

AVOCADO OIL, THE CINDERELLA OF THE AVOCADO INDUSTRY?

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The use of avocado oil as a cosmetic medium dates from the days of the Aztec, Inca and Maya Beauties in South America, where the fruit pulp was applied as a face mask, in a similar manner as the modern woman uses mudpacks. Today the oil from the fruit pulp is still used in the form of an additive in cosmetics such as face creams, hand lotions and bath oils by the fairer sex. With the advancement of science some of the chemical constituents of this remarkable oil are today utilized in the synthesis of certain pharmaceutical products, and thereby enlarging its field of application as well as its value.

A conservative estimate of the world demand for this oil extends to some 250—300 tons per annum. Not a vast mass by world standards of other oil consumption, but in terms of fresh fruit it still represents a fair mass of around 3 000 tons of fruit.

There are two main methods of extraction of this oil from the flesh of the fruit. The older method being a mechanized extraction. The more recent development is a solvent extraction process similar to that employed in the recovery of wheat germ oil.

At Letaba Co-op an improved mechanical method developed by the Food Technology Institute of the CSIR is employed which takes advantage of the difference in density of the oil from water and it is separated by centrifugal force. Mature undergrade avocados are ripened in ripening rooms and are mechanically deseeded and skinned.

The fine pulp mass obtained is subjected to a curing process before being heated and pumped in a diluted form through an automatic self-cleaning centrifuge. The crude oil emulsion is then cycled through a special "polishing" centrifuge, which removes most of the remaining fine solid materials as well as all the residual water. This oil is then pumped through a plate filter, and the end product is a transparent brown/green oil known as "crude avocado oil".

There are further refinements that can be made to this crude oil such as decolorizing and deodorizing, which means the removal of the "solid fats" from the oil, but the major buyers of the oil prefer to purchase crude avocado oil and do further refinement themselves. Such a refined oil is as clear and odorless as water.

What does this all mean to the avocado grower? For one, obviously an outlet for undergrade fruit which after all cost as much to produce as the export fruit. As oil production rises, a means of controlling the peak season's overproduction to the local markets and thereby stabilizing the local market prices. By producing a high grade oil, the Co-op managed to obtain a good return for the grower's factory grade fruit. In order to produce the 40 tons of crude oil last season 400 tons of low grade avocados were

siphoned from the local markets. This has far reaching effects on the prices realized locally.