

Bitten by the banana bug

One man's experience in marketing bananas locally and internationally.

Casey NG interviews TAN Yap Pau

The time was mid 1980s' and United Plantations, a company in which Tan Yap Pau served as head of research, had successfully developed a new banana cultivar out of Pisang Berangan. The management named it "Intan" to commemorate the mother stock, which originated from Teluk Intan, Perak.

Fresh out from a university in India, at 25 years old, Tan relates how he was employed by United Plantations in 1968. United Plantations started mass planting of oil palm in Jendarata in mid 1950s and in the early 1980s, Tan was given the important task to establish a new tissue culture laboratory for oil palm. At the early stages of setting up a tissue culture laboratory, there was time to spare. Tan and his team came up with an idea—why not try cloning other crops besides oil palm? With a nod from top management, Tan and his team combed the rural regions around Teluk Intan and Bidor for suitable crops to clone. It was decided that the banana presented the best potential. During his banana forays into the countryside, Tan stumbled upon many unrecorded varieties and one such was Pisang Relong. It was a variety that was perfect for cooking and making banana chips. For a short period, the laboratory became a kitchen, frying bananas for studies!

Tan also made numerous other observations. For example, he was convinced that Pisang Awak has natural tolerance against *Fusarium* wilt or Panama disease, which had devastated



Tan Yap Pau

the Gros Michel plantations in the 1950s. Tan also found that the local Pisang Embun, which usually remained green when ripe, could be induced to turn yellow if stored at 18 - 20°C in a cold room for a few days.

The team decided that Pisang Berangan was the most suitable candidate for development because its shape and form closely resembled the "international standard" Cavendish. From there on, the laboratory team worked feverishly to mass micro-propagate a specially selected form of Pisang Berangan.

Edible bananas are typically seedless and are propagated vegetatively by separation of young offshoots or suckers that arise from the base of old plants. Each mature plant produces only a few offshoots at a time, hence multiplication of plants is very slow. Moreover, the size, age and vigour of the offshoots is variable. Tissue culture greatly speeded up the production of

plantlets and the plantlets of each batch were of uniform quality, age, size and vigour. However, the tissue-cultured plantlets looked tiny and weak compared to offshoots. When Tan started to approach banana growers with his little plantlets, they laughed and no one wanted to buy. Tan figured he would have to give out free samples for the growers to experiment with. Well, after just four months, the growers were knocking on his door to buy the plantlets. They were amazed that the banana plantlets grew in a uniform manner and faster than normal offshoots. They were more-or-less the same height and bore high-yielding fruit bunches of uniform high quality.

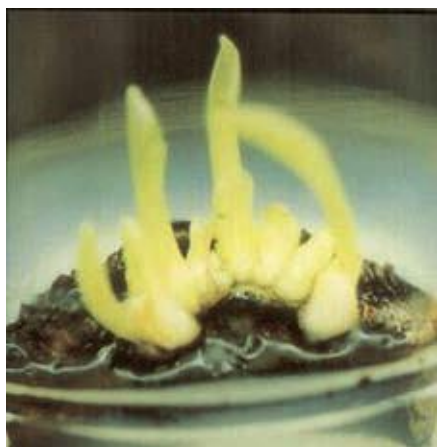
This was United Plantation’s signature banana cultivar “Intan”. Selling Intan plantlets soon become a significant source of revenue for the company and by the second year of its introduction, profits from Intan plantlet sales were more than enough to cover the tissue culture laboratory’s expenses.

United Plantation then took up the challenge to introduce and sell Intan to supermarkets in Europe. The company believed Intan was

a sure winner because of its popularity in the Malaysian market, and the favourable response it had received at an agricultural expo in England. Alas, the campaign met with unexpected resistance from corporate buyers. The primary objection was that Intan fingers were typically shorter than 6 inches. It had not occurred to United Plantations that size would be the key determinant of selling price and perceived quality in Europe. Because Intan was shorter and smaller than the established Cavendish cultivars sold in Europe, it was sold as a low grade banana. When the company decided to shift its attention to the Japanese and Korean markets, it faced the same discrimination.

“What’s wrong with eating smaller bananas?”, Tan laments during our interview. He explains that in Korea, children typically consume bananas after lunch. After a hearty meal, it makes sense to enjoy a small dessert banana. Why is there a need to consume a large-sized banana? No one in Korea could provide a logical answer.

The company finally abandoned its overseas campaign.



Multiple plantlets in tissue culture



Rooted plantlets