

## **FROM PIGS TO RICHES**

### **Dwight and Mildred Poole**

What is thought to be the oldest Fuerte avocado tree in the world, and is often referred to as the 'Daddy' of the Fuerte avocado industry, still stands in Yorba Linda, a small village located in the northeast corner of Orange County in California. The historical destiny of this tree seems to have been controlled solely by the hand of Fate, or as some might say, by Lady Luck.

The green pear-shaped fruit that we in the United States call avocado, is of the genus *Persea* of the Laurel family and is known by many names. Most Spanish-speaking countries call the fruit 'aguacate,' but in Brazil it becomes 'abacate.' These are simple sound substitutions for the Aztec name 'ahuacatl.'

The name 'alligator pear' probably originated in Jamaica and is a combination of sound substitution for 'ahuacatl' and a description of the pear-like shape of some varieties.

The name 'midshipman's butter' was given to the fruit by seamen who sailed on whaling ships carrying cargo throughout the islands of the South Seas and the Northern Pacific. They used the fruit as a substitute for butter.

The first documented proof of avocados being used as food dates back to the early sixteenth century. In 1519, when General Cortez led his army into Tenochtitlan, now known as Mexico City, he was a guest of the Aztec ruler, Montezuma II. At a banquet in his honor, he was served his first avocado. He enjoyed this strange fruit so much that he sent seeds to the royal family of Spain and the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is possible that these seeds never grew to fruit-bearing trees, because unbudded and ungrafted trees are not always productive.

That same year, Martin Fernandez de Enciso published a description of avocados in his *Suma de Geografia* for the Europeans. He discovered the fruit in Columbia while coasting along its shores on one of his Spanish expeditions to the mainland. They were not introduced into the United States until 1858 when avocado seeds were planted on the Henry Dalton ranch in Azusa, and not grown commercially until 1900 when some grafted varieties were planted in Florida.

Horticulturally, the Fuerte is a hybrid cross of the Mexican and Guatemalan races. The former confined largely to Mexico, the Guatemalan, originating in the highlands of Central America, and the West Indian in the Caribbean. Growth of the latter is limited, at least in the United States, to the Southern part of Florida. Fray Bernabe Cobo makes mention of these racial designations about the middle of the 17th century.

A few years after the Florida plantings, in 1911, Carl Schmidt, acting for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, discovered a seedling tree growing in the back yard of a

Senor Blanco in Atlixco, Mexico. The tree was so sturdy and produced abundant fruit of such superior quality that Blanco had given it the favored designation of 'Avocado de Chino,' after the excellent silk imported from China. His enthusiasm about the fruit prompted Schmidt to send buds back to the West India Gardens in California, near Altadena, for propagation and experimentation.



It was the very next year that J. T. 'Grandpa' Whedon, a resident of Yorba Linda, decided to stop being a pig farmer and to start raising avocados. He had been raising pigs to supplement his pension after he retired as superintendent of the Ohio Street Railway. He sold his pigs and purchased five acres of virgin land, just northwest of the village, before he ever tasted an avocado.

His wife, knowing that he knew nothing about growing avocados, and especially because he didn't bother to ask her opinion about his plans, was very upset. Fact is, she became so upset that she refused to move to the ranch with him, and continued to maintain a separate residence.

Wife or no wife, Grandpa Wedon wasn't about to change his plans. He went over to the West India Gardens and ordered 40 avocado trees. The trees that he ordered were of the type that he had read something about, and that he had heard the ranchers talk about down at the hardware store. These did not include Senor Blanco's 'Avocado de

Chino.'

He was to pick up his trees the following spring.

Fate, as usual, was up to her little tricks. In January the coldest winter ever to hit California descended upon the citrus area. Temperatures dropped to as low as 12 degrees above zero. Every tree in the nursery froze, everything, that is, except the little trees that had been started from the Atlixco's Avocado de Chino. This prompted F. O. Popenoe, who was in charge of the nursery, to name them 'Fuerte,' meaning hardy.

The following March, Grandpa Whedon hitched his old white horse to the buckboard and drove to the nursery to bring his trees home with him. When he arrived, he was told that all of the trees that he had ordered, and paid for, had been killed in the freeze.

When he demanded his money back, Popenoe was forced to tell him that his money was only part of the over \$100,000 that the nursery had lost during the freeze, and that there was no money to return. He offered the would-be orchard grower the little "Fuertes."

Finally, although Grandpa Whedon had no faith in these un-tried scrawny little trees, he realized that he either had to take them or go home empty-handed. This, his pride would not let him do.

Thus, the beginning of the world's first Fuerte avocado orchard!

When the trees began to bear fruit, he received standing orders from hotels in Los Angeles and San Francisco for all the avocados that he could deliver. They were willing to pay as much as \$12 a dozen, and the yield from one of his trees was as many as 4,000 avocados.

Word about the hardiness of the trees and their ability to withstand the cold, quickly spread among the California avocado growers. Ranchers throughout the entire citrus area began demanding buds from the Fuerte trees.

Another major freeze in 1922 killed out more and more of the fruit trees in the citrus area, causing demands for buds from the Fuerte avocado trees to sky-rocket. Some years, he realized as much as \$6,000 from buds alone.

The trees that the man who knew nothing about growing avocados had been so reluctant to accept, and the ranch that caused a lasting rift between him and his wife, made the retired railway conductor and ex-pig farmer well-to-do.

American growers made a pilgrimage to Atlixco in 1938 and placed a bronze plaque to mark the 'Mother' tree. She was still bearing fruit. California Fuertes which owed their existence to the original buds from Senor Blanco's seedling were later planted by grateful growers in various parts of Mexico, including trees started in the backyard of the Mexican Governor's mansion on Chapultepec Hill.

When the 'Mother' tree died, a cut made through her trunk revealed that she had lived for 60 years.

In 1948, approximately 300 California growers visited the spot where she had stood, and planted one of her descendants, a California-grown Fuerte. The Mexican Government has declared the spot a national monument.

The most prolific, and assumed to be the first of the original 40 trees that Grandpa Whedon planted on his five Yorba Linda acres, wears a metal necklace on one of its sprawling branches. A tag attached to the necklace reads, "Whedon #1."

The tree stands stalwart and tall, its branches outstretched toward its descendants. Its chair-like trunk, large enough to seat two men, extends upward of 40 feet into the sky. Its branches cover a spread in excess of 50 feet.

There are still fruit to be found hidden behind its dark green foliage, but hotels are no longer willing to pay \$1 for an avocado, and the 'Daddy' of the Fuertes has gone into semi-retirement. It yields fewer fruit than in its heyday, but it has survived its only known ancestor, the tree that bore the 'Avocado de Chino.'

## **MATERIAL SOURCE**

"Encyclopedia Britannica," 1958 edition.

Newspaper clippings from the "Santa Ana Register," dated 1948, 1951, and 1958.

Interviews with the late Mrs. Cecil Tuffree, former owner of the avocado ranch; Frank L. Anderson, formerly in charge of the ranch and now living in Placentia, California; and George Kellogg, veteran grower of Yorba Linda, California.