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WHAT ABOUT THE MARKET?

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What about the market? I think that is about the commonest question I hear in regard to the avocado, and I hear it from two sides. You opulent rich, who have a few trees are wondering how long you can net a dollar a pound for your fruit; and the common people, who have to worry along with nothing more profitable than banks, gold mines and oil wells to provide the where-with-all, are wondering if the time will ever come when it will be safe to acquire an avocado appetite.

As the members of this association seem to wear the smile of the man who "has his," let us consider the question from the seller's point of view.

It is really startling to make figures on the probable profits from avocado growing. No matter how conservatively you figure, your results will appear far too rosy. A theoretical calculation is pretty sure to look something like this: You are now getting from seventy-five cents to one dollar each for fruit averaging about a pound in weight. Basing our estimate on individual trees, an acre of avocados of the best variety will produce at least ten thousand pounds of fruit in a year. The cost of producing this fruit, after the trees are fully established, is about two cents a pound; leaving a net profit of \$9800 an acre. It sounds like the chicken story doesn't it? Of course, it cannot be proved either true or false because there are no acre groves of full bearing trees of the better varieties, but there are several trees in California, the average annual crops of which reduced to an acre basis, would produce a still more startling estimate.

I will try, therefore, to be as conservative as possible in speaking of the conditions as I actually know them, and I hope you will pardon me if I refer especially to Florida where the growers have already started to market their fruit in the open markets of the north.

Prices of all commodities are regulated by supply and demand. There is at present practically no supply of avocados. There never can be a large supply, for the territory suitable to their culture is very limited. In the United States it is limited by temperature to a small area in California and another in Florida. These two areas combined would hardly equal in size the state of Connecticut. In the countries to the south of us, supply is limited by the happy "go-lucky" characteristic that limits the vision to *mañana*, or at most *pasado mañana*. To put his money and time into something that will produce no returns for several years is not the way of our Latin neighbor. American capital may plant to some extent in Cuba and Porto Rico though I have seen but two small plantings of commercial varieties in the West Indies and I do not know of any others. Lack of rapid transportation will also limit competition from the tropics. I cannot see where any supply can ever come from, that would supply the United States, should the consumption per capita ever reach that of Southern Florida or Cuba.

It is safe to say that the average consumption in Havana is more than a quarter of a pound per day during those seasons when avocados can be bought for less than seven

cents a pound. Should the per capita consumption in America ever reach one-fifth that of Havana it would require 5,000,000 pounds a day or 1,500,000,000 pounds for the three hundred days of each year that our present varieties should cover. This would be the product of 150,000 acres at the rate of 10,000 pounds per acre.

Will the American demand ever equal this one-twentieth of a pound a day? I assure you that it will not at one dollar a pound. I feel sure it will if the supply ever reaches the point where avocados can be bought at ten cents a pound. The avocado taste is no more an acquired one than the taste for potatoes. I imagine Sir Walter Raleigh must have had quite a job convincing the English that potatoes were really good to eat, but there are quite a few of them eaten today; even if you can carry home a dollar's worth in a paper bag.

The taste for tomatoes has but recently been acquired, but the entire acreage in the United States suitable to avocado culture, if solidly planted, would not supply the demand if avocados were eaten as generally as tomatoes.

Miami, Florida, offers perhaps the only example of how the avocado will be accepted by the American people when a supply becomes available. There are a great many seedling trees scattered about in the door yards and in small plantings near town. These fruit ripen in the late summer and early fall. The average price during that season when the fruit is plentiful is about twelve cents a pound. When it drops below this figure the consumption increases and the price quickly swings back to normal. If the crop is light and the price is above twelve cents, the consumption by the laboring classes falls off, but at twelve cents a pound, avocados take a substantial place with other nutritious foods even among the negro laborers; and I would estimate that the average daily consumption in Miami during August and September is fully one-fourth pound per capita.

