

EXPLORING FOR "AGUACATE DE MICO" IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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During the explorations made in recent years of *Persea* species under the University of California (Riverside) program, we have encountered an interesting collection known as "Aguacate de Mico." Botanists who have explored the region of Central America overlooked this interesting wild avocado.

The first scientist to detect an avocado of this kind, meaning in English "Monkey Avocado," in all the countries explored was G. A. Zentmyer. He found "Aguacamico," as it is known in El Salvador, near the edge of the crater of "El Boqueron" volcano in Central El Salvador, in the early 1950's. He then found it in the 1970's in the region of Sta. Maria de Ostuma in Nicaragua, continuing his interest in this wild true avocado. Since then, our explorations made during the last decade have also included searching for additional specimens of "Aguacate de Mico." What may be a special type of "Aguacate de Mico" (with anise scent) was reported in 1935 by Wilson Popenoe; he called it "Aguacate de Anis" of San Isidro (1).

Distribution in Central America

Since its first detection in El Salvador in Central America, we have found populations of "Aguacate de Mico" from the Guatemala-Mexico border south to the volcano Turrialba in Costa Rica. It is found in the warmer regions of the volcanic chain of Central America. Forests located between 2,500 and 4,000 feet above sea level constitute the ecological zone for the wild avocado in all of the countries where it is found. The following centers or populations of trees of "Aguacate de Mico" have been detected in recent years:

1. Guatemala
 - (a) El Tumbador, San Marcos, near the Guatemala-Mexico border, in a coffee region.
 - (b) Colomba, Quetzaltenango, near coffee plantations.
 - (c) Between Santiago Atitlan and Chicacao (cardamom farms).
 - (d) San Lucas Toliman, growing wild along the ridge of an extensive canyon.
 - (e) Slopes of volcano Quetzaltepeque (in warm region about 2,500 feet above sea level).
 - (f) Between the crater of the Quetzaltepeque volcano and the old road to Esquipulas (near Honduras-Guatemala border).

2. El Salvador
 - (a) Slopes of the volcano "El Boqueron" where Zentmyer detected it for the first time in the early 1950's.
 - (b) Northern slopes of the volcano San Salvador, detected with Dr. Benjamin Waite, then of AID in El Salvador.
 - (c) "Los Andes" on the slopes of volcano Sta. Ana in western El Salvador; one of the largest populations found in recent years.

3. Honduras
 - (a) Near Santa Rosa de Copan near the Guatemala-Honduras border, detected recently this year by Schieber.

4. Nicaragua
 - (a) In Santa Maria de Ostuma near Matagalpa, detected there for the first time by Zentmyer in the 1970's.

5. Costa Rica
 - (a) Slopes of the volcano "Turrialba."



Fig. 1. G. A. Zentmyer with inflorescence of Aguacate de Mico. Photographed in Los Andes, Santa Ana volcano in El Salvador.



Fig. 2. Leaf of Aguacate de Mico showing its characteristic shape and venation.



Fig. 3. Tree of Aguacate de Mico photographed in Santa Ana volcano in El Salvador.

Characters of the "Aguacate de Mico"

In all the regions where "Aguacate de Mico" has been detected, one of the primary characters is the very hard-shelled fruit, resembling the primitive variants of the "Guatemalan criollos." These hard-shelled fruits remain hard even when the fruit is ripe. Usually the fruit is round to oblate and with irregular skin dark green in color. The seed is oblate. The foliage of the tree is similar to the Guatemalan criollos; however, the foliage is very dull, not shiny. Individual leaves are dull with no luster. The trunks from a distance have a more whitish appearance than the Guatemalan criollo trees. The branching usually starts high on the trunk, and seldom are branches seen on the lower part of the trunk.



Fig. 4. Fruit of Aguacate de Mico photographed in Santa Maria de Ostuma in Matagalpa region in Nicaragua

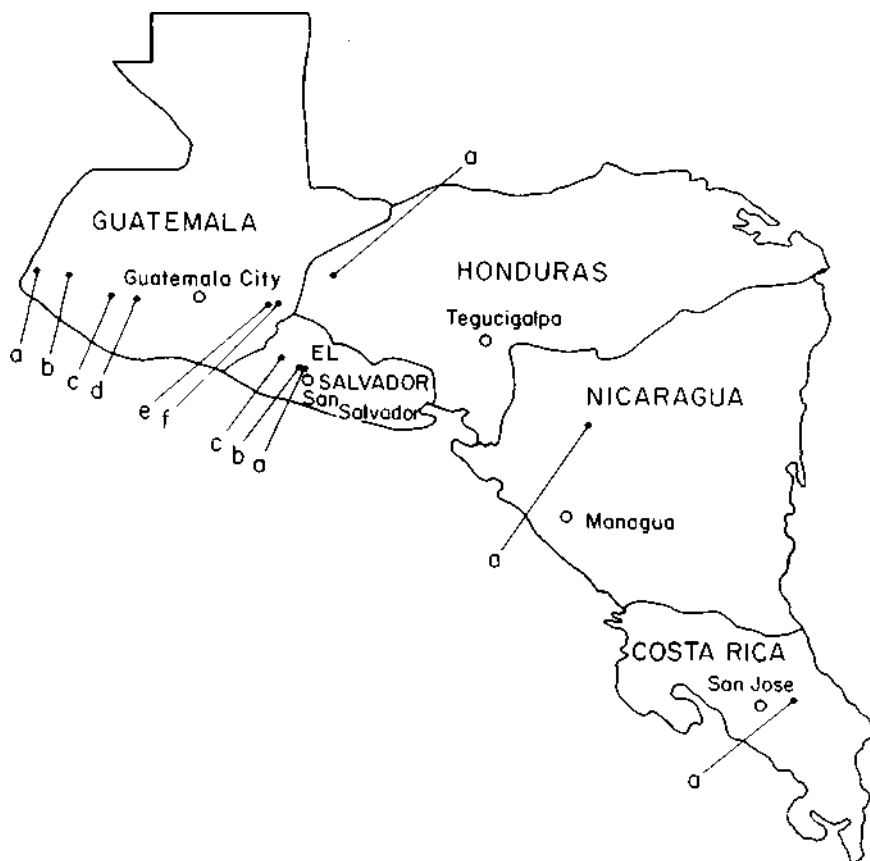


Fig. 5. Locations for collections of Aguacate de Mico in Central America.

Variants within "Aguacate de Mico"

We have detected during our explorations, "variants" within what we classify as "Aguacate de Mico." For example, even within a country, the Aguacate de Mico has smaller fruit in Los Andes, Santa Ana than in El Boqueron, also in the Republic of El Salvador.

Importance of this wild avocado

We believe that "Aguacate de Mico" played an important part in the evolution of the "Guatemalan criollos." The fruit characters are quite similar, although there is generally less flesh in fruit of "Aguacate de Mico" and fruit are smaller than the average Guatemalan criollo. Monkeys and squirrels eat this avocado in Central America; the natives do not eat it because of its bitter taste.

It is of interest, that being so conspicuous and known by "campesinos" throughout Central America, this wild avocado was overlooked by botanists exploring for Persea in this region of the world.

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