California Avocado Society 1952 Yearbook 37: 147-150

MOSTLY ABOUT SPAIN

Wilson Popenoe
Director, Escuela Agricola Panamericana, Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

After a trip to Spain, North Africa, Sicily, and Italy, J. Henry Burke of the Office of Foreign Agricultural Relations, U. S. Department of Agriculture, wrote a letter to George B. Hodgkin which was published in the I950 Yearbook of the California Avocado Society. In this letter Mr. Burke says:

"In Spain, I traveled extensively in the citrus area, particularly in the southern regions, from Castellon to Murcia, 125 miles to the south. While the climatic conditions of this district are very favorable to avocados, I did not see a single avocado tree during my stay in this section of Spain. I also visited the bitter orange districts in the vicinity of Sevilla, and I have been told that there is some small avocado production in this area. However, I did not see a single tree during my visit, so any plantings that exist must be on a very small scale."

After having made a trip around the world (1912-13) without having touched Europe, I decided it was about time to have a look at things—especially Spain, which has played so important a part in the history of tropical America. Taking advantage of the opportunity to attend the Thirteenth International Horticultural Congress in London, I talked Mrs. Popenoe into the idea and we flew by the southern route—so we could hereafter say "Oh, ves, we have been in Africa" (one hour in Dakar) and we landed in Lisbon, Portugal, early in July. A lovely city, with a lovely little botanical garden where 1 found an avocado tree, too small and too crowded among other sorts of trees to do very much. Following a lifelong custom I immediately pulled off a leaf, crushed it, smelled it, and found that it was of the Mexican race.

This is all I have to report about avocados in Portugal. We traveled by car northward into Galicia (Spain) without seeing any more—but such gardens, such pretty little homes! Those people love plants, and they know how to grow them. In Lisbon they have what they call the Estufa Fria—a gigantic lath house, perhaps two acres in extent, beautifully landscaped inside and full of semi-tropical decorative plants. It is the finest thing of its kind I have ever seen.

After going through northern Spain and Madrid we hurried down to Andalusia—the major objective in Europe so far as I was concerned. What a country! Miles and miles of olive groves—those people must bathe in olive oil. And vineyards and almonds and finally, down near the Mediterranean, oranges. Plenty of pomegranates, too, and Japanese persimmons in several places—though not in orchard form. But of course what I wanted to see was an avocado tree.

When we got close to Malaga, and saw in several valleys which opened out on the Mediterranean small orchards of cherimoyas (of which more anon) 1 said to myself: "Of

course these folks can grow avocados, if they can grow cherimoyas; why don't they do it?" But we went back to Madrid without seeing a single one.

I called on the people in the Ministry of Agriculture. "Why don't you grow avocados? Let me send you some nice young grafted trees from Honduras." "We can't use them," was the reply; "Our people do not like avocados, with the exception of an occasional Spaniard who has been in tropical America."

"Are there any avocado trees in Spain?" I asked. "Yes, there are a few down near Malaga, at a little place called Torrox."

That was enough for me. We boarded the Granada express (after having been to London and talked tropical fruits with colleagues from all over the tropical world) and then we hunted up Jose with his 1936 Chevrolet (he said it really wasn't as old as the date indicated, for it was laid up for six years during the civil war) and we headed back to the Mediterranean.

As we approached the region of Torrox, we began to inquire. I let Mrs. Popenoe do all the inquiring. She learned her Spanish years ago in Madrid and I had become tired of hearing the local gentry say: "We can understand your wife all right because she is a Spaniard, but we can't understand a darn word *you* say." A chap by the roadside, wearing a big brass badge, said he knew what an aguacate was, and there were two trees at a ranch house right up the Rio Seco. The Rio Seco was seco all right, so we drove up the stream bed to the ranch, ignoring the protestations of José who thought it might not be too good for the Chevrolet. We got by the dogs and approached the house. Two fine avocado trees, maybe 25 years old, right by the kitchen, "We sent all the fruit down to the market in Malaga only last week," explained the caretaker, "but maybe we can find one or two still on the trees."

