sonia Maribel Rauda arrived on the Kingswood campus, the first of two Central American girls to receive Chiquita scholarships to the school.

M.M.S.

Continued from previous page

trade duplicate labels with other collectors, stickers for stickers. People scan stickers available to trade onto their websites and then arrange swaps via e-mail.

Collectors have already begun to specialize. They have to: There are too many stickers out there! Worldwide, more than 75 billion labels a year are printed and stuck onto produce. (The labels are non-toxic, by the way – even the glue and ink. You're not supposed to eat them, but if you do it's OK.)

"Watermelon labels are big and colorful," Foster notes. Squash labels often have recipes. And there are "tons" of mango labels.

Banana-label collectors are one of the biggest subgroups. They are practically a world unto themselves. That's not surprising: Banana stickers have been around the longest. Some date back to the 1920s. But finding old labels requires detective skills.

Gerri Lorenzo, a collector from Cali-

fornia, publishes an authoritative catalog of all known banana labels, past and present – 5,000 of them. Keeping up with the hundreds of new stickers each year is daunting. But even more challenging is tracking down decades-old labels.

"They're still out there," Lorenzo says, "You just have to know where to look. I've found them in all kinds of places." She's discovered rare specimens pasted on walls in the back rooms of old neighborhood grocery stores in Los Angeles. She's even found them in second-hand shops – stuck underneath the top bunk of children's bunk beds, inside school lunch boxes, and on the sides of old refrigerators.

Rare stickers can be unstuck with a little paint thinner, gently pried off with tweezers, and placed on wax paper.

"It's like a treasure hunt," Lorenzo says, and laughs, "only the treasure isn't worth anything. And that's the fun of it."

Mark M. Sheehan



TATERS TOO: The '80s brought more Pseals.