

THE SOUTH AFRICAN AVOCADO INDUSTRY IN 1996

Lindsay Milne

Merensky Technological Services Westfalia Estate, P.O. Box 14, Duiwelskloof 0835, South Africa

The run-up to the 1996 season started in the same way as it had for the past four years: drought and intense heat. Heavyhearted growers waited in vain for the much needed rain. And then, in January (what we would regard as midsummer) the rains started—in earnest! Heavy downpours occurred for nearly three months, often accompanied by severe wind and hail.

Much to our joy, we saw streams starting to flow again and our irrigation dams filling to overflowing. We would never regret this welcome relief; but in the dry years we had forgotten the words of wisdom of the fruit-physiologists: "When trees flush heavily shortly after fruit set, you can expect essential elements such as calcium to be withdrawn from the fruit, leading to physiologically sensitive fruit."

Sure enough, not only was the crop relatively small, due to being set in the drought, but the fruit that remained after the wind and hail damage were extremely sensitive to cold storage. By sea, we are some 24-28 days away from our main markets in Europe. This means a very long cold storage period with temperatures ranging from 7.5°-3.5°C, depending on fruit maturity, etc. During the dry years we felt confident that we had developed the perfect cold-chain. However, with this ultra-sensitive fruit, physiological disorders such as internal grey-pulp and pulp-spot, and even external cold injury, were often seen in Europe.

One solution was the use of integral controlled atmosphere (CA) containers which were found to greatly reduce the occurrence of these disorders.

The size of the export crop was disappointing, reaching only 7 million 4kg cartons, considerably down on the 9.5 million of 1994. An interesting development was an expansion of the local market in South Africa using 'ready-to-eat' export quality fruit. This appears to hold considerable potential for the future. Quite a volume of fruit was also late-hung in order to benefit from better prices on the local markets late in the season. The remarkable recovery in tree condition bodes well for future seasons, when we expect to see significant production increases. Unfortunately, a cold snap in spring did not allow us to reach our full potential for the 1997 season.

The South African Avocado Growers' Association (SAAGA) continues to represent 90% or more of our growers. Various committees handle the affairs of the association. These include a Temperature Committee, coordinating the export cold chain; a Research Committee, with various subcommittees dealing with Horticulture, Plant Pathology, etc.; an Exporters' Committee which coordinates export volumes; a Marketing Committee; and, of course, the SAAGA Board that determines overall policy.

The year 1996 saw the first serious SAAGA promotion campaign of South African avocados in the United Kingdom for many years. This investment of US \$ 500,000 was seen as the start in a series of campaigns designed to promote avocado sales in Britain and ultimately the whole EU.

A recent census carried out by SAAGA showed that 10,800 ha are planted to avocados in South Africa. On an *area* basis, this is represented by 47% Fuerte, 31% Hass, 10% Ryan, and the balance in 'Others'. However, for the first time, of the 1.9 million *trees* Hass at 38% tops Fuerte at 37%.

The Annual Research Symposium held in March 1996 yielded some very interesting results, all of which have been published in the SAAGA Yearbook, Volume 19. Of the 37 papers presented there were included papers on boron deficiency, selection of rootstocks for resistance to *Phytophthora*, the benefits of mulching on Hass fruit size, the effect of various storage temperature regimes on fruit quality, the natural occurrence of insect pollinators in avocado orchards, and the influence of tree and fruit manipulation on tree physiology.

SAAGA was unfortunate to lose its executive director, Colin Partridge, during the course of the year. He has joined a fruit-exporting company in New Zealand. However, he is replaced by a dynamic newcomer, Chris Keevy, who took over in January 1997.

We were fortunate, during the course of the year to have visits from our California friends Hank Brokaw, Len Francis, and Mary Lu Arpaia.

We look forward to meeting many friends again at the next World Avocado Congress in Mexico in 1999.