

## Early History of the Avocado

### Wilson Popenoe

Antes de llegar a Santa Marta esta Yaharo que es en las caidas de las sierras nevadas, Yaharo es buen puerto y buena tierra y aqui ay heredades de arboles de muchas frutas de comer y entre otras ay una que parece naranja, y cuando esta sazónada para comer vuelvase amarilla: lo que tiene de dentro es como manteca y es de maravilloso sabor y deja el gusto tan bueno y tan blando que es cosa maravillosa.

WHEN MARTIN FERNANDEZ DE ENCISO wrote these lines he did not know that he was announcing to the old World the discovery of a fruit which four centuries later, would become the basis of an extensive horticultural industry in Florida and California. Indeed, when he wrote them Florida and California themselves were undiscovered to Europeans, who had only then commenced the exploration of the new continent.

Enciso a man of learning, accompanied one of the first Spanish expeditions to the coast of northern South America. "He was a cartographer," writes Sir Clements Markham, "a good observer, and had the gift of lucid description." Let us translate his story of the avocado, which appeared in his "Suma de Geografia," published at Sevilla in 1519 "Before reaching Santa Marta," he says, "is Yaharo, which lies at the foot of the snow mountains, Yaharo is a good port, with good lands, and here are groves of many different sorts of edible fruits, among others is one which looks like an orange, and when it is ready for eating it turns yellowish; that which it contains is like butter and is of marvelous flavor, so good and pleasing to the palate that it is a marvelous thing."

Seven years passed, and another of the conquistadores described in print this new fruit. Gonzalo Fernandes de Oviedo, who had spent much time at the Spanish court, came to America in 1514. After wide travel and observation, he returned to Spain and published in 1526 his "Sumario de la Natural Historia de las Indias," a brief account prepared at the request of the King, who was desirous of knowing as much as possible about the wonders of the New World. "On the mainland," wrote Oviedo, "are certain trees called pear trees, but they are not like those of Spain, though held in no less esteem; rather is their fruit of such a nature that they have many advantages over our pears. They are large trees, with broad leaves similar to those of the laurel, but larger and more green. They bear pears weighing a pound and even more, though some weigh less, and the color and shape is that of true pears, and the rind somewhat thicker, but softer, and in the center of the fruit is a seed like a peeled chestnut . . . and between this and the rind is the part which is eaten, which is abundant, and is a paste very similar to butter and very good eating and of good taste."

Like Enciso, Oviedo had seen this tree in northern South America (Tierra Firme, it was then called) though some years later he published a more extensive work in which he

mentioned having observed it in Nicaragua as well. None of the early accounts mentions the avocado as growing in the West Indies. Though botanists of the last century generally considered the tree indigenous to the islands, reference to the early accounts clearly shows this not to have been the case, - as was pointed out by G. N. Collins in his bulletin, "The Avocado, a Salad Fruit from the Tropics," published by the U. S. Department of Agriculture in 1905. (Incidentally, this bulletin laid the groundwork of modern avocado culture, and still ranks as one of the most interesting documents in the literature of this fruit tree.) Eliminating, then, the West Indies, what was the distribution of the avocado at the time of the Conquest?

Pedro de Cieza de Leon, writing between 1532 and 1550, reported having seen the tree in the region which is now western Colombia. Pursuing his travels southward, he noted its occurrence in the coastal valleys of Ecuador and Peru. He referred to it under the names "aguacate" and "palta": his work is the earliest in which I have found either of these words in print.

Francisco Cervantes Salazar seems to have been the first to chronicle the presence of this fruit in Mexico. Yet he did not describe it. His book, "Mexico en 1554," lists it among fruits which were sold in the market of Tenochtitlan (the name by which Mexico City was known in those days). Not many years later,—some time previous to 1569; the exact date seems to be uncertain,—Pray Bernardino de Sahagun wrote his "Historia de las Cosas de Nueva Espana," in which he described several kinds of avocados, using the Aztec name *aoacatl* (more commonly spelled **ahuacatl** by subsequent writers; corrupted by the Spaniards to **ahuacate** and **aguacate**). One of his varieties went under the somewhat staggering designation of **tlacocataoacatl**.

An English merchant, by name Hawkes, whose travels in Mexico were published by Hakluyt in 1589, mentioned having seen this fruit, which, with the usual clumsiness of the early writers in spelling plant names foreign to their tongues, he called **alvacata**. As far as I have been able to ascertain, this was the first mention of the avocado in an English publication.

In 1590, Father Joseph de Acosta published a work in which he differentiated between the small, thin skinned Mexican avocados, and the larger, thick skinned ones of South America. Yet he did not use the name **aguacate**, calling the Mexican forms instead by the Peruvian name **palta**.

