

AN EARLY ACCOUNT OF THE AVOCADO

Wilson Popenoe

The avocado first commenced to receive serious and widespread attention at the hands of North American horticulturists about the year 1900. In Florida, the first orchards of budded trees were planted about 1901 or 1902, while it was not until 1910 or 1911, if I remember correctly, that budded trees were available in California.

Interest in the avocado did not stop at the planting of orchards. The history of this fruit, its distribution, and its botanical relationships have been objects of investigation.

In his bulletin, "The Avocado: A Salad Fruit From the Tropics," published at Washington in 1905, G. N. Collins says:

"What appears to be the earliest reference to the avocado is found in Oviedo's report to Charles V of Spain in the year 1526," and he goes on to translate the account, which is probably the most comprehensive and interesting so far found among the writings of the early voyagers.

Lately, while reading Sir Clements Markham's work, "The Conquest of New Granada," published at New York in 1912, I have come upon a reference to the avocado which, though not so extensive in its description, issued from the press seven years before Oviedo's account. It is in the work of Martin Fernandez de Enciso, regarding whom a few words may not be out of place.

It seems, from the facts I have been able to glean, that Enciso was intimately connected with some of the great events of the discovery and conquest of America, though his name is not usually associated with those best known to us. He was an educated man—a Bachelor of Arts, doubtlessly something of a rarity among the rugged and venturesome crowd which came out to complete the work commenced by the great Columbus.

In 1509 he was in Santo Domingo. When he sailed from there for the mainland of South America, Vasco Nunez de Balboa, future discoverer of the Pacific—at that time embarrassed by debts and unable to leave the town openly—was smuggled on board his vessel in a barrel of "victuals for the voyage." Later, it seems, Enciso was indirectly the cause of Balboa's discovering the Western sea, for he complained to the Spanish king of Balboa's behavior in Panama and the latter felt himself obliged to attempt some great enterprise which he hoped would conciliate his sovereign. He succeeded, as all the world knows, but his success was only temporary, for the redoubtable Pedrarias Davila, sent out to supersede him as governor of Panama, shortly had him beheaded on a trumped-up charge.

It was while on a voyage along the South American coast with this same Pedrarias

Davila that Encisco—"El Bachiller," "the Bachelor of Arts," he was called by his comrades—records having seen the avocado. The account appears in his *Suma de Geografia*, published at Seville in 1519—a work credited by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as being "the first Spanish book which gave an account of America."

But to return to the voyage with Pedrarias. "The presence of Enciso," writes Sir Clements Markham, "gives lustre to the expedition. He was a cartographer, a good observer, and had the gift of lucid description of the coast . . . After leaving Cabo de la Vela, he mentions Yaharo, a good port, with fertile lands on the skirts of the snowy mountains. Among the other edible fruits, Enciso here first became acquainted with what we call the alligator (avocado) pear. He describes the inside as like butter, "with such a wonderful flavor and taste so good and pleasant that it is wonderful."

Reading the above, I was, of course, possessed with a desire to see Enciso's original text. I found it and reproduce it below. The port of Yaharo does not appear on any modern map which I have been able to examine, but it lay a short distance eastward from Santa Marta, Colombia, which I visited in 1920 when hunting avocados, and where I found avocado trees growing abundantly in the mountains in a wild or semi-wild condition.

Here is the account:

"Antes de llegar a Santa Marta esta Yaharo que es en las caidas de las sierras nevadas. Yaharo es buen puerto y buena tierra y aqui ay heredades de arboles de muchas frutas de comer ye entre otras ay una que parece naranja, y cuando esta sazónada para comer vuelvase amarilla; lo que tiene de dentro es como manteca y es de maravillosa sabor y deja el gusto tan bueno y tan blando yue es cosa maravillosa. Las sierras nevadas comienzan en Santa Marta y en par de Yaharo es lo mas alto . . . "

Translated rather literally, this reads:

"Before arriving at Santa Marta you reach Yaharo, which lies on the slopes of the snowy mountains. Yaharo is a good port and the soil is fertile, and here are orchards of many edible fruits, and among others one which looks like an orange, and when it is ready for eating it becomes yellow, the inside of it is like butter and of marvelous flavor and so good and pleasant to the taste that it is a wonderful thing. The snowy mountains rise at Santa Marta, and their highest point is reached above Yaharo . . . "