

THE AVOCADO HAS MANY NAMES

Wilson Popenoe¹, George A. Zentmyer² - & Eugenio Schieber³—

(1892-1976) Agricultural explorer and educator;

²*Professor Emeritus, plant pathology,*

U. C. Riverside, and plant explorer;

³*(1930-1994) plant pathologist and plant explorer.*

Over the five centuries since the first records of what we now know in the English language as the avocado, this fruit has been known by many names in the different languages of those who have used the fruit, from the Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas, to the European invaders of this hemisphere. The late Wilson Popenoe prepared an excellent and comprehensive survey of avocado nomenclature several years ago which this paper uses, with some minor modifications, as follows.

During the early days of avocado growing in the United States, the correct name of this fruit was warmly debated. **Alligator pear** was admitted to be a corruption and a misnomer; **aguacate** had many partisans who claimed it as the Aztec or Nahuatl name, and the only correct one. Others accepted this, but preferred to spell it **ahuacate**. Those who had been in Peru and Chile were accustomed to **palta**. The English name **avocado**, while known to be a corruption of the Aztec name, was finally accepted by most as the one best adapted to the genius of the English language, and at the same time justified by long usage in the West Indies.

Many vernacular names for this fruit are current in tropical America. The region between Mexico and Peru, throughout which the avocado is cultivated, was peopled at the time of the Conquest by numerous tribes or nations, each having its own language. Some of these tribes were closely related to each other, as shown by the similarity of their languages; others were so distinct that no linguistic relationships can be traced. A study of the vernacular nomenclature of this fruit is valuable, not alone because it demonstrates the origin of common names in use at present, but more particularly because it throws light on the early distribution of the tree. It has long been recognized by students of plant geography that the presence of a native or local name for a plant tends to indicate an ancient cultivation in that particular region. While not in itself sufficient to be accepted as establishing the origin or distribution of a species, in connection with other data, such as the presence of wild relatives, it is by no means insignificant.

Mexico was originally peopled by numerous tribes of different linguistic stocks. The Otomi—that is, the group of tribes speaking the Otomi language and its dialects—occupied a large area in the central part of the country, extending from Mexico City northward to San Luis Potosi and including the modern city of Queretaro, one of the principal centers of avocado growing in the republic. The name for this fruit in Otomi is given as **nttzani**. It is doubtful if this is used in many places at the present day.

Westward and southward of the Otomi area, the state of Michoacán is peopled by Indians speaking the Tarascan language. The avocado is known as **cupanda** in this tongue.

In northwestern Mexico, along the Pacific coast as far southward as Acapulco, and from this region across the plateau of Mexico City to the state of Veracruz, languages of the Nahuatlan family are spoken. Aztec or Mexican is one of these, and the principal one, for it was spoken by the people of Tenochtitlan or Mexico City, who dominated a large part of central and southern Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest. In this language the avocado is called **ahuacatl**, a word which possesses particular interest as the origin of most of the names by which the avocado is now known in other countries.

Dictionaries of the Aztec language give two meanings for the word **ahuacatl**; one, "the fruit of *Persea americana*," and the other, "testicle." The name is probably not a derived one, though certain writers have attempted to find its root in "ahuatl," which means "oak tree." In their hieroglyphic writing, the ancient Mexicans represented the avocado tree by means of the figure cuahuatl tree, to which were attached green ellipsoidal fruits which made it stand for "the avocado tree," in place of "tree in general." By substituting other fruits for avocados, the tree-hieroglyphic was made to serve for numerous words. These were used to express the names of places; thus the avocado tree, with the addition of a locative suffix—the "tlan" sign, teeth placed in the trunk—read "Ahuscatlan," the name of at least two towns in ancient Mexico. These sent tribute to Moctezuma, the Aztec emperor, and the hieroglyph representing them was probably devised to render possible the keeping of records concerning the character and quantity of tribute expected. According to Zelia Nuttall, the two towns of this name were Ahuacatlan in the present state of Nayarit, near the Pacific coast, and Ahuacatlan (now called Aguacatan) in northern Guatemala.

Several compound words containing "ahuacatl" exist in the Aztec language. **Ahuacachiauallotl** means "avocado oil," and is formed of "ahuacatl" and "chiauallotl" oil. **Ahuacamulli** is a dish prepared from avocados; it is the correct form of the term **guacamole**, current in Mexico and Cuba, and is derived from "ahuacatl" and "mulli," the latter being a term used by the Aztec to indicate a soft dish or sauce. **Ahuacamilli** is an avocado orchard; it is formed by combining "ahuacatl" and "milli," an orchard or planted field.