In October when the seedling crop disappears the price of budded fruit rises and the demand continues from the skilled labor and business classes until the price reaches twenty cents a pound. In November the price reaches twenty-five cents a pound and the consumption is then limited to the more prosperous classes. This would seem to indicate that fifteen cents a pound is about the price at which the avocado can be considered a staple food necessity among the American people. That the price would be a little higher in localities where the avocado is not grown locally is indicated by the demand in New Orleans, Mobile, Key West, Jacksonville, New York and other Gulf and Atlantic ports, where considerable fruit is shipped in during the late summer from the West Indies. South Florida growers are also shipping their second grade fruit to the interior southern towns and the demand in these markets is increasing so rapidly that in some cases cull fruit is bringing a fancy price.

When I first became interested in the avocado, the few Trapp fruit that were being shipped North from Florida, were netting the growers three dollars a dozen or about twenty-five cents a pound. Even the wildest optimist admitted that this price could not continue, but even if it dropped fifty per cent, they would still have a big profit. That was twelve years ago. Instead of dropping, the price for late fruit has advanced until within the past year or so, net returns of fifty cents a pound have occasionally been received. This price is due not so much to the superiority of the budded varieties, but to the fact

that nearly all the seedling Florida and West Indian fruit is then off the market.

The Florida avocados are usually shipped in tomato crates somewhat similar to our orange boxes, but holding only about forty pounds. The fruit is packed in excelsior and is not wrapped, as it was found that paper wrappers tended to the ripening of the fruit in transit. The shipments are made by express without ice and usually reach the Northern markets in good condition. Some fruit is being shipped from Florida to this coast in refrigerator packages and, I believe, netting fair returns.

Regardless of what we may think of the superiority of our California varieties, most of the fruit reaching the large centers of population, are of the West Indian variety, and all shipments of Guatemalans into these markets should contain clear instructions about their ripening. The West Indian ripens from the seed toward the skin, so that when the fruit shows the first sign of softening it is ready to use. The Guatemalan varieties I have eaten, ripen from the skin toward the seed; and after spoiling several fine fruits by cutting them before they were ripe, I have adopted the plan of keeping them until they were fully ripe by West Indian standards, and then wait about three days longer. For this very reason I believe the California avocado will ship better than the West Indian varieties, but unless the Eastern buyer is warned he will try to eat it too green and, of course, condemn it. Even a good Californian of many years residence told me last fall that he had just eaten a Taft avocado and that it was tough and tasteless. He said he knew it was ripe because it was fully as large as the purple fruit he had been getting. When I told him that the Taft when mature should have been several times as large as the one he had eaten and should have weighed a pound or more, he said he did not know any California avocados ever got that large. He had eaten it all and was still living, so I suppose green avocados are not fatal any way.

It is said against the avocado, that it cannot be cooked. To me it would appear to be an advantage that it can be eaten and is at its best without cooking and without processing.

The objection of some that it cannot be canned or preserved except by refrigeration is met by the wide seasonal range of maturity. It is needless to preserve them if we can keep up a constant supply right from the trees.

While it is likely that for many years to come the price of avocados will keep them in the luxury class, I feel sure that should the production • ever become large enough, they will take a firm place with the other nutritious foods and will find a ready sale to the masses at prices several times the cost of production.

That the avocado is really a natural food is evidenced by the fact that it is considerable of a question to protect the fruit on the trees from the depredations of wild animals. The raccoons are specially fond of them and even after a "coon" is caught in a steel trap while after his favored food, he will continue contentedly eating away as long as there is a ripe avocado within his reach, blissfully oblivious to the pain from the sharp steel jaws of the trap.

I have been asked why it is, that since Florida has been producing avocados commercially for a dozen years or more, there are not as many named varieties as there are in California? I answer that by stating that if every individual seedling tree that bears good fruit of a slightly different size or shape or season, had been given the proud

name of its owner, the Florida grower would be deluged with a thousand different names.

As to what variety will ultimately be the most popular on the market, I could not hazard even a guess. The reason the Trapp variety brings a higher price than the seedlings, is not because of its superior flavor, but because it gets into the market when most of the Florida and West Indian seedlings are gone.

Nor would I dare to name a preference for the fruit of any particular type nor from any particular locality, though I can say that the best flavored fruit I have ever eaten was a Fuerte from Mr. Whedon's grove at Yorba Linda. In fairness I must add that there are many of the California named varieties that I have not yet been fortunate enough to sample.