

Oddly colored and somewhat phallic: How Miami's rare tropical fruit went TikTok viral

miamiherald.com/miami-com/restaurants/article263608093.html

By Carlos Frías

July 27, 2022

Social media helps Miami Fruit sell products throughout the country

Miami Fruit, an online company that sends boxes of fruits to customers around the United States and the world, uses social media to promote its products to followers.

Rane Roatta and Edelle Schlegel can predict when one of the rare tropical fruits they grow on their Redland farm is destined to go viral on TikTok.

“If it’s an odd color or appears somewhat phallic,” Roatta says, laughing.

Press record. Film Roatta taking a machete to a cluster of blue bananas with the consistency of ice cream. Or give two girlfriends the “world’s largest banana,” and ask them to eat the yellow pylon on camera.

Watch Schlegel slice open a round purple fruit to reveal the magical multipoint design inside. Or devour a longneck avocado that could star on FruitHub.

But there’s also the nostalgic: Watch Roatta crack open a Spanish lime and ask their one million TikTok followers what they call the fruit in their home countries — mamoncillo, kenep, quenepa, what else?

Comments ensue. Millions of views pile up. And so do the orders to their online company, Miami Fruit, which sends boxes of these Rorschach rainbows to followers around the country.

Call them the fruit influencers.

Rane Roatta, 29, and Edelle Schlegel, 25, the founders of Miami Fruit, shoot video of blue java bananas from their farm in Homestead. MATIAS J. OCNER mocner@miamiherald.com

Roatta, 29, and Schlegel, 25, harnessed social media’s devotion to that which is strange and nostalgic (and possibly profane). They use it to market and sell the niche tropical fruit grown in Homestead and the Redland to the rest of the country.

Many found Miami Fruit over the last two years, while they were home during the pandemic, learning to shop for groceries online or escaping to the internet for mindless videos. Miami Fruit gave them both.

Their videos feature way more than mangoes. Think of fruits with names (depending on the country) like caimito and tamarillo, longan and langsat, jaboticaba and June plums. They have spikes or seed pods or resemble the human anatomy to those who can't keep their mind out of the gutter. And they attract both the adventurous and the nostalgic.

Regional variations of their names fuel arguments in the comments as the videos are shared and re-shared. The eye-catching TikToks and Instagram Reels turned the young couple into social media tastemakers.

Theirs was a union that could only have started on social media.

Rane Roatta, 29, and Edelle Schlegel, 25, the founders of Miami Fruit, hold some of the tropical fruits they sell online from their farm in Homestead, Fla. Miami Fruit, an online company that sends boxes of fruits to customers around the United States and the world, uses social media to promote their products to their followers. MATIAS J. OCNER
mocner@miamiherald.com

From musician to farmer

Roatta had already been through a midlife crisis in his early twenties when Schlegel first saw him talking about tropical fruits on YouTube in 2015.

By that time, Roatta, a graduate of New World School of the Arts, had given up on a career as a professional saxophone player. Born in South Miami, Roatta graduated from the prestigious Brubeck Institute in the Bay Area, started by jazz great Dave Brubeck, but told his parents he didn't want a career as a backup musician, touring with the likes of Steely Dan for union scale.

That sounded like a dream to his father, Claude, a longtime Miami musician who owns an exotic palm tree nursery he named after his first band, Action Theory. Instead, Rane followed his father down the agricultural path — even through being red-green colorblind made it tougher.

“I understood if you find something you love to do, you'll make a living at it because it's your passion,” Claude Roatta said.

Rane Roatta, 29, the founder of Miami Fruit, holds a rollinia deliciosa at his farm in Homestead. MATIAS J. OCNER mocner@miamiherald.com

Roatta had grown up helping his father at his nursery and Claude has memories of Rane as a toddler, in nothing but a diaper, helping him plant seeds in tiny starter cups.

“The mamey doesn't fall far from the tree,” Rane Roatta said.

Rane wanted to peddle fruit – sort of.

