

SIAL Canada Reveals Winner of 2026 Gold Innovation Award Kunana



By: Frank Yeo

A Q&A with Santiago Stacey, chief banana officer at Kunana



Isabelle Marquis, co-president of the SIAL Innovation jury, Santiago Stacey (center) chief banana officer from Kunana accepting his SIAL Innovation Gold award and Stephane Thuillier, CEO SIAL Canada.

1 What is unique and innovative about your product?

Kunana is Canada's first upcycled banana milk made from rescued bananas that are perfectly good to eat but overlooked because they don't meet cosmetic standards. While most dairy alternatives focus on oats, almonds, or soy, Kunana introduces bananas as a completely new base for the category, delivering a naturally creamy texture with no dairy, no nuts, and no added sugar in our Unsweetened variety.

Beyond the ingredient itself, Kunana combines sustainability, functionality, and nostalgia into one product. It's a modern take on the banana shakes many of us grew up drinking at home, reimaged for today's consumer who wants convenience, better ingredients, and products with purpose.

2 What inspired you to launch this project, and what's the story behind the brand?

I grew up in Ecuador, one of the largest banana-exporting countries in the world. Bananas were part of everyday life, and one of my favorite childhood drinks was a homemade banana shake called "platanada." Years later, after moving to Canada, I kept thinking about two realities happening at the same time: consumers were looking for better dairy alternatives, while millions of bananas were being discarded simply because they didn't look "perfect."

That became the inspiration behind Kunana: rescuing and transforming overlooked bananas into something delicious and functional.

3 What makes Kunana more sustainable than other products on the market?

Kunana helps address food waste by using rescued bananas that would otherwise have limited commercial value due to cosmetic imperfections. We believe food shouldn't be wasted simply because it doesn't fit supermarket beauty standards.

At the same time, food insecurity remains a major issue in Canada, while nearly half of all food produced is wasted every year. That disconnect is one of the reasons we believe reducing food waste should be a priority across the food industry.

Bananas are also one of the most efficient crops in the world in terms of yield per hectare, and by upcycling

fruit already grown within the supply chain, we can create additional value from existing agricultural production rather than requiring new resources. Sustainability for us is not just about ingredients, it's about rethinking how the food system values produce.

4 How does it stack up for nutrition when compared to cow's milk or other dairy alternatives?

Kunana was designed to offer a balanced dairy-free option that consumers can enjoy every day. Our Unsweetened variety contains 5g of plant-based protein per serving with no added sugar, while delivering the creamy taste and texture consumers typically expect from dairy.

Meanwhile, our Chocolate Banana Milk is positioned as a better-for-you treat, made with real cacao and containing roughly half the sugar of the leading chocolate milk brand in Canada.

Compared to many dairy alternatives, Kunana stands out because it's allergen-friendly, banana-based, and offers a naturally smooth profile without relying heavily on artificial flavours. Kunana provides consumers with a dairy-free option that aligns with evolving preferences around sustainability, ingredient transparency, and functional nutrition.

5 How do you plan to educate the consumer on this new addition to the category?

Education starts with storytelling and sampling. Since banana milk is a new category for many consumers, we focus on making the product approachable by connecting it to familiar experiences: smoothies, cereal, coffee, and nostalgic banana shakes people already know and love.

We're investing in in-store demos, social content, and retailer partnerships to help consumers understand both the taste and the mission behind the brand. Once people try Kunana, the reaction is usually immediate: "This actually tastes really good." That trial moment is key to driving repeat purchases and building the category.

6 Where is Kunana available in Canada, and what's next for distribution?

Kunana recently launched across Canada and is already available in more than 100 stores nationwide, including major banners such as Healthy Planet and Farm Boy through our distribution partnership with Jonluca Neal.

One thing we discovered early on is that Kunana froths exceptionally well, making it a natural fit for baristas and specialty coffee applications. Since our humble beginnings started with cafés in Toronto, we're



In 2026, Kunana was awarded the SIAL Innovation Gold award for their plant-based banana milk.

also investing heavily in expansion through coffee shops and smoothie bars nationwide.

The response from retailers and consumers has been extremely encouraging, and we're focused on expanding nationally, growing foodservice distribution, and continuing conversations with larger grocery retailers as the category gains momentum.

The recognition accelerated conversations with retailers, distributors, and strategic partners, while also increasing consumer curiosity around the brand.

7 What did winning the SIAL Innovation Gold Award change for Kunana?

I'll make a confession: I didn't initially plan to participate in the innovation competition, but my friend Eric from the City of Toronto encouraged me to apply, and I'm grateful he did.

Winning the SIAL Innovation Gold Award was a major validation moment for our team. It confirmed that retailers, buyers, and industry leaders see banana milk not just as a novelty, but as a meaningful innovation within the beverage category.

The recognition accelerated conversations with retailers, distributors, and strategic partners, while also increasing consumer curiosity around the brand. For a young company launching an entirely new category, that credibility has been incredibly valuable.●