

AVOCADOS

Know Your Avocados

Though the famously rich-tasting hass variety dominates the American market, hundreds of other types of avocado exist—all of them descended from three primary subspecies: West Indian, Guatemalan, and Mexican. Here are nine of our favorites.

1 | DONNIE Resembling a bright green papaya, the roughly six-and-a-half-inch-long donnie can weigh as much as one and a half pounds but has a surprisingly small seed, or pit. When this avocado is ripe, its thick skin is taut and shiny and, if the fruit rubbed against a branch as it matured, occasionally sports brown leathery patches. The donnie's light, mild flesh, low in fat, pairs well with richer ingredients such as cream and olive oil in velvety soups and salad dressings. Since it's so large, the donnie is the perfect avocado for stuffing, especially with crabmeat salad.

2 | ZUTANO This Mexican variety is ready to pick from late fall to early winter in the San Joaquin Valley in California. The medium-size (the fruits are usually about five inches long), pear-shaped zutano has a shiny, light green skin flecked with delicate white striations. The mild-tasting flesh, less rich than that of a hass, tastes great with a drizzling of extra-virgin olive oil and a little salt and pepper.

3 | FUERTE This Guatemalan-Mexican hybrid originated in the Mexican state of Puebla and was introduced in California in 1911. The fuerte earned its name—which means strong in Spanish—after it withstood a severe frost in California in 1913; it was the first avocado to be produced on a large scale in that state. Harvested from the late fall through the spring, the medium to large fruit (five or more inches long) has a smooth, shamrock green skin dappled with white specks. Inside, a medium-size seed is embedded in thick yellow flesh whose luscious flavor is reminiscent of hazelnuts'. The delicious fuerte is best eaten with little embellishment.

4 | MACARTHUR The large (often more than six inches long), pear-shaped macarthur—which originated in Monrovia, California, in 1922—has a paper-thin, pebbly skin that can be punctured easily and yellow-gold flesh that tastes slightly sweet and nutty. Available in the United States from August through November, it has a silky, firm pulp perfect for spreading and mashing and for puréeing into creamy smoothies or even ice cream.

5 | GWEN Bred from the hass variety in 1982, the gwen is a slightly larger, army green version of its darker-hued parent. Harvested from the late winter through the summer, the oval-shaped fruit, roughly four inches in length, has dense, gold-green flesh possessed of a buttery and slightly smoky flavor, somewhat akin to that of chipotle chiles. When the fruit is ripe, its green skin dulls slightly; refrigerated, the ripe fruit will keep for up to two and a half weeks, like its forebear the hass. The fatty, rich flesh of the gwen is delicious on its own or spread on bread like butter.

6 | BACON This generally five-inch-long, egg-shaped avocado has a smooth, delicate, pine green skin mottled with dots that darken faintly when the fruit is ripe. Developed by a farmer named James Bacon in 1954, the fruit is harvested from the late fall through the spring, though some believe it peaks in midwinter. The bacon's pale, yellow-green flesh tastes slightly sweet, clean, and faintly sharp. Try it tucked into a BBLT (bacon, bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich).

7 | HASS A Guatemalan-Mexican hybrid first planted in this country in 1926 by a California

postman named Rudolph Hass, this buttery variety has become the standard by which most Americans now judge avocados. The stout, teardrop-shaped fruit is the primary crop of most California avocado orchards; it can be harvested year-round and ships and stores well. Though its exact size and oil content depend on where it's grown, its average length is four and a half inches, and its skin is always a purplish black. The hass has creamy, pale green flesh that is resilient enough to hold its shape in dishes like the California roll but supple enough to be used in guacamole, to which it lends a nutty flavor that stands up beautifully to other, more robustly flavored ingredients like onions.

8 | FREY A Guatemalan variety, the frey typically weighs about a pound and resembles an oversize bartlett pear, usually just under six inches long. Its thick, speckled, yellow-and-forest green skin is as bumpy as a country road. Though its summer season is fleeting, the frey has a creamy flesh—which has a lingering, piquant flavor—and is worth seeking out. Try the frey as a garnish for grilled fish or as a filling for such Tex-Mex classics as burritos and hard-shell tacos.

9 | PINKERTON Shaped like a slender, elongated pear (specimens are generally six inches or longer), the pinkerton is prized for the intense flavor of its silky, almost puddinglike flesh. This cultivar, which was first grown on the Pinkerton Ranch in Saticoy, California, in the early 1970s, is harvested in that state in the winter through the spring. Ripeness is indicated by dark patches that form on the avocado's pebbly skin. The fruit's gold flesh has a high oil content and can be scooped from the skin effortlessly. Pinkertons are an excellent choice for omelettes. —A.N.

(continued from page 82) as 40 cents (roughly \$9 in today's money) at the turn of the 20th century. By the late teens and early '20s, American avocado growers had recognized the need to market their product more aggressively to everyday American consumers (see "Love Fruit", page 82).

Soon avocados began to appear in recipe books of the era, often thanks to the promotional efforts of growers, in dishes that would strike today's cook as decidedly dated. Cookbook writers and editors, keen to evoke the fruit's exoticism but either unable or unwilling to tap into authentic foreign cuisines, attempted to come up with recipes that suited the national palate but still had a whiff of tropical mystique.