Roatta, a cycling hobbyist who had already devoted himself to becoming vegan, was 20 when he attached a trailer to his bike and rode from South Miami to the Redland, where he bought 500 pounds of tropical fruits from local growers. One of them is Don Chafin, who has been growing dozens of rare varieties of bananas and lychees at his farm, Going Bananas, for nearly 40 years.

“His clients are getting unusual tasting and looking fruit. He’s offering something different,” Chafin said.

Roatta tried selling them locally at weekly farmers markets — with little success.

Maybe that’s because South Floridians are spoiled with backyards that are bursting with native fruit, mangoes and papayas, avocados of many varieties, lychees and limes that they swap and share. Not to mention the viandero fruit trucks that park in neighborhoods and the mom-and-pop fruit stands.

A box full of caimitos is gathered at the Miami Fruit farm in Homestead. MATIAS J. OCNER
mocner@miamiherald.com

The business, he learned, was national. When Rane posted photos of the fruit he sold at farmers markets on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, fruit aficionados re-shared his photos. He got messages from around the country, begging for boxes of whatever fruit he would sell them.

His entire business went online, and Miami Fruit was born.

A fruit snob

Other fruit-obsessed growers invited him onto their YouTube channels, which is where Schlegel saw him and commented, “Beautiful!” She meant the fruit, but also him.

“He seemed like a cool, fruity guy,” she said.

Schlegel had grown up in the Bay Area suburb of Concord, the youngest of three sisters raised by a firefighter mom and police officer dad. Her mother died when she was 7, and it was up to her father, Ed, to encourage his youngest when she started planting fruits and vegetables in a corner of their yard because she wanted her family to eat better.

“Pretty soon there was fruit all over the house,” said Ed Schlegel. “She started talking about ‘sustainable this, organic that.’”

The day she tasted a mango for the first time, at a farmers market near her house when she was 15, “I became a fruit snob,” she said. By 16 she was vegan.

Edelle Schlegel, 25, the co-founder of Miami Fruit, holds an awapuhi at her farm in Homestead. MATIAS J. OCNER mocner@miamiherald.com

She sought out a college that offered instruction in how to raise tropical fruits and attended the University of Hawaii at Hilo.

When Rane mentioned in a YouTube video he was visiting the Bay Area, she messaged him and they met up near San Francisco. A year later, he visited her again when she was home from college in Concord.

“And that’s when we fell in love,” she said.

She liked and followed him — on social media and IRL.

She left school. And they drove cross country and moved into a trailer in the backyard of his mother’s house in South Miami where they started selling South Florida’s bounty of fruit to Rane’s small but devoted group of customers around the country.

Edelle built Miami Fruit a simple, functional, Shopify website that made it easy to take orders. And she took over all the social media, including Instagram, posting as much as three times a day, where that audience has grown to more than 359,000 followers. She started a daily newsletter.

Offering only the rarest fruit

In two years, they had raised enough money to buy 2.5 acres of fruit farmland for \$150,000 from the late tropical fruit advocate Bill Lessard, the founding president of the Tropical Fruit and Vegetable Society of Redland.

Rane Roatta, 29, the founder of Miami Fruit, holds a cecropia, or gummy worm fruit, at his farm in Homestead. MATIAS J. OCNER mocner@miamiherald.com

Lessard financed their dream with a one-year, interest-free loan. He kept his neighboring five acres and became a mentor and a friend. When Lessard died after a long battle with cancer in the summer of 2020, he left written in his trust that the young couple should have the first chance to buy the land, and the house in which he lived, at market price.

On that land, they started experimenting with tropical varieties of fruits they can grow in South Florida’s slightly cooler sub-tropical climate. They focused on fruits that were not grown by the multinational growers, couldn’t be imported and fruits that wouldn’t stand up to the rigors of the global supply chain.

They chose fruits like atemoya or guanabana that can't be picked too early, ripen quickly and bruise easily. They're terrible choices for large growers, who have to ensure fruits can stand up to a week of travel. But they're perfect for small, local farmers who can raise the best fruit for flavor — not hardness — and ship them within a day or two. They could bypass the traditional supply chain.

