

A Visit to Chile

February 6-18, 1988

Kurt P. Pidduck

Mr. Pidduck is a grower of avocados and citrus in Ventura County, California.

My first impressions of Chile as our LAN Chile 747 descended into Santiago were of brown hills and dusty roads, very similar to the back roads of California in August, except that those giant Andes mountains in the hazy distance off to the east were certainly out of place. It was if a row of Mt. Whitneys were lined up to greet us! Since this was my first trip to South America, I was not entirely sure what to expect. Any trepidations I may have had, however, were quickly put to rest.

Upon arrival, one is immediately impressed by the many similarities between Chile and California: the mountains, the soil, and the climate. Certainly, these characteristics are not identical to those of California; but the similarities are so strong that one really feels quite quickly at home. So many times during the next week, this similarity to California would come back to me as I stood in a dusty field shaded from the hot sun by a friendly eucalyptus tree.

Chile is located at the same longitude as Boston, but at very nearly the same latitude (albeit south) of Los Angeles. With its long length, Chile extends from south to north a distance equal to that from the tip of Baja California to above Juneau, Alaska, and it has all the climatic differences that we see here between those two points. The Lake District of southern Chile is renowned for its fishing and mountain inns, while in the northern Atacama desert it has not rained in four hundred years of recorded history!

Because Chile is so narrow (often only 150 miles), most locations have some coastal influence. In the Aconcaqua Valley, two hours to the northwest of Santiago, there is a pronounced coastal influence. The valley opens onto a large alluvial plain which is one of the older citrus and avocado growing regions. The properties are small on the average (40 acres), and when planted to trees, contain a mixture of citrus and avocados. The citrus is a mixture of lemons and oranges. Most of the avocados were Mexican varieties similar to our old Topa Topa. When replacing trees, the obvious choice is Hass, and young interplants of this variety are quite a common sight in older blocks. It was very interesting to see the number of cherimoyas that are grown. For them, this is obviously a regular alternative to avocados and not an experimental crop.

By preference, the Chileans do not consume many oranges; but they make up for it by using a great number of lemons. At every meal one sees on the table a dish of sliced lemon. It is used liberally on salads (they don't care for vinegar), as well as on all meat. Naturally, it is used heavily with seafood; and there is plenty of that fresh from the Pacific Ocean. And then there is Pisco Sour, the national drink, which is made from whole lemons (including the peel!), a little sugar, and distilled wine. It is very good, but

does pack a wallop if you are not ready for it!

Contacts in this area (Quillota) told me that many growers have pulled out their lemons in recent years due to poor returns and some had replaced them with avocados. The current choice for replanting is kiwi, however, as it is in all the regions of Chile that I visited. The citrus groves I visited were not in good condition. The trees varied greatly in vigor, and many were obviously diseased. On the lemon trees, fruit varied greatly in size and color, and was not of good exterior quality. Little pruning was done beyond that necessary to control overall size of the tree. Cultural practices varied, but were essentially old fashioned and always very labor intensive. There is some use of herbicides, but weed control in general does not have a high priority. Since all irrigation is from open ditches which are frequently overgrown with weeds, the battle against weeds and grass is never-ending and does not receive a high priority. These grove conditions were also typical of the majority of avocado plantings that I observed.

I did see some blocks of younger avocados (Hass I was told) that had good color and vigor. They had a good crop and generally appeared quite equivalent to trees that one would see here in California. I was told by one grower whose grove I visited that he actually preferred his lemons to his avocados. The lemons could be best described as "scruffy," while I thought his avocados looked quite good. His primary objective seemed to be cash flow, however; and because he could pick his lemons several times during the year, while his avocados only once, he preferred the lemons. I don't know how prevalent this attitude was, but I certainly did not see any new plantings of avocados, nor did I feel that there was an active conversion (citrus to avocados) program underway.

Also near Quillota, I visited the California Nursery that is owned by a German company and run by a German woman. I was told that it enjoys the best reputation in Chile and is one of the largest. It was a very impressive operation with nearly ten acres under plastic mesh sun shade. It was built on cement terraces up a gradual hill slope with a permanent plastic irrigation system that was very well executed. Each plastic sleeve growing container was serviced by a spaghetti tube connected to a PVC pipe lateral. Truly quite impressive by any standards. I was interested to find that fully three-fourths of the plants were kiwi, and I was told that they were all sold! The balance were citrus, ornamentals, and minor subtropical fruits. I saw no avocados and was told that there was no current interest in planting them.

