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EARLY HISTORY OF THE AVOCADO

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CONQUISTADORES

The first Europeans (excluding the possible early Norse voyages to northern North America) set foot on the mainland of tropical America in 1499. The early voyagers and colonists, searching for food to supplement their rations from Spain, soon made the acquaintance of the numerous fruits and vegetables indigenous in this hemisphere and at that time unknown in the Old World. One of these was the avocado.

The first published record of what we now know as the avocado is in the report of Martin Fernandez de Enciso, who observed in 1519 that this fruit was commonly grown in the vicinity of Santa Marta, Colombia. Enciso's description occurs in the first book published after the discovery of the New World, **Suma de Geografia**, published in Seville, Spain, in 1519. Enciso accompanied the great navigator and cartographer, Juan de la Cosa, in the first extensive exploration of the New World. He described the avocado that he saw in one of the small harbors at the foot of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta:

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

Wilson Popenoe translated some of Enciso's report as follows:

Before reaching Santa Marta is Yaharo, which lies at the foot of the snow mountains. Yaharo is a good port, with good lands and here are groves of many different sorts of edible fruits, among others is one which looks like an orange, and when it is ready for eating it turns yellowish; that which it contains is like butter and is of marvelous flavor, so good and pleasing to the palate that it is a marvelous thing.

When Martin Fernandez de Enciso wrote these lines he did not know that he was announcing to the Old World the discovery of a fruit which four centuries later would become the basis of an extensive horticultural industry in Florida and California. Indeed, when he wrote them Florida and California themselves were undiscovered to Europeans, who had only then commenced the exploration of the new continent. Seven years passed, and another of the conquistadores described in print this new fruit. Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, who had spent much time at the Spanish court, came to America in 1514. After wide travel and observation, he returned to Spain and published

in 1526 his **Sumario de la Natural Historia de las Indias**, a brief account prepared at the request of the king, who was desirous of knowing as much as possible about the wonders of the New World.

On the mainland, [wrote Oviedo] are certain trees called pear trees, but they are not like those of Spain, though held in no less esteem; rather is their fruit of such a nature that they have many advantages over our pears. They are large trees, with broad leaves similar to those of the laurel, but larger and more green. They bear pears weighing a pound and even more, though some weigh less, and the color and shape is that of true pears, and the rind somewhat thicker, but softer, and in the center of the fruit is a seed like a peeled chestnut...and between this and the rind is the part which is eaten, which is abundant, and is a paste very similar to butter and very good eating and of good taste, and such that those who have these fruits guard them and esteem them highly and the trees are wild as are the others which I have mentioned, for the chief gardener is God, and the Indians apply no work whatever to them. These pears are excellent when eaten with cheese, and they are gathered before they are ripe, and stored, and when treated thus they ripen perfectly for eating but after they have reached this stage they spoil quickly if allowed to stand.

Like Enciso, Oviedo had seen this tree in northern South America (Tierra Firme, it was then called), though some years later he published a more extensive work in which he mentioned having observed it in Nicaragua as well, where the avocado was cultivated by the Indians. None of the early accounts mentions the avocado as growing in the West Indies. Though botanists of the last century generally considered the tree indigenous to the islands, reference to the early accounts clearly shows this not to have been the case—as was pointed out by G. N. Collins in his bulletin, **The Avocado, a Salad Fruit from the Tropics**, published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1905. Incidentally, this bulletin laid the groundwork of modern avocado culture, and still ranks as one of the most interesting documents in the literature of this fruit tree. Eliminating, then, the West Indies, what was the distribution of the avocado at the time of the Conquest?

Twenty-four years after Oviedo published his **Sumario**, Pedro de Cieza de Leon completed the writing of his **Travels**, covering the period between 1532 and 1550 and providing one of the most valuable as well as the most interesting contemporaneous accounts of the Conquest. Cieza de Leon noted the occurrence of the avocado in several countries. He first mentions the avocado, under the name "aguacate," as one of the fruits "belonging to the country" in Panama. Then he cites it as abundant in northern Columbia, not far south of the Isthmus in a region now little known, then in the vicinity of Arma, and also at the Spanish settlements of Cartago and Cali in the great Cauca valley of western Colombia. Both in the Cauca valley and at Arma, Cieza de Leon speaks of the fruit as "palta" instead of "aguacate" (this is the earliest reference to either of these words in print, as far as we can determine). It should not be inferred, however, that the fruit was known by the Quechua name, "palta," at either location in pre-Columbian days. The Spaniards were apparently familiar with both the Aztec and Quechua names for avocado.

In the region of Puerto Viejo, on the Ecuadorian littoral, Cieza de Leon found avocados abundant, as in Columbia; and finally, in describing the numerous small valleys that open onto the coast of Peru, he stated that there are to be found in them, along with several other fruits, "great quantities" of paltas. He did not record the tree anywhere in the highlands of Peru, even though he traveled extensively in that region. The impression given by Cieza de Leon's work is that at the time of the Conquest the avocado was one of several fruits commonly grown by the Indians of northern and western Colombia, the Ecuadorian littoral, and the small valleys of the Peruvian coast.

