

Casa Festiva
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Warm Up to California Avocados

by Katy Budge

*Central Coast avocados are the
cream of the crop
... local turkeys available
... and Anthony Bourdain
on shunning fast food.*



A couple of years ago, I witnessed a real, live epiphany. I was buying some avocados at a local farmstand store when some tourists from the Midwest dropped by. While most were familiar with avocados, one woman in the group had never tried an avocado, a situation which the proprietor of the store quickly rectified.

Understandably, the woman was a little reluctant to taste some of the mushy green stuff being offered to her, but bowed to peer pressure and took a bite. Almost immediately, the look on her face turned from apprehension to adulation, and a new avocado fanatic was born!

She's certainly not alone. The average U.S. citizen eats about three pounds of avocados annually, and about 43% of all U.S. households buy avocados. Until recently, those avos probably would have been domestically grown, but recent trade agreements have opened up our markets to other countries, and the U.S. ranks third in production behind Mexico and Indonesia.

The some 7000 growers in California are responsible for 90 percent of the nation's avocados, so last winter's big freeze was a big shock to the industry, and not just for this year's numbers. Avocados reproduce on a two-year cycle, so growers that were slammed by frost in 2007 will be affected in 2008 as well, though luckily, with careful pruning, avocado trees have the capacity to grow back.

(The photo below shows some trees in Morro Bay, CA about 8 months after the January freeze. The trunks are painted white to protect them from sunburn until the tree leafs out.)

To fill the gap created by the big chill, distributors started looking to imports even more than before, so if you're someone concerned about buying locally or domestically, be sure check the country of origin on those avocados, or buy directly from the farmers. Yes, the imports will be more plentiful and probably always cheaper, but you'll probably be getting what you pay for – an inferior avocado. Yes, California growers think they have a superior product, but I invite you to do your own taste test and see if maybe they have a right to be righteous. There's just something about a California avocado that is far richer and creamier than the watery imports, and some people think that avos grown on the Central Coast are the cream of the whole crop.



"Maybe I'm prejudiced," admitted Bill Coy, a longtime Cayucos area grower, "but I think we have a premium product here, and people that buy our locally grown avocados know the difference and know that the imports just don't measure up. California avocados, especially from this area, are the ones that retailers and restaurants always want." The reason for this "has got to be the climate," he believes. San Luis Obispo County is one of the northernmost commercial growing regions for avocados, and is cooler than places such as San Diego County, which accounts for an estimated 60-70 percent of the state's crop, primarily Hass avocados (although the industry just took another huge hit from the myriad wildfires that ravaged the San Diego area in October 2007).

According to the California Avocado Commission, "there are close to 500 varieties of avocados, seven varieties are grown commercially in California, and the Hass variety accounts for approximately 95% of the total crop." Native to Mexico and with a history of cultivation reaching back as far as 750 B.C. Peru, avocados were introduced as a commercial crop in United States in the late 19th century. The fruit steadily gained in popularity and began to emerge as a serious cash crop about a century later. In fact, when I lived in Santa Barbara in the 1980s, there was a serious outbreak of outright avocado theft: the culprits would pull their trucks alongside an orchard in the dead of night, cut the fence, and make off with thousands of dollars worth of fruit. Since then, fencing and monitoring have gotten a lot better!

Though various seasons and regions offer a host of avocado varieties such as Bacon, Fuerte, Nabals, and Zutanos, the Hass remains the outright favorite. It's not only great tasting, but also meets a host of commercial needs including having a long shelf life. Curiously enough, every single Hass avocado tree in the world can trace its heritage back to a single tree cultivated in La Habra Heights, California. Unfortunately, the grand old tree succumbed to root rot in 2002, but her memory and legacy lives on in countless bowls of guacamole!



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About Avocados ...

-- Avocados are a nutritional bonanza. Experts say the fruits contribute nearly 20 vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients, and avocados can be used in place of foods such as mayonnaise, sour cream, and even cheese to reduce your intake of cholesterol, calories, fat, saturated fat, and sodium.

-- The Aztecs thought the avocado was an aphrodisiac, and the fruit's shape spurred the Nahuatl (Aztec) word for it: "ahuacatl," meaning "testicle."

-- Apparently, the Spanish conquistadors had trouble pronouncing the Aztec word, and changed it to "aguacate," from which we get "avocado." The conquistadors also discovered that the avocado seed yields a milky liquid that becomes red when exposed to air. The Spaniards used this reddish brown or even blackish indelible liquid as ink, and some of the documents still exist.

-- European sailors in the 1700's called the avocado "midshipman's butter" because they spread it onhardtack biscuits.

-- Other names for the avocado are "alligator pear," "butter pear," and "avocado pear." It is known as "aguacate" in most Spanish-speaking countries, except in some South American countries where it is known as the Incan or Quechua word, "plata."

-- The word "guacamole" derives from the Aztec "ahuacamolli," which means "avocado soup" or "avocado sauce."

-- And lastly ... yes, you can grow a tree from an avocado pit, but it'll take about 8-12 years for it to mature and even if it does flower, the fruit won't be very edible. Trees need to be grafted in order for them to produce quality fruit.

Let's Talk Turkey ...

Alana Estrada at Gold Coast Meats still has a few hand-raised (and hand-plucked!) turkeys available for Thanksgiving. She warns that the ones she has left are on the big side, but if you're interested, call 610-1977 or email goldcoastmeats@tcsn.net.

Bits of Bourdain ...

"My position (on fast-food) is kind of the Nancy Reagan position on drugs: 'Just Say No.' Next time you find yourself standing slack-jawed and hungry in front of a fast-food counter — and a clown is anywhere nearby — just turn on your heels and head for the lone-wolf, independent operator down the street: a pie shop, a chippie, a kebab joint ... anywhere that the proprietor has a name ... at least you are encouraging individual, local business, an entrepreneur who can react to neighborhood needs and wants, rather than a dictatorial system in which some focus group in an industrial park in Iowa decides for you what you will or should want."

-- from rogue chef and author Anthony Bourdain's book, "The Nasty Bits"