We found several; they were small Mexicans, with large seeds as usual —but they were avocados. We were thrilled. We told them how good avocados are for your liver; that they ought to plant more of them, and they said "Sure." That was that.

We asked if they knew of any more trees in the neighborhood. They said they knew of one, half a mile down the road toward Malaga. We went after it. When we finally located the house and found the owner, he said he knew the tree—it was right over there in the front yard. It turned out to be a white sapote *(Casimiroa tetrmeria,* not the species commonly grown in California) and we admired it and told him that white sapotes are wonder ful soporifics, and we wrote down the Latin name and went away, leaving him properly impressed.

That evening we rolled into Malaga—after having blown the dirt out of the Chevrolet gas line several times—and put up at a little hotel. And how good those little hotels are in Spain, and how cheap! We never had to pay more than $2.50 per diem, and this included all the food you could eat. And the people everywhere so friendly and helpful that if you dared ask a traffic cop to recommend a nice little hotel, just as likely as not he would stop all traffic, jump on the running board, and take you to one, two blocks awav.

Early in the morning Mrs. Popenoe went over to the market, and came back breathless ten minutes later. "Come with me quick!" I went, and there were two baskets of the avocados we had seen the day before—from the same trees without a doubt. But they

were well past the edible stage, though the girl who sold them to us did not seem to know that. There was also a basket of avocados which they said came from near Valencia; and these were hard-shelled Guatemalans, about as big as baseballs, with seeds only a trifle smaller. They too were completely overripe, but they proved that somebody in Spain had brought in the Guatemalan race.

These overripe avocados reminded me of an experience in London. 1 saw plenty of Fuertes in the shops there, shipped from South Africa, and thought it would be a nice thing to buy a few for some friends who had been in Honduras. So I went in and asked the price—the equivalent of about 40 cents each. "Give me two," I said. The merchant brought out a couple which would have been in fine condition about ten days previously. "These are overripe," I said, "they are no good." "That's the way we always sell them," he replied. "You won't develop a demand for avocados very fast," 1 countered. "Say, what do you know about avocados anyway?" he asked. By this time I was getting ready to tell him a few things. But I didn't. I lust said, "If I had one pound sterling for every avocado of this variety which I have grafted in my long and dissipated career, brother, I wouldn't be stopping at second-class hotels any more."

But let us return to Spain. There is nothing more to say about avocados, for we saw no more; and I doubt that there are two dozen trees along the whole Mediterranean coast—though I hope I am wrong. We covered the region from Valencia down to Gibraltar, and we worked back and forth across the interior of Andalusia twice.

The other fruit I want to talk about is the cherimoya. From Granada it is not far down to Motril on the Mediterranean, and from Motril you go west to Malaga. The town of Almunecar lies on the beach, between these two, and stretching inland from the town are cherimoya groves. The cultivation of this fruit is a real industry here—and in a few other valleys. I think we saw more than 50 acres in the valley of Almunecar alone. In the patio of an inn, right on the edge of town, the people were packing cherimoyas (this was in early October) to send to Sevilla and Granada and even to Madrid. They sorted them and put them in baskets holding slightly less than a bushel—no packing material used. The fruits were not large—few would weigh more than a pound.

We went out to look at the orchards. Well kept, the trees beautifully green, and more important than that, carrying, on the average, larger crops of fruit than I have commonly seen either in California or tropical America. This fact impressed me greatly. Of course I cannot explain it, on the basis of a hasty visit. But it would be worth investigating.

I walked through one orchard with the owner. "How do you propagate your trees?" I asked him. "By grafting, of course," he replied. This surprised me greatly; I did not expect it. To lead him on, I asked, "Why do you have to graft them?" "Don't you know," he replied, "that is the only way we can perpetuate a superior seedling?"

I cut a sucker from one of the trees, made a T-incision, and stuck in a bud. "Is this the way?" I asked. His ever, fairly stuck out. "Why of course," he replied, "How did you know?"

So there you have it—a thriving little cherimoya industry in southern Spain, but practically no avocados, in spite of the fact that climate and soil appear to be eminently suitable. Some day the Spaniards will learn to eat avocados, but then we will start

sending them budwood of a lot of interesting varieties.