“The goal is always to offer stuff that's special,” Roatta said.

Edelle Schlegel, 25, the founder of Miami Fruit, squeezes an awapuhi at her farm in Homestead. MATIAS J. OCNER mocner@miamiherald.com

The couple built a cold storage, a refrigeration room and packing area out of recycled Chiquita banana shipping containers. They contracted with a local company to make the shipping boxes out of recycled paper, and Miami Fruit's staff of about 20 handmakes the packing material out of biodegradable materials.

They worked with independent farmers, most of them in South Florida, encouraging them to grow rare tropical fruits Roatta and Schlegel proved could grow on their land.

Why grow common avocados paid at 20 cents a pound, Roatta told them, when you could grow something unique — like a variety of a longneck avocado or a rare purple sugar apple that caught the internet's attention — and demand \$5 a pound? Some turned over parts of their land to grow for Miami Fruit.

When critics ask why their fruit is so expensive — a box can cost over \$100 — they stress paying farmers whatever they ask so they can continue growing quality, sustainable fruit at a fair wage. (They even [made a TikTok about it.](#))

“He does such a service to Redland growers by buying that quality fruit and selling that quality fruit all over the United States,” said Chafin, who offers 75 varieties of bananas from his farm, including the Blue Java.

Their business was climbing every month — then COVID hit. While some businesses ground to a halt, theirs, which is all online, took off.

Fruit goes viral

People suddenly at home with nowhere to go found the TikTok account Schlegel had started for Miami Fruit in October 2019. They found Schlegel, blonde and coquettish, creating short, fun videos that showed off the rare fruit as Rane harvested it. She often wore graphic T-shirts she had designed for the company, starring anthropomorphic fruit she'd drawn.

All her life she had said she wanted to be an artist, then a farmer, then an “artist farmer,” her father recalled.

“As it turns out, she did turn into a farming artist,” he said.

Rane Roatta, 29, and Edelle Schlegel, 25, the founders of Miami Fruit, shoot video of blue java bananas on their farm in Homestead. MATIAS J. OCNER mocner@miamiherald.com

Videos took turns going viral. The Today Show discovered one of her videos with a longneck avocado and featured it. Another of her slicing open a mamey has more than 15 million views. The video of Schlegel squeezing sap out of a so-called shampoo ginger plant, known in Hawaii as awapuhi and used as a hair conditioner, has another 13 million with comments like, “I thought about something completely different while seeing this.”

Fans — and new customers — sprouted up across the country overnight.

In Napa Valley, Josh Laidlaw, 27, and his girlfriend, Alana Gravatt, 25, discovered Schlegel’s videos at the beginning of California’s COVID lockdowns and started ordering weekly boxes. They discovered fruits like monstera deliciosa and abiu (also called caimito), which have become favorites.

“You know how people picked up hobbies? That was our hobby, discovering the whole world of tropical fruit. It was the only thing we had to look forward to: next Tuesday we’re getting guanabana or next Thursday we’re getting papaya,” said Laidlaw, a chef in the Sonoma Valley of Venezuelan and Panamanian descent.

Miami Fruit’s business — and their social media following — doubled. Even after lockdowns and restrictions ended, their business continues to steadily climb, Roatta said.

“Our farm is a testing ground for the future of agriculture in Homestead,” Roatta said. “Our goal is 20 years from now, people will still be growing tropical fruit down here.”

It also means steady content where South Florida’s fruit farmers get to be social media stars.

“We had to do this,” Schlegel joked, “to sustain our tropical fruit obsession.”

Rane Roatta, 29, and Edelle Schlegel, 25, the founders of Miami Fruit, show off some of the tropical fruit they sell online from their farm in Homestead. MATIAS J. OCNER mocner@miamiherald.com

This story was originally published July 27, 2022 4:30 AM.

Miami Herald food editor Carlos Frías is a two-time James Beard Award winner, including the 2022 Jonathan Gold Local Voice Award for engaging the community with his food writing. A Miami native, he’s also the author of the memoir “Take Me With You: A Secret Search for Family in a Forbidden Cuba.”

