

Padre Cobo on the Avocado

Translated by Wilson Popenoe

Padre Cobo on the Avocado. When, only a few years ago, we began to speak of the Mexican, West Indian, and Guatemalan types of Avocados, we thought we were forming a classification which had never before been suggested. We did not know that in the year 1653 the venerable Padre Cobo, in his description of the avocado, mentioned these three races and spoke of their differences in unmistakable terms.

Padre Cobo's account of the Avocado is, in fact, one of the most interesting of those written in the early days. I will translate it, leaving out only a few sentences regarding the uses of the plant in medicine. I am unable to include the latter because I have not yet found any English equivalents for the Spanish diseases which the avocado will cure.

CONCERNING THE PALTAS

The Palta is a tree of very attractive appearance, shapely, of the size of a large fig tree, symmetrically branched and moderately spreading; its leaf is similar to that of the mulberry, a trifle larger, and its fruit is one of the finest in the Indies; in fact, many give it the palm, placing it ahead of all others. It is spindle-shaped and commonly of the size of an average quince; in some regions it becomes as big as a small squash or large citron, the varieties of the province of Yucatan in New Spain being of this class. The Palta has a thin skin, more tender and flexible than that of a Ceuta lemon, green externally, and when the fruit is quite ripe, peeling readily. It has the largest seed that I have ever seen in any fruit, either in the Indies or Europe; it is as large as a hen's egg, and spindle-shaped; it is of a reddish white substance, tender like the meat of a chestnut, and covered with a grayish parchment. It has the flavor of bitter almonds, and when pressed it yields an oil like that of the almond. Between the seed and the outer skin is the meat, slightly thicker than one's finger except at the neck where it is very thick. It is of whitish green color, tender, buttery, and very soft. Some people eat it with sugar or salt, others just as it comes from the tree, it being of such good flavor that it requires no seasoning. But, although it is very pleasant to the taste, it should be eaten in moderation because it is considered, like nearly all the indigenous fruits of these Indies, to be heavy and indigestible. The best Paltas come from hot, dry regions; the finest of this kingdom of Peru are those of the valley of Ica and those of the province of San Garo (Asangaro), in the diocese of Guamanga.

There are three different kinds of Paltas. The second kind is a large, round one which is produced in the province of Guatemala, and which does not have as smooth a skin as the first. The third is a small Palta which is found in Mexico, which in size, color, and form resembles a breba fig; some are round and others elongated, and the skin is as thin and smooth as that of a plum. In some regions they cut the immature palta in small bits and put it in brine, to take the place of olives. . . . The wood is useful in building, and

for fuel. The name Palta is current in the language of Peru; in the major portion of the Indies the fruit is called Aguacate, which is the name given it by the Indians of Hispaniola.