This brings us down to the end of the sixteenth century, and we have clear evidence that the Spanish conquistadores found the avocado cultivated from Mexico to Peru. That remarkable man, Garcilaso de la Vega, son of one of Pizarro's warriors and an Inca princess, makes it equally clear, however, that it was not grown in Peru many years before the advent of the Europeans. In his "Royal Commentaries of the Incas," published in 1605, Garcilaso recounts the deeds of his ancestors, the rulers of Peru: among other things, he says that "Tupac Inca Yupanqui marched to the province of Canari, and on the road he conquered another called Palta, whence they brought to the warm valley near Cuzco the wholesome and delicious fruit called Palta." Here, then, we learn the origin of this name, as well as the approximate time the tree reached Peru from the territory which is now Ecuador; for it is known that Tupac Yupanqui's conquest of the northern provinces took place sometime about 1450-1475.

Less clear is the extent to which the tree had spread eastward from the Andean region. There is much evidence to indicate that it was not known in Brazil before the Conquest. We are warranted in believing that it was grown in the valleys of the Venezuelan Andes, where, as in Colombia, the vernacular name **cura** was current. And while speaking of vernacular names it may not be out of place to mention that there were many tribes in the extensive region between northern Mexico and southern Peru. These were of diverse linguistic affiliations, and usually had their own names for this fruit. In the Maya dialects of Yucatan and Guatemala, for example, we find **on**, **okh**, and the like; while in the Tar-ascan region of western Mexico it was **cupanda**. The Zapotecs of southern Mexico called (and still call) it **yasu** and **isu**. In some of the languages of Honduras and Salvador it was known as **zjal**, **hayi**, and **narimu**; in Nicaragua and Costa Rica were found such names as **sikia**, **kulup**, **anio**, and **devora**.

Though the avocado has not, to the present day, been grown extensively in Europe,—due, in large part, to the fact that none but the hardiest varieties will tolerate the cold climate of even the most protected nooks on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, France, and Italy,—we have record of its early introduction into the Old World from the New. Clusius, in his "Rariorum Plantarum Historia," published at Antwerp in 1601, gives a fairly complete botanical description of the tree, based upon specimens grown in a garden at Valencia, Spain. Both from his statements, and from our present knowledge of the climatic requirements of the several horticultural races, we can be fairly safe in assuming that this particular avocado was of Mexican origin. Clusius states that the owner told him the common name in the Indies was "mamay," but that later he learned from the erudite Simon de Tovar (who also had one of the trees in his garden) that its correct name is "aguacate."

Twenty-five years ago, when avocado growing first began to attract serious attention in California and Florida, horticulturists found that the seedling forms growing in these regions, as well as in the American tropics, could conveniently be divided into three groups or races, based upon fairly well defined characteristics of tree and fruit. The kind most abundant in Florida and the West Indies was first termed the West Indian-South American type. Later this was simplified to West Indian. The other two, less commonly grown in Florida but to all practical purposes the only ones known in California, were called the Guatemalan and Mexican types,—or to use the term which ultimately met with general acceptance, races.

I imagine North American horticulturists, in adopting this classification of cultivated avocados, thought they were developing something new. I can say, at least, that such was my own feeling at the time the distinguishing characteristics of these three groups were being discussed and catalogued.

Let us turn, therefore, to the work of Fray Bernabe Cobo and see how greatly mistaken we were. This worthy, in his "Historia del Nueva Mundo," which was written in 1653, says:

The palta is a tree of very attractive appearance, shapely, 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 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 (Mexico) 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. . . . Between the seed and the rind 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 and salt, others just as it comes from the tree, it being of such good flavor that it requires no seasoning. . . .

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 skin as the first. The third is a small Palta found in Mexico, which in size, color, and form resembles a Breva fig; some are round and others elongated, and the skin is as thin and smooth as that of a plum. . . . The name Palta is current in the language of Peru. In the major portion of the Indies the fruit is called aguacate. ...

At the beginning of the present century, when avocado growing first began to receive serious attention in the United States, there was great divergence of opinion regarding the correct name for this fruit. Collins, in his classic bulletin mentioned earlier in this article, had listed forty names; some of these, however, were nothing more than orthographical variants, two or three perhaps mere typographical errors in the publications where they originally appeared. In Florida, the accepted appellation was **alligator pear**, often, perhaps usually, abbreviated to "pear" and occasionally "gator pear"; while in California, whither the fruit had wandered northward from Mexico instead of the West Indies, the name **aguacate** was common, as well as **alligator pear**. And in both California and Florida, **avocado** and **avocado pear** had met with considerable acceptance.