Apparently the Aztec did not apply distinguishing names to many forms of the avocado. Early writers, however, mention a few which were current at the time of the Conquest. The **quilahuacatl** ("quiltic," green, plus "ahuacatl") was a green variety; the **tlacocatahuacatl** was another, whose name means, "the harmful ahuacatl" or perhaps "the small harmful ahuacatl." The term **tonalahuate**, said to be applied to the avocado in some parts of Mexico, probably comes from "tonalli" (summer) and "ahuacatl," meaning a summer-ripening variety. The name **pahua**, also used at present in certain parts of the country, but only with reference to forms having large, thick-skinned fruits (Guatemalan race), does not appear in any of the early accounts and may have been applied to this fruit since the Conquest. It is probably the Aztec word "pahuatl," meaning fruit.

East of the region in which languages of the Nahuatlan family are spoken, on the

Atlantic coast at the northern end of Veracruz state, is a small area in which the Totonac language is used. This is believed by most authorities to exhibit affinities with the Mayan linguistic family. Two names for the avocado are reported in this language, one **cucata**, applying only to small thin-skinned fruits (Mexican race), and the other **cucatlizl**, signifying the larger varieties.

The Zapotec tribe, which attained a relatively high state of civilization in pre-Cortesian days, occupies the valley of Oaxaca and most of the state of the same name. There are dialectical differences in the Zapotec language as spoken in different towns and villages which accounts for the fact that the avocado is variously known in this tongue as **yasu**, **yashu**, **ishu**, and **isu**. Adjoining the territory of the Zapotecs in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is a region occupied by tribes of the Zoquean family. Their language, like that of the Zapotecs, exhibits several dialectical differences: at Oluta, Veracruz, the avocado is called **cuytem**; at Texistepec, **cuchem**; and at San Juan Guichicovi, **cuchpa**. The form of Zoquean spoken at the last named place is Mixe.

Throughout Yucatan, most of Tabasco and Chiapas, and the neighboring Republic of Guatemala, languages of the Mayan stock are spoken. During the first ten centuries of the Christian era, the Maya achieved the highest degree of civilization attained in pre-Colombian America. They excelled in arts and sciences, and developed the most elaborate system of hieroglyphic writing in the New World.

In Maya proper, which is spoken in Yucatan, the avocado is called **on**. This is its name also in the dialect of Peten, which differs very little from Maya proper, and in Tzental, Tozolabal, Motozintleca, and Jacalteca.

The Kiche (or Quiche) dialect, second to Maya proper in importance, is spoken in the highlands of Guatemala. The avocado is known as **okh** in this tongue, as it is in the closely allied Cakchikel dialect, and in Tzutuhil, Pokonchi, Pokomam, Aguacateca, Mam, and Uspanteca. In Kekehi, which is spoken in the Alta Verapaz region of northern Guatemala, an important center of avocado culture, it is called **oh**. In Chicomulcelteca it is **ou**, in Choi, **um**, in Chorti and Chontal, **un**, and in Huasteca, **hu**. The last named is spoken far to the north of the principal Maya area, in the vicinity of Tampico, Mexico.

It has not been possible to ascertain the names by which the avocado was known in any of the languages spoken between Guatemala and Costa Rica. In the latter country, most of the dialects are believed to be of the Chibchan family, hence related to the language of the Colombian highlands. In Bribri, one of a group of closely allied dialects which together form the Talamanoa language, the avocado is called **amo**. In Terraba, one of the same group, it is known as **debo-ua**. In Guatuso, a distinct language, yet believed to belong to the Chibchan family, the tree is called **di-kora**. In the Chibcha area proper, which comprised the plain of Bogota, in the central part of Colombia, and certain adjacent regions, the avocado was known as **cura**, a name which was adopted by the Spaniards who settled in that region and which is still used at Bogota, though **aguacate** is the name current on the Colombian littoral and in the lowland regions of the interior.

Unfortunately, early writers do not record names for this fruit in most of the languages of northern South America. Many of these are now extinct or practically so, and it is consequently impossible to obtain the information at firsthand. The only indigenous

name which it has been possible to find south of the Chibcha area in Colombia is that which was used in Peru, and which is said by Garcilaso de la Vega to have been given to this fruit by the Quichuas at the time they conquered southern Ecuador. This is **palta**, originally the name of a small tribe inhabiting the region of Zaraguro in the northern part of Loja Province. It would be interesting to know whether the Paltas took their name from the fruit (which is not unlikely), or whether they knew it under a different name; and the Quichuas first termed it palta, meaning thereby "the fruit of the Paltas."

The names current in European languages have been derived, directly or indirectly, from the Spanish **ahuacate** or **aguacate**. The Portuguese have made of this **abacate**, a name extensively used in Brazil. The German **advogato** and **avocato** are probably adaptations of the English avocado, rather than direct derivatives of "ahuacate." The French generally call the fruit **avocat** or **poire d'avocat**, which means "lawyer's pear." The similarity between some of the corruptions of "ahuacate" and the Spanish word "abogado" meaning advocate or lawyer has led numerous writers to assume falsely that the name of this fruit has something to do with the latter; hence, in attempting to translate the name, such atrocities have arisen as **peral de abogado** (lawyer's pear tree) and the above mentioned **poire d'avocat**.