Francisco Cervantes Salazar seems to have been the first to chronicle the presence of this fruit in Mexico. Yet he did not describe it. His book, **Mexico en 1554**, lists it among fruits which were sold in the market of Tenochtitlan (the name by which Mexico City was known in those days). Not many years later—some time previous to 1569; the exact date seems to be uncertain—Fray Bernardino wrote his **Historia de las Cosas de Nueva Espana**, in which he described several kinds of avocados, using the Aztec name "aoacatl" (more commonly spelled "ahuacatl" by subsequent writers; corrupted by the Spaniards to "ahuacate" and "aguacate"). One of his varieties went under the somewhat staggering designation of "tlacocataoacatl."

An English merchant, by name Hawkes, whose travels in Mexico were published by Hakluyt in 1589, mentioned having seen this fruit, which with the usual clumsiness of the early writers in spelling plant names foreign to their tongues, he called "alvacata." As far as I have been able to ascertain, this was the first mention of the avocado in an English publication.

In 1590, Father Joseph de Acosta published a work in which he differentiated between the small, thin skinned Mexican avocados, and the larger, thick skinned ones of South America. Yet he did not use the name "aguacate," calling the Mexican forms instead by the Peruvian name "palta." Father de Acosta gives a succinct account of the avocado, translated as follows:

The Paltas, on the other hand, are hot and delicate. The Palto is a large tree, well-formed, with a good head of foliage, and its fruit has the shape of large pears within it has a rather large stone—the rest is soft flesh, and when fully ripe it is like butter, and of delicate and buttery taste. In Peru the paltas are large, and have a thick rind which can be removed entirely. In Mexico they are small, as a rule, and have a thin skin which may be peeled like that of an apple. They consider it a wholesome food, and one that is inclined to be hot, as I have said.

This brings us down to the end of the sixteenth century, and we have clear evidence that the Spanish conquistadores found the avocado cultivated from Mexico to Peru. That remarkable man, Garcilaso de la Vega, son of one of Pizarro's warriors and an Inca princess, makes it equally clear, however, that it was not grown in Peru many years before the advent of the Europeans. In his **Royal Commentaries of the Incas**, published in 1605, Garcilaso recounts the deeds of his ancestors, the rulers of Peru; among other things, he says that "Tupac Inca Yupanqui marched to the province of Cahari, and on the road he conquered another (province) called Palta, whence they brought to the warm valley near Cuzco the wholesome and delicious fruit called Palta."

Here, then, we learn the origin of this name, from the province of Palta, as well as the approximate time the tree reached Peru from the territory which is now Ecuador; for it is known that Tupac Yupanqui's conquest of the northern provinces took place sometime about 1450-1475.

Less clear is the extent to which the tree had spread eastward from the Andean region. There is much evidence to indicate that it was not known in Brazil before the Conquest. We are warranted in believing that it was grown in the valleys of the Venezuelan Andes, where, as in Colombia, the vernacular name "cura" was current.

Though the avocado has not, to the present day, been grown extensively in Europe—due, in large part, to the fact that none but the hardiest varieties will tolerate the cold climate of even the most protected nooks on the warm Mediterranean coast of Spain, France, and Italy—we have record of its early introduction into the Old World from the New. Clusius, in his **Rariorum Plantarum Historia**, published at Antwerp in 1601, gives a fairly complete botanical description of the tree, based upon specimens grown in a garden at Valencia, Spain. Both from his statements, and from our present knowledge of the climatic requirements of the several horticultural races, we can be fairly safe in assuming that this particular avocado was of Mexican origin. Clusius states that the owner told him the common name in the Indies was "mamay," but that later he learned from the erudite Simon de Tovar (who also had one of the trees in his garden) that its correct name is "aguacate."

Fifty-five years ago, when avocado growing first began to attract serious attention in California and Florida, horticulturists found that the seedling forms growing in these regions, as well as in the American tropics, could conveniently be divided into three groups or races, based upon fairly well defined characteristics of tree and fruit. The kind most abundant in Florida and the West Indies was first termed the West Indian-South American type. Later this was simplified to West Indian. The other two, less commonly grown in Florida but to all practical purposes the only ones known in California, were called the Guatemalan and Mexican types—or to use the term which ultimately met with general acceptance, races. North American horticulturists, in adopting this classification of cultivated avocados, thought they were developing something new.