Interested horticulturists felt that it was a mistake to encourage,—even to tolerate,—further use of **alligator pear**, on the grounds that this name was misleading, ungraceful, and generally objectionable. The American Pomological Society and the U. S. Department of Agriculture,—both arbiters of high standing,—approved and adopted **avocado**, but the Californians leaned toward aguacate, and for a time stuck to their guns. They even went so far as to undertake a return to the purer spelling **ahuacate**. Eventually, however, they gave up what appeared a useless fight and joined the Easterners in sponsoring avocado. It seemed highly probable, at this time, that **alligator pear** would become the accepted commercial name unless all concerned got together on some other, less objectionable one. Since that time, the Californians have coined a new word, Calavo, by which they distinguish California-grown avocados of a certain standard of quality from all other avocados on the market,—but that is another story which has no place in this tale.

Having adopted **avocado**, the history of this name became a matter of some interest. It can be traced back in the literature and its origin established with satisfactory accuracy.

In the year 1655, the British took possession of Jamaica, an island which up to that time had been in the hands of the Spaniards, who had, at an early date, established settlements there. The avocado had been brought over from the mainland, and had

found a congenial home on the island.

In 1657 there was published at London a curious little work entitled, "A Book of the Continuation of Foreign Passages." Under the heading, "A Brief Description of the Island of Jamaica," mention is made of "Avocatas, a wholesome, pleasant fruit; in season in August, and sold for eight pence per piece." The high price (for those times) suggests that the fruit was still something of a rarity.

This, then, is the first statement which has been found in British literature regarding the occurrence of the avocado in the West Indies. A few years later (1660) the poet Cowley extolled the virtues of this fruit (he called it aguacata), but his verse adds nothing to our knowledge of its history or distribution. It was not until 1672 (unless we have overlooked some obscure account) that an extensive description appeared in our language. This was contained in a classical work by W. Hughes, entitled, "The American Physitian," and is of sufficient interest to warrant our reprinting it here. It is as follows:

### **Of the Spanish Pear**

This is a reasonable high and well-spread tree, whose leaves are smooth, and of a pale green colour; the Fruit is of the fashion of a Fig, but very smooth on the outside, and as big in bulk as a Slipper-Pear; of a brown colour, having a stone in the middle as big as an Apricock, but round, hard and smooth; the outer paring or rinde is, as it were, a kind of a shell, almost like an Acorn-shell, but not altogether so tough; yet the middle substance (I mean between the stone and the paring, or outer crusty rinde) is very soft and tender, almost as soft as the pulp of a Pippin not over-roasted.

### **Place**

It groweth in divers places in Jamaica, and the truth is, I never saw it elsewhere; but it is possible it may be in other Islands adjacent, which are not much different in Latitude.

### **Name**

I never heard it called by any other name than the Spanish Pear, or by some the Shell-Pear; and I suppose it is so called only by the English (knowing no other name for it) because it was there planted by Spaniards before our Countrymen had any being there; or else because it hath a kinde of shell or crusty out-side.

### **Use**

I think it to be one of the most rare and most pleasant Fruits of that Island; it nourisheth and strengtheneth the body, corroborating the vital spirits, and procuring lust exceedingly; the Pulp being taken out and macerated in some convenient thing, and eaten with a little Vinegar and Pepper, or several other ways, is very delicious meat.

It seems strange that Hughes did not hear "it called by any other name than the Spanish Pear, or by some the Shell Pear," in view of the fact that the "Book of the Continuation

of Foreign Passages," fifteen years earlier, had used a common name of Spanish origin, while Sir Hans Sloane, twenty-four years later, reported several.

It is to Sloane, indeed, that we must look for the first record of the name now generally accepted,—avocado. This distinguished naturalist published in 1696 a catalogue of the plants of Jamaica, among which he listed, but did not describe, this tree. He referred to many previous accounts, and made the observation in Latin: "The Avocado or Alligator Pear-Tree. It grows in gardens and fields throughout Jamaica." Some thirty years later, in 1725, he published an extensive work entitled, "A Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, St. Christophers, and Jamaica," in which was included a natural history of the last-named island. One chapter was devoted to "The Albecato Pear-Tree; Spanish, Abacado, or Avocado."

It is obvious that all of these words, as well as the earlier *avocata*, were corruptions of the Spanish name *aguacate*. And as regards *alligator*, the difference appears to be one of degree, not of kind, for we can only infer that it is an extreme, just as *avocata* is a moderate, adaptation. We see, therefore, that our chosen name for this fruit enjoys no very high standing on the grounds of purity, nor can we honestly say that it is particularly appropriate; it represents a compromise, made primarily with the object of relegating to the limbo of innocuous desuetude the objectionable alligator pear,—a purpose, I may add, which unfortunately has not been wholly achieved.