

## Doctor Franceschi on the Avocado

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Dr. Franceschi (with apron) welcomes the University of California Summer Traveling Class in Citriculture (July 1913) at his home in Santa Barbara. The shrub being exhibited is the original Feijoa plant introduced by Dr. Franceschi.

The 1936 Yearbook of the Society contained a little paper entitled "Looking Back." In this I tried to recall some of the incidents and some of the personalities connected with the early days of commercial avocado growing in California. Among the personalities, few stand out more clearly in my memory than Dr. Franceschi of Santa Barbara.

He lived on top of Mission Ridge, and when we plant lovers from the Los Angeles region made our periodic pilgrimages to Santa Barbara—then the Mecca of California plantsmen—he would drive down to meet us at the end of the street car line—the old Mission—and take us up to his home, where his cultured wife entertained us in the most exquisite European fashion. I still remember her salads, and her insistence that we should take a little red wine in our drinking water; "Otherwise, water is very bad for your stomach," she said. Doctor Franceschi knew every tree and shrub of interest in the Santa Barbara area, and in his tiny phaeton, behind his old sorrel horse, we visited and admired them all.

He was a pioneer, plantsman of plantsmen, who tried to make a living out of introducing and distributing new plants, and who probably lost five times as much as he made. California horticulture owes him a great deal. His memory must, and will be, kept green.

In his later years, he took back his family name, Fenzi, and as E. O. Fenzi he died in Tripoli; but I think "Dr. F. Franceschi" (the way he used to sign his letters) will persist in the history of California horticulture. After he retook the name of Fenzi we learned of his

distinguished connections in his native Italy. His nephew Guido Corsini spent some time at Santa Barbara, where he lived with the Franceschis in apparently impoverished simplicity. But when my brother Paul visited Florence in 1911, and started out to search for Guido, he came up against a marble palace, the magnificence of which rather startled him. Still it was the address Dr. Franceschi had given, so Paul timidly rang the bell. It was opened by a butler in livery. "Can you tell me where Guido Corsini lives?" "Yes," replied the butler, "the Marquis is in."

Doctor Franceschi knew a great deal about the history of exotic plants in California, and in 1895 published a little book entitled "Santa Barbara Exotic Flora" which was scarce and difficult to obtain even in my time (1905-1912). I mentioned this in "Looking Back", and now that I have access to a copy, I think it worth while to place on record in the Yearbook the Doctor's notes on avocados, which are as follows:

"The introduction of the **Ahuacate** or **Alligator Pear** (*Persea gratissima*) is due to the late Judge Ord, who brought a few plants from Mexico about 1870. Two of them are still growing quite vigorously, one of them near the residence of Mrs. Judge Ord, De la Vina street, and the other at Montecito, planted out by Mr. Silas Bond in the grounds at present owned by Mr. E. H. Sawyer, of which mention has been and will be made several times in these notes, because of so many remarkable specimens existing there, whose introduction is to be credited to the enthusiastic zeal of Mr. Bond. In connection with that it is worth recording that most of the plants he was able to obtain through the cooperation of the late Dr. Kellogg, of San Francisco, who did so much towards the investigation and illustration of our native flora. The Ahuacate at Montecito has been bearing for several years, sometimes as many as five hundred fruits in one year, attaining a large size and perfect maturity. Its brother in town blooms profusely every year (it is actually loaded with blossoms now) but for some unaccountable reason, it never sets many fruits, and these usually drop off when the size of a cherry. I have been told, however, that once a few fruits attained maturity, but were not larger than a walnut, and that none of the seeds germinated. On the other hand, there is a large plant of Ahuacate in the grounds of Mr. K. Stevens in Montecito some twelve years old, which has never bloomed, while I know of seedlings having flowered when hardly two years old. Where seedlings of Ahuacate have been raised in large number, a wide range of variation has been noted in size and shape of leaves, and the same is reasonably to be expected concerning age and feracity of bearing, size, and comparative merit of fruits. It will only be through more extensive planting of seedlings that some superior variety may be brought to light, which then could be easily propagated by budding or grafting, on its own stock, and perhaps, too, on our native laurel (*Umbellularia californica*), which could also impart to it more hardiness. It is highly desirable that the Ahuacate may become a regular inmate of our orchards, as it is relished by everybody, and, besides the local market, it would find ready sale in the east. During 1894 the average price on the New York market has been from three to four dollars a dozen, such fruits being shipped there from the West Indies. Nor is there much fear of the market being glutted, the zone where such tree can be profitably grown being rather limited altogether in California."

It will be observed that Dr. Franceschi gave preference to the name and orthography **ahuacate**, and if I recall correctly, he was one of the leading backers of the movement to change the name of the California Avocado Association to California Ahuacate

Association, shortly after its organization. Other, and perhaps more practical, men felt that it would be difficult to market fruit in the East under the name **ahuacate**; and there was grave danger that **alligator pear** would become generally accepted by the trade. Anything would be preferable to that—it was argued—so the name was switched back to avocado and has so remained.