The numerous corruptions of "ahuacate" which have, at various times and places, crept into the English language and literature, are due in the main to the efforts of travelers to reproduce the name as they had heard it pronounced. The earliest mention of this fruit in English is under the name "alvacatas," in Hakluyts Voyages; more than likely the man who wrote this, Henry Hawkes, spelled the word "ahuacatas," and the "h" was taken by the printer for an "l" and a "v."

In 1655, the British took the island of Jamaica from the Spaniards. Here they found the avocado cultivated under its Spanish name, ahuacate. Since this was not well suited to the genius of the English language, it promptly underwent corruption. In 1657, the form **avocata** was published in the "Book of a Continuation of Foreign Passages." The first appearance of the name **avocado** was in a publication by Sloane in 1696² in which he mentioned the names **avocado** and **alligator pear**. In a more extensive paper in 1725³, Sloane called the tree the "albecate pear tree" and stated incorrectly that the Spanish name is "abocado" or "avocado." The latter name has become the common one in English for this fruit, possibly because it is more euphonious than the other adaptations of original Aztec, Mayan, or Spanish names. Several other corruptions of the Spanish name appeared in English publications during the eighteenth century; **avocato**, and **avigato** are two of them.

The term "alligator" is an extreme, just as **avocado** is a more moderate corruption of the Spanish name, while the addition of the word "pear" is a natural consequence of the fruit's appearance, and in accordance with the custom prevalent in the early days of American colonization, when many products hitherto unknown to the Old World received names at the hands of the European settlers; the terms pear, apple, or plum, with a qualifying word, were applied to many strange fruits thought to suggest in appearance or character those of European gardens and orchards.

A few names exist in English which have no relation to the Spanish **ahuacate**, but none of them has ever enjoyed wide usage. **Subaltern's butter**, **midshipman's butter**, and

marrow were obviously given because of the peculiar character of the fruit; the derivation of **shell pear** and **Spanish pear** is equally patent.

It does not seem desirable to perpetuate typographical errors, such as the spelling "patta" in lieu of "palta," which occurs in Lunan's work. It should be mentioned, however, that the name **ouacate** or **acuaca**, affirmed by several French authors to be of Carib origin and current in the West Indies, is clearly the Spanish name **ahuacate**, not indigenous to the Islands.

Collins¹, in his 1905 bulletin has a section on common names, with a table listing 43 different "popular names for the avocado." Most of the names used by Collins are similar to those noted above with a few minor exceptions.

In connection with our recent collections of species of *Persea* in the search for resistance to *Phytophthora* root rot of avocado^{4,5}, it is interesting to note that in Guatemala many of the common names noted above are still used by natives in the different regions. The Cakchiquel natives (Solola, Chimaltenango, Sacatepequez) use the name oj for avocado; the Mam natives (in Huehuetenango principally) use **on and onte**; the Quiche natives (Quiche) use oj; and the Quekchi natives (Alta Verapaz) use o and **oh**. In modern Chiapas in southern Mexico, the words **tzitzi** and **tzitzito** are used for the avocados of that region.

In relation to modern-day usage of the name **avocado**, let us look at a hotly debated motion considered by the California Avocado Association at their annual meeting on October 23, 1915. At that time in California, an acceptable name for the fruit was still a matter of controversy. In the food trade, the name **alligator pear** was being used extensively, while the avocado growers and enthusiasts debated the merits of various names from the countries of origin, such as **ahuacate** and **aguacate** versus the fairly-widely used English name, **avocado**. Finally, at the 1915 meeting, the Association adopted a motion "...to adopt the name "avocado" instead of "ahuacate." One of the persuasive statements in favor of the motion was made by University of California horticulturist, Dr. Ira J. Condit, who mentioned that the word **avocado** had been largely used in the English language since it was first mentioned by Sloane in 1696.

REFERENCES

1. Collins, E. N. 1905. The avocado, a salad fruit from the tropics. USDA Bulletin 77, 52 pp.
2. Sloane, H. 1725. Natural history of Jamaica. 2:1-133.
3. Sloane, H. 1696. ?
4. Zentmyer, G. A. 1980. *Phytophthora cinnamomi* and the diseases it causes. Monograph 10. American Phytopathological Society, 96 pp.
5. Zentmyer, G. A., and E. Schieber. 1974. Collecting *Persea* from Mexico to Colombia in search for resistance to *Phytophthora* root rot (Abstr.) *Phytopathology* 64:769