

## AVOCADO GROWING IN CHILE

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It is not known when avocados were introduced into Chile, but we must assume that the Spaniards, who sailed up and down the Pacific coast of South America, brought the first seeds from Mexico some 300 years ago. These seeds have found favorable conditions, especially in the lower part of the Aconcagua Valley around the towns of Quillota and La Cruz, not far from the port of Valparaiso, where a climate similar to Ventura and Santa Barbara counties exists. However, avocados also have been grown in the valleys farther north and in many protected places south of Santiago.

The avocado has always been a popular fruit in Chile and has always been sold for good prices. Originally all trees were grown from seeds, but around the beginning of this century grafting was introduced, and each grower started to give preference to the best type he could find in his orchard. Until about 1935 only the thin-skinned Mexican varieties were grown, among which exists the dark-skinned and the green-skinned varieties, but the dark-skinned are favored for a very simple reason. They cannot be picked until they turn dark on the tree, and a customer who buys a black avocado always knows that it has been picked at the proper time. This is not the case with the green-skinned varieties, and therefore they have always been looked upon with a certain suspicion.

In Chile avocados are called *Paltas*, an Indian word whose origin is not well known. Around 1935 the first Guatemalan varieties were introduced into Chile and since they were imported from California, they were called "Palta Californiana" in contrast to the Mexican type, which is called "Palta Chilena." The latter has been grown in Chile for such a long time, that its foreign origin almost has been forgotten.

Introduction of the new varieties started with the ones which were propagated in California and, during the years that followed, more than 20 varieties were introduced, starting with Nabal, Queen, Mayapan, Fuerte, Mexicola, Carlsbad, Ryan and many others. Years of experimenting with these varieties followed and today the favorites are Fuerte and Hass, together with a remarkable amount of Ryan, Mexicola, Edranol and Carlsbad. However, the thin-skinned Mexican varieties are still grown, and sell as well, and during their main season from late summer to early winter they almost dominate the market.

It has been found that the very large-sized fruit like Nabal and Queen do not sell as well as the medium-sized varieties like the Fuerte. Although they catch the eye, people do not want to buy avocados weighing a pound or more. It seems that this has been the experience in all countries where avocados are grown.

Lately a new and promising variety has been found and called the "Black La Cruz." since it has been found in the place called La Cruz. It is a black-skinned variety with the size and shape of the Fuerte, and it shows a very vigorous growth and takes very easily

when top grafted on other varieties. Bearing habits seem to be good and consistent, and the quality of this smooth-skinned variety is as good as Fuerte. It is a winter-ripening fruit and can be picked during the winter about two months ahead of Fuerte. This makes it a convenient variety to fill the gap between the end of the Hass season and the beginning of the Fuerte. We do not know how this variety has originated, but it seems to be a hybrid of a Mexican and a Guatemalan variety. Of the latter it resembles most the Leucadia.

The avocado industry in Chile is still growing, since prices are favorable and sale is easy, so each year new groves are planted. In a country where there is a lack of abundant food production the avocado is a very convenient fruit, because it makes it possible to produce a great amount of calories per acre. The avocado growers of Chile never have spent money for advertising because their fruit has been known and liked in their country since ancient times. It is certain that better sales organizations would increase consumption still more, but up to now the producers have not been forced to take such steps.

Avocados are selected in the orchards, packed in transport boxes and sent by truck to the towns, mostly to the capital, Santiago. There the wholesalers sell the fruit to the retailers in small quantities. We have no big retail organizations, but thousands of small fruit shops and street sellers. It might seem that this creates a fierce competition with low prices, but it turns out that these retailers, because of their great number, have a very small turnover and must make a living of this. So the difference between what the producer gets and what the consumer pays is mostly 100% or more.

Frost protection with heaters and wind-machines is not used in Chile, and avocado growing is not recommended in places with severe frost hazards. The acreage dedicated to avocados is smaller than in California, and we consider it to be about one-fifth of its size. However, we must keep in mind that, with a population of only seven millions, this means that the per head consumption of avocados in Chile is far greater than in the United States. Good avocado land is not so abundant as in California, but in the good avocado districts production per acre is a good or even better than in California. This seems to be due to climatic conditions. Avocado root rot has been found in Chile by Dr. George Zentmyer but, when care is taken against excess of moisture, it has not been a severe problem, and no great damage has been suffered as in some parts of California. This fact still presents a riddle to us, because nobody ever takes any precautions against the propagation of root rot.

Many people related to avocado growing in California have visited Chilean groves, and in the 1959 Yearbook of the California Avocado Society we find a very detailed article about avocado growing in Chile by Robert W. Hogson, who visited this country in 1958.

Although avocados have been grown here long before they were introduced into California, modern avocado growing in Chile owes much to California. New varieties and modern growing methods have been brought from there. Today there are many first class avocado groves in Chile but also many old-fashioned ones, and much can be done to improve the latter. But, considering the popularity of this fruit, there is no doubt that production shall increase greatly and a great part of the existing groves have not fully come into production yet.