

Early history of the avocado during the time of the Conquistadores

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SYNOPSIS

Soon after the discovery of the Americas, the Spanish Conquistadores discovered the avocado as an unusual, savoury fruit in northern South America, Central America and Mexico in the early 1500s. From Fernandez de Enciso's first report of this new fruit in Colombia in 1519, many Spanish publications and later, in the 17th century, English ones described and lauded the avocado.

From these beginnings over 400 years ago, the avocado, an-indigenous fruit to the Americas, has been introduced into many countries with suitable climates around the world and a sizeable avocado industry has developed.

Before the Spanish conquest of the Americas in the 16th century, the avocado was known only to the native inhabitants of Latin America - the indigenous peoples of Mexico, Central America and northern South America. The Spanish Conquistadores discovered numerous different and unusual fruits and vegetables indigenous to the Americas, among which the avocado. They soon published their findings and transported fruit and seeds back to the Old World (primarily to Spain).

The first published record of what is now known as the avodado, is in the report of Spanish Conquistador Martin Fernandez de Enciso, who observed this fruit in 1519 as commonly grown near Santa Marta, Colombia. When he wrote the report, Enciso did not know that he was announcing to the Old World the discovery of a fruit which, 400 years later, would become the basis of an extensive horticultural industry in many countries. Seven years later another Spaniard, Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, published his 'Sumario de la Natural Historia de la Indias', in which he gave a more complete description of "... certain trees called pear trees, but not like those of Spain ... they have many advantages over our pears ...". Oviedo also saw these trees along the north coast of Colombia.

The Spanish name, Aguacate, was first used by Pedro de Cieza de Leon in a journal of his travels written in 1550; he noted that at that time the avocado grew in Panama, Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru. The first mention of the avocado as growing in Mexico, was made by Francisco Cervantes Salazar in 1554. He listed the avocado among fruits sold in the market of Tenochtitlan - the name for Mexico City at that time.

The first mention of the avocado in an English publication was made by an English merchant named Hawkes; his travels in Mexico were published in 1589. Hawkes called this fruit the alvacata, apparently a modification of the Spanish aguacate.

Over 300 years ago the first description of the three groups or races of the avocado was given by Fray Bernardo Cobo. In his 'Historia de Nuevo Mundo' Cobo described in 1653 the thin-skinned palto with large fruit (today known as the West Indian type), the large round fruit from Guatemala and the small palto from Mexico with thin, smooth skin. Early in this century, horticulturists in California and Florida began to use the names West Indian, Guatemalan and Mexican for the three races of avocado, not realising that these terms had been used 300 years earlier by Cobo.

The name West Indian for one of the races of avocado is a misnomer, as this type of avocado did not originate in the West Indies, but was brought to the islands from the mainland, probably from either coastal Mexico, Central America or Colombia. The avocado was first mentioned in the British literature in 1657, described from Jamaica under the name avocatas. The name avocado was first used by Sir Hans Sloane, in his catalogue of plants in Jamaica, published in 1696. In this report Sloane refers to "The avocado or alligator pear-tree; it grows in gardens and fields throughout Jamaica". In 1725 Sloane published a more detailed history of Jamaica and described the avocado as "... one of the wholesomest fruits of these countries ...".

In 1605 there was a report by Garcilaso de la Vega, commenting that the avocado was cultivated at that time from Mexico to Peru. This provides information on the origin of the name palta for avocado, stating that an Inca warrior marched along the road to Peru. He conquered another province called Palta (part of what is now Ecuador), from whence a wholesome and delicious fruit called Palta was brought to the warm valley near Cuzco, Peru. This conquest took place before the arrival of the Conquistadores, between 1450 and 1475 and this is the only record of the history of the avocado in pre-Colombian days.

It is evident from these miscellaneous reports by Spanish Conquistadores that, at the time of the Spanish conquest, avocados were grown from northern Mexico south through Central America into north-western South America and south in the Andean region as far as Peru (where the avocado had been introduced shortly before the conquest), as well as into the Andean region of Venezuela.

Thus, the early history of the avocado in the Americas provides a fascinating look at the early records of the occurrence of avocado in the greater part of Latin America and the extensive development of the avocado industry until today, more than 400 years later. There is a significant production of this fruit world-wide, for example in Australia, Brazil, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Israel, Mexico, South Africa and in the United States (California and Florida, where beginnings of what is at present a very significant industry occurred in the 19th century).

This is an abbreviated version of a longer paper that will be published elsewhere.