

THE AVOCADO IN MEXICO

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In complying with a request from Dr. Webber for a paper on the avocado in Mexico, I will state at the outset that I am limited to a general knowledge only of the subject coming to me as a coffee planter of some fifteen years experience in the Tierra Caliente, or hot country of southern Mexico.

Of course on the plantation we had all of the native fruits such as the mango, avocado, banana, pine-apple, orange, lime, guava, naranja-lima, cocoanut, sapote, papaya and many other less known fruits.

Our plantation was located in the foot-hill section of the Sierra Madres, some seventy miles back from the gulf coast, in latitude seventeen and a half, at an elevation around eight hundred feet.

We were pioneering in a virgin forest as old or older perhaps than the ruins of the prehistoric city of Palenque in the same forest which stretched off to the east of us toward the Guatamalan line.

In making our clearings for the "fincas" or plantings, we left the largest trees of the forest to protect the coffee plants from the direct rays of the sun. The ground selected was always a hillside or mountain slope necessary to get proper drainage, as our rain fall often reached one hundred and forty inches. Invariably we found in this tropical under growth the wild avocado, called by the Indians "CHININI".

Apropos of the discussion of the proper name for this fruit, I might say, in passing, we have here in the Aztec tongue perhaps our oldest precedent.

We generally left these chininis standing as we did the wild cacao the producer of the chocolate bean and also the different sapotas, including- the "Chicle" whose sap is now so profitably hunted to supply the great American craving for chewing gum. The vanilla vine frequently was found clinging to the trees.

The wild orange too is found here along the streams and bottom lands in the deep alluvial soils.

The chinini as found in the forest, does not grow to be a large tree. It is usually not over eight or ten inches in diameter and perhaps thirty feet high. The fruit is about the size of a large egg and in shape oval. The quality is only fair. We ate them only when our planted varieties were out of season. This fruit is green in color, and as I recall it now, the skin was of the hard shell type.

The planted varieties are all seedlings, and so far as I know very little effort has been made to introduce budded varieties of any fruits into Mexico. We had a number of

varieties of avocados, each district having something different. In going about the country, whenever I found a particularly fine specimen, I took the seed home for planting. To show how fast avocados grow in the tropics, in four years time from the seed, we had trees six to eight inches in diameter, thirty feet high, and full of fruit. The fruits of this section of Mexico do not grow as large as our largest varieties here.

Crossing the Sierra Madres to the Pacific slope one enters the dry country, somewhat drier than we have here when irrigation prevails, and still in the lower altitudes we find the avocado fruiting and producing as good a quality if not better than that found in the wet or gulf side. Here also there is a hot wind from the South, "El Sur", that prevails for a season, very dry and very like our "Northers" here in California. I mention this fact as some of our people have feared that our interior valleys might be too dry and windy to allow the fruits to set.

I have spoken so far of the avocado as I have known it in the Tierra Caliente or real tropics, where the temperature varies from a minimum of 50 degrees to a maximum of 103, or an average of 76 degrees. I feel very sure that these tropical varieties are not adapted to this country, for the same reason the banana and pineapple do not mature fruit here. Below the Tropic of Cancer latitude apparently loses its value. Climate is made by elevation and amount of moisture, and climbing the mountains you reach the frost line between 4000 and 5000 feet, the dead line of tropical growth, where the fruits mentioned at the beginning of this paper all end, with the exception of the avocado. Here begins the semi-tropics and it includes the great table land of Mexico, the Tierras Templadas, the land of the scrub oak, pine and maguey. This is the region from which all of the California introductions of the avocado have come, a climate very similar to our own and in fact with a rainfall even less. Here I witnessed the first snow which had fallen in fifty years. Mr. Popenoe and others have introduced their varieties from such altitudes as Atlixco 7000 feet, Queretero 6000, Guanajuato 6800 feet, Guadalajara 5400 feet. This section of course is the natural one to explore for suitable plants for California.

In Mexico, I know of no large plantings of the avocado. In fact, orchards or commercial planting of any of the fruits is very little developed. In recent years Americans have, here and there, done some planting, chiefly oranges and pineapples in the state of Vera Cruz and bananas in Tabasco. Each family, in the country or in the small pueblas, will have a few trees around their homes, and the surplus finds its way to the plaza or market of the nearest town.

As to the popularity of the avocado, there is no fruit among the Mexicans or foreigners in Mexico that is more esteemed unless it be the mango. This fact alone is proof positive to me that the fruit has a great future in this country, and I feel justified in predicting that someday our shipments from California will rank along with its tropical neighbor the lemon, and perhaps the orange.