South of Santiago, I visited another avocado growing area near Peumo that was quite similar to our interior valleys along the South Coast. The plantings in this region were made up again of a mixture of what appeared to be Mexican varieties, with young Hass trees interplanted where older trees had been removed. There did appear to be a program of general interplanting underway, with the new Hass in the three to five-year age category. It was not unusual to see avocados interplanted with nectarines or peaches. I was told again that this was done for reasons of cash flow.

In both of the avocado-growing areas I visited, I saw no plantings of avocado trees that would indicate a major effort directed toward export. While traveling in Chile, one frequently sees, and I visited several, young plantations of deciduous fruits (apples, nectarines, cherries) of 500 to 1000 acres. These plantings are very well organized; and

from the looks of the buildings, fences, and infrastructure, were quite well capitalized. They compare very favorably to similar plantings that one would see in the San Joaquin Valley.

The only obvious shortcoming of these new developments would be the lack of good roads, both on and off the farm, to transport the volumes of fruit that will be produced by these new plantings. These new plantings are obviously being made with the export market in mind, with Europe and the U.S. as their major targets. Chile is definitely still a third-world country and frequently has higher priorities than building a fancy network of smooth highways, but one can not help but believe that the problem of quality control and prevention of damage to fresh fruit that has a long trip to market would certainly be aided by a little more attention to the details of material handling back at the farm. I was frequently amazed at the rough and dusty conditions to which they were subjecting those beautiful big nectarines!

During much of my time in Chile, I was guided by Gabriel Bravo, the National Sales Manager for Petoseed Chile. Petoseed is a major international grower of vegetable seeds and has a growing farm and trial grounds located outside Santiago. Like all of the Petoseed employees, Gabriel was most hospitable, as were all the Chileans that I was fortunate enough to meet.

Rufino Ortega Arcauz is a former classmate of Gabriel's, and was most helpful to me. I visited Mr. Ortega's office in the market district of Santiago, where he is a wholesale broker of primarily deciduous fruit. He does, however, handle the avocados and citrus of his family's farm near Peumo. He was most hospitable and went with us from Santiago to Peumo, where he took me on a tour of his farm. This was a real pleasure, and made me feel that I was visiting California of fifty years past! The family farm is an old Spanish style hacienda in a grove of immense old avocado trees. The front yard was a well manicured lawn edged with roses. Standing just outside the yard, tied to an avocado tree, was the horse of Pepe Ortega, Rufino's brother who is the farm manager.

The Ortega farm was a victim, as were many others, of the flooding that occurred in each of the past two winters when Chile had one-hundred year rainfalls. Chile has an abundance of water and many swift and fast flowing rivers; but because of the steep drop from the Andes to the Pacific, it has few good reservoir sites. As a result, water management is a continuing problem. There is often too much water, and then during the late summer, there may not be enough where it is needed. They surely do not suffer from shortages, but rather from an inadequate distribution system. In none of the avocado groves that I visited was drip or even sprinkler irrigation utilized. Since they were using ditch water and did not have wells or pumps, the use of sprinklers was regarded as too expensive.

Another very charming and hospitable host was Florencio Lazo Barra, president of the Federacion de Productores de Frutas de Chile. I met Mr. Lazo and visited his farm and packing shed in Quinta Tilcoco near Rancagua, which is located south of Santiago. Mr. Lazo is a very progressive grower of grapes and deciduous fruits. He raises peaches, nectarines, seedless grapes, and melons, and is experimenting with feijoas as well. The organization of which he is president is a national organization of producers of all types of fruits.

As a result of my visit and observations, albeit most unscientific, my conclusion is that we will continue to see avocados arriving from Chile when we have shortages and the price is sufficiently high to attract them into our markets; but we will not see a major effort made to penetrate our market, or see the type of continued presence that would be necessary to establish a loyal customer base here in the United States.

Perhaps Chilean avocados will become attractive to American handlers who will want to use them to supplement California avocados for continued development of foreign markets. The dramatic volume fluctuations our industry has experienced in the past few years does make development of overseas markets difficult. Without a regular supply that will allow shippers to guarantee delivery, it will continue to be difficult to build demand. The Japanese are very interested in Chile, and several incidents were related to me that demonstrated the interest of Japanese importers in Chilean fruit. Perhaps it would be more advantageous for California growers to view the Chilean grower as a potential partner in the world export market, rather than as a potential competitor in the U.S. domestic market.