

An Early Illustration of the Avocado

H. J. Webber

Citrus Experiment Station, Riverside

As an addition to the very excellent article by Mr. Wilson Popenoe on the "Early History of the Avocado," published in the 1934 yearbook of the California Avocado Association, the following note relative to an early illustration of the avocado will be of interest.

A description of the avocado with an illustration is given in Samuel Champlain's "narrative of a voyage to the West Indies and Mexico in the year 1599-1602, with maps and illustrations." Translated from the original and unpublished manuscript with a biographical notice and notes by Alice Wilmore, edited by Norton Shaw and published by the Hakluyt Society, London, 1859¹.

During Champlain's voyage described in this translation of his manuscript, he visited Porto Rico, Haiti, Cuba and various of the West Indies Islands and then went to Mexico and journeyed from Vera Cruz to Mexico City. On page 22 of the Hakluyt Society's translation, there is the following statement:

"Making the journey to Mechique (Mexico City), I admired the fine forests, filled with the most beautiful trees that one could wish to see, such as palms, cedars, laurel, orange and lemon trees², palmistes, gouiave (guavas), accoiates³ (avocados), good Bresil (Brazil wood) and Campesche wood, which are all trees common to the country."

Again on page 28 of the Hakluyt Society's translation, there is the following statement:

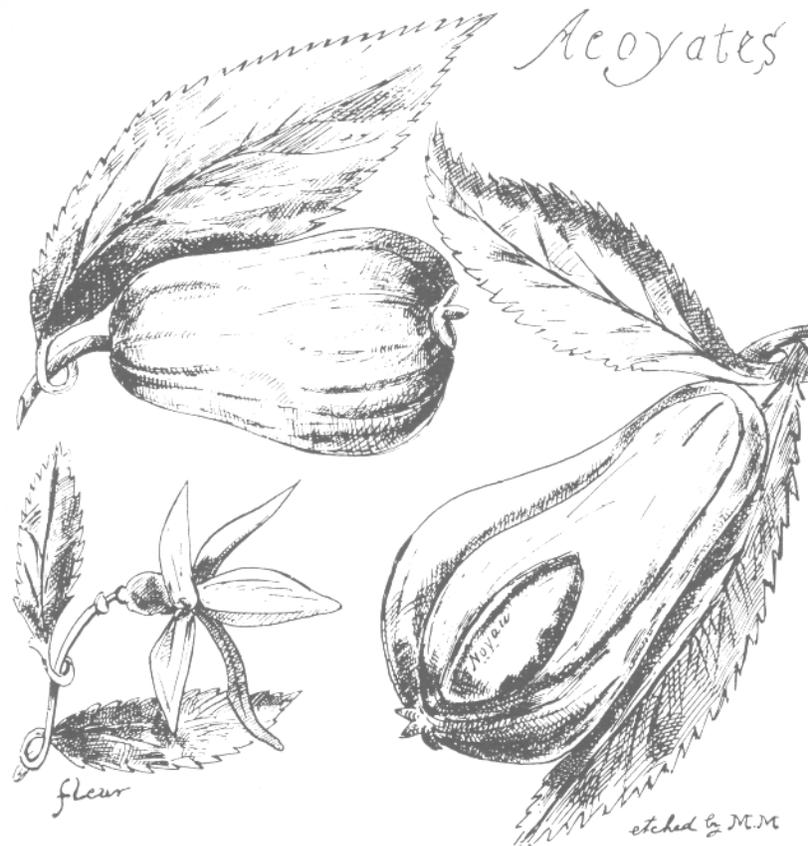
"There is also another fruit, called Accoiates³ [³ "Ahuacahuit" native name by corruption "Aguacat," by the Spaniards "Avorat," "Avogade" and "Avocat"] of the size of large winter pears, very green outside, and when the skin is taken off, a very thick flesh is found, which is eaten with salt and has the taste of kernels of green walnuts; there is a stone in it the size of a walnut, of which the inside is bitter. The tree (branch) on which grows the said fruit is here figured, together with the fruit." (See Fig. 1.)

This illustration will be recognized by avocado growers as similar in shape and seed-form to the avocado, but the leaf and flower are quite different. Further, the fruit is figured here as "inferior," that is with the calyx adhering to the ovary and the segments of the calyx showing at the apex of the fruit like the apple or guava, while the avocado has a "superior" fruit. The flower certainly is not like the avocado, but is rather similar to that of the guava. The leaves, while similar in shape to some avocados, are more like the guava, but are more deeply serrate than any guava known to the writer and very different from any avocado.

It seems clear that Champlain's sketch was made from memory when he wrote up his manuscript, probably on the long sea voyage back to Europe after the completion of his journey. He probably mixed in memory the character of the avocado and guava in

particular, so that his sketch represents a memory hybrid.

SKETCH OF AVOCADO MADE BY CHAMPLAIN
ABOUT 1600 A. D.



That he specially observed and was interested in the guava is attested by the quotation given above from page 22, and also by the following quotation from page 28 of the Hakluyt translation:

"I have spoken of the tree which is called the **Gouivae** which grows very common in this country and bears a fruit also called **Gouivae**, of the size of an apple of **Capendu** (an apple variety of Normandy) of a yellow color and the inside like that of green figs; the juice is pretty good.

"This fruit has the property that if a person should have a flux of the belly and should eat of the said fruit, without the skin, he would be cured in two hours; and on the contrary if a man be constipated, and eat the skin only, without the inside of the fruit, it would incontinently loosen his bowels, without need of other medicines."

It will be remembered that Champlain, a Frenchman, a few years later became

identified with the exploration and settlement of Canada by the French. He made his first voyage to Canada in 1603, founded Quebec in 1608, and became the first governor of French Canada. His memory is endeared to Americans through the beautiful lake which bears his name—Lake Champlain.

¹Champlain's original manuscript entitled "Bref discours des choses plus remarquables que Samuel Champlain de Brouage a recogues aux Indes Occidentales" is in the library at Dieppe, France. It was not published in French until 1870 although the English translation was printed by the Hakluyt Society in 1859.

²The earliest known account of the introduction of citrus into the main land of America in the vicinity of Mexico is that of Benal, Dias del Castillo, who describes having planted orange seeds near an "Idol house" while with the Grijalva Expedition, sometime between July 12-20, 1518. Citrus had thus by the time of Champlain's journey become widely disseminated.

³Note different spelling on illustration, Fig. 1.