

An Appraisal of Gwen and Whitsell

David Freistadt

President, Calavo Growers of California:

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A Contribution to a Panel Discussion

In the United States, anyone has the right to grow anything that a person wants to grow, illegal crops excepted, of course.

However, this does not give a person the right to expect that someone must buy all — or even some — of what is grown.

We have seen this recently within our own avocado industry to the frustration and severe financial loss of many growers. We now are seeing it in much of our country's farming — in wheat, corn, oats, almonds, and many commodities, both staples and specialties.

Over and over now, we are told by economists: you must be market oriented, not production oriented. Find out what the market wants first, then produce it, and in the quantities the market will take on a basis that is profitable to the grower. We have seen the farmer grow more and more on less and less, but this has not solved his problem. It has worsened it.

Calavo was organized by avocado growers — 104 of them — in 1924 for a basic and single purpose: to *market* avocados for its growers.

That remains our basic and overriding purpose today.

Therefore, my appraisal of the Gwen and the Whitsell — or any new variety — must begin with its marketability. Unfortunately, we presently have no real criteria or experience by which to make this most important appraisal. There has been no opportunity to put them to the test, for there has been no volume available for this purpose.

And herein lies a fundamental flaw within our industry. Too often, a new variety is developed that has favorable characteristics — usually relating to yield, weather tolerances, appearance, flavor, and related characteristics — but all essentially at the grove, not after precooling and packing and trucking and warehousing and shelf-sitting and finally cutting by a homemaker 2,500 miles and two to three weeks removed from the grove.

Too often, unfortunately, hundreds or thousands of trees of such a variety are sold and planted and four to six years old in terms of water, fertilizer, and similar investments of time, money, and effort *before anyone really finds out about the variety's marketability*. And, in some cases, before finding out if the marketing "window" for which it has been

developed now has been slammed shut.

Consider the Jim, the Zutano, the Bacon, the Pinkerton, the Santana, and the Susan as a few possible examples.

To appraise a variety's marketability — and thus its likely long-term worth — here are some basic considerations.

Today's measuring stick has to be the Hass. Not because I say so, but because of its obvious track record of producing customer preference — at retail or food service — and satisfaction, and thus producing more dollars for the grower.

I would say that each new variety must be as good as the Hass, if not preferably better, not just at the grove end but at the user end where we have the only judge of what will, or will not, sell: the homemaker.

Can we expect some reasonably standard shapes and sizes, as opposed to packing and sales problems such as extreme neckiness...?

How does the avocado hold up as to cooling, handling, and packing?

How does it ship? Can we be sure of good arrival — including flavor, ripening, and appearance — after a trip to Fresno... or Chicago... or Paris... or Japan?

How about its shelf life?

Does the variety pose special consumer educational problems? For example, the industry has spent millions of dollars in an attempt to teach consumers that the Hass avocado turns dark — even black — as it reaches edibility. If we suddenly begin to market an avocado resembling the Hass but never turning dark, will our educated consumers let the avocado rot as they await its darkening as they have finally been taught? Or how much we will need to spend to re-educate without confusing?

I can't answer these questions in behalf of the Gwen or the Whitsell. I don't believe anyone here can, either.

Therein lies our challenge, if the expert economists are right. We must look toward genuine market research *before* we convince too many growers to go out and plant a market unknown.

Again, anyone has the right to grow anything that a person desires. No one has the right to expect that someone will buy any of it, or all of it.

It behooves us to take as good a look as we can at the market end.