Let us turn, therefore, to the work of Fray Bernabe Cobo and see how greatly mistaken we were. In his **Historia del Nueva Mundo**, which was written in 1653, Cobo says:

The palta is a tree of very attractive appearance, shapely, the size of a large fig tree, symmetrically branched and moderately spreading; its leaf is similar to that of the mulberry, a trifle larger, and its fruit is one of the finest in the Indies; in fact, many give it the palm, placing it ahead of all others. It is spindle-shaped and commonly the size of an average quince; in some regions it becomes as big as a small squash or large citron, the varieties of the province of Uycatan in New Spain (Mexico) being of this class. The palta has a thin skin, more tender and flexible than that of a Ceuta lemon, green externally, and when the fruit is quite ripe, peeling readily. It has the largest seed that I have ever seen in any fruit, either in the Indies or Europe....Between the seed and the rind is the meat, slightly thicker than one's finger except at the neck where it is very thick. It is of whitish green color, tender, buttery, and very soft. Some people eat it with sugar

and salt, others just as it comes from the tree, it being of such good flavor that it requires no seasoning....

There are three different kinds of Paltas. The second kind is a large, round one which is produced in the province of Guatemala, and which does not have as smooth skin as the first. The third is a small Palta found in Mexico, which in size, color, and form resembles a Breva fig; some are round and others elongated, and the skin is as thin and smooth as that of a plum....The name Palta is current in the language of Peru. In the major portion of the Indies the fruit is called aguacate...which is the name given to it by the Indians of Hispaniola.

Father Cobo was mistaken in the origin of the name "aguacate," which is Mexican and not West Indian. With this exception, the account is accurate, and particularly valuable in recording that the existence of three horticultural groups of avocados (now termed the West Indian, Mexican, and Guatemalan) was recognized over 300 years ago.

None of the early accounts of explorations and of occurrence of various native plants mentions the avocado as growing in the West Indies. Some of the botanists in the 19th century considered the tree indigenous to the islands, but reference to the early accounts clearly shows that this was not the case. Collins points this out also in his bulletin on the avocado.

In the year 1655, the British took possession of Jamaica, an island which up to that time had been in the hands of the Spaniards, who had, at an early date, established settlements there. The avocado had been brought over from the mainland, and had found a congenial home on the island.

In 1657, there was published at London a curious little work entitled **A Book of the Continuation of Foreign Passages**. Under the heading, "A Brief Description of the Island of Jamaica," mention is made of "Avocatas, a wholesome, pleasant fruit; in season in August, and sold for eight pence per piece." The high price (for those times) suggests that the fruit was still something of a rarity.

This, then, is the first statement which has been found in British literature regarding the occurrence of the avocado in the West Indies. A few years later (1660), the poet Cowley extolled the virtues of this fruit (he called it "aguacata"), but his verse adds nothing to our knowledge of its history or distribution. It was not until 1672 (unless we have overlooked some obscure account) that an extensive description appeared in our language. This was contained in a classical work by W. Hughes, entitled **The American Physitian**, and is of sufficient interest to warrant our reprinting it here. It is as follows:

OF THE SPANISH PEAR

This is a reasonable high and well-spread tree, whose leaves are smooth, and of a pale green colour; the Fruit is of the fashion of a Fig, but very smooth on the outside, and as big in bulk as a Slipper-Pear; of a brown colour, having a stone in the middle as big as an Apricock, but round, hard and smooth; the outer paring or rinde is, as it were, a kind of a shell, almost like an Acorn-shell, but not altogether so tough; yet the middle substance (I mean between the

stone and the pairing, or outer crusty rinde) is very soft and tender, almost as soft as the pulp of a Pippin nut over-roasted....

USE

I think it to be one of the most rare and most pleasant Fruits of that Island; it nourisheth and strengtheneth the body, corroborating the vital spirits, and procuring lust exceedingly; the Pulp being taken out and macerated in some convenient thing, and eaten with a little Vinegar and Pepper or several other ways, is very delicious meat.

It seems strange that Hughes did not hear it "called by any other name than the 'Spanish Pear,' or by some the 'Shell Pear'," in view of the fact that **The Book of the Continuation of Foreign Passages**, fifteen years earlier, had used a common name of Spanish origin, while Sir Hans Sloane, twenty-four years later, reported several.

It is to Sloane, indeed, that we must look for the first record of the name now generally accepted—"avocado." This distinguished naturalist published in 1696 a catalogue of the plants of Jamaica, among which he listed, but did not describe, this tree. He referred to many previous accounts, and made the observation [in Latin]: "The Avocado or Allegator Pear-Tree. It grows in gardens and fields throughout Jamaica." Some thirty years later, in 1725, he published an extensive work entitled **A Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, St. Christophers, and Jamaica** in which was included a natural history of the last-named island. One chapter was devoted to "The Albecato Pear-Tree; Spanish, Abacado, or Avocado. ..."

Several years ago, Wilson Popenoe prepared a concise summary listing of references to the avocado in literature down to the end of the seventeenth century. It is reproduced, with a few minor modifications, on the following pages.