RECIPE

Fajitas with Green Sauce

SERVES 6-8

Green sauce—originally from Ninfa's in Houston—is now a Texas standby. The recipe for this dish (facing page) is based on one that appears in *The Tex-Mex Cookbook* by Robb Walsh (Broadway Books, 2004).

- 1/4 cup fresh lemon juice
- 1/4 cup pineapple juice
- 1/4 cup sherry
- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 3 tbsp. butter, melted
- 1 tbsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 3 whole dried chiles de árbol, crushed
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- Zest of 2 lemons
- Zest of 1 orange
- 2 skirt steaks (about 3 lbs.), trimmed and halved crosswise
- 6 tomatillos, husked and rinsed
- 2 small serrano chiles, stemmed
- 2 ripe avocados, such as hass, gwen, or frey (see page 85), peeled, seeded, and chopped
- 1/2 cup sour cream
- 1/4 cup chopped cilantro leaves
- Salt
- 6 tbsp. canola oil
- 2 red bell peppers, cored, seeded, and thickly sliced
- 2 yellow onions, thickly sliced
- Warm flour tortillas

1. Combine fruit juices, sherry, soy sauce, butter, pepper, chiles de árbol, garlic, and zests in a large dish; add steaks; turn to coat. Cover; marinate for 2 hours.

2. Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add tomatillos and serrano chiles and cook until tender, 8-10 minutes. Drain and transfer to a blender. Add avocados; blend until smooth. Transfer to a large bowl and stir in sour cream, cilantro, and salt to taste. Cover surface with plastic wrap and refrigerate.

3. Heat 3 tbsp. oil in a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. Add peppers, onions, and salt to taste. Cook, stirring occasionally, until softened and beginning to char, 8-10 minutes. Transfer to a plate and set aside. Wipe out skillet. Heat 1 tbsp. oil in skillet over medium-high heat. Working in batches, cook steaks, flipping once, until well browned, adding remaining oil as needed, 7-8 minutes per batch. Transfer to cutting board, tent with foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Cut steaks crosswise into finger-size strips. Transfer to a platter, along with collected juices and peppers and onions. Serve with tortillas and green sauce.

Witness the Guatemalan avocado breakfast with claret and cracked ice and St. Thomas-style avocados with port or madeira and citrus juice from a 1912 *New York Times* article titled "Avocado Pear Recipes" and any number of dessert recipes that called for mixing avocados with sugar and sherry or deep-frying them.

Still, experimentation and innovation also yielded some longer-lasting results. A 1953 *New York Times* article noted that avocados combined well with almost any fish, an enduring observation indeed. Other recipes from the first half of the 20th century hailed the ability of the avocado to serve as a luscious binder in creamy dressings—a lighter and less oily alternative to mayonnaise—as well as the ways in which the fruit's oil-rich flesh married harmoniously with a wide variety of spices.

It was a single Mexican side dish, however, that definitively sparked mainstream America's passion for the fruit. Guacamole—which in its traditional form consisted simply of mashed avocados, onions, and tomatoes but could also include chiles, garlic, cilantro, lime juice, and, often, fruit as well—began to catch on as a party food in this country in the latter part of the 20th century. In her seminal 1972 book *The Cuisines of Mexico*, Diana Kennedy, one of America's foremost experts on Mexican foodways, wrote that guacamole is commonly served in Mexico with warm tortillas at the beginning of a meal. With the rise of Tex-Mex cuisine, salted, fried tortilla chips replaced fresh tortillas and helped guacamole "dip" become a tabletop staple in restaurants and bars.

The cover of a 1970 issue of *Sunset* magazine summed up guacamole's rising popularity: "It's endlessly versatile," it read. "It's a dip, a sauce, a dressing, a spread. It's guacamole." Americans from all over the country went wild for the tasty (and margarita-friendly) combination of crunchy, salty tortilla chips and cool, creamy avocado. Today Americans have made guacamole their own. On Super Bowl Sunday alone, nearly 55 million pounds of avocados are sold across the 50 states.

GUACAMOLE'S SUPERSTARDOM notwithstanding, more and more of us are beginning to embrace the avocado's infinitely broader culinary potential, as well as the remarkable variety of tastes and textures that American growers are now able to offer consumers. Many of these producers—like Aaron Lewis, a 37-year-old, second-generation avocado grower in Ventura, California—rely on a base crop of hass avocados (still the best-selling variety by a vast margin) while experimenting with lesser-known cultivars, testing the market and slowly creating demand. "Many kinds of avocados exist," says Lewis. "Just because people don't know them, they shouldn't shy away from trying them."

Another California grower, whom I visited recently, Dick Beckstead, lost almost 20 percent of his avocado crop to a freeze last January. But the 76-year-old farmer, based in Escondido, seemed unfazed as we walked through groves of avocado trees bearing varieties like fuerte, zutano, and hass. He was hopeful that, with proper nurturing, the injured trees would come back. "Look at these tiny buds," he said. "They're signs of life."

Before I left, Beckstead handed me a box of freshly picked fruit. "These are the best you've ever had," he said, pointing to a shiny, thin-skinned, and perfectly ripe zutano. When I got home, I rummaged through the box and pulled one out. Sitting at my kitchen table, I sliced it in half, popped out the pit, dug my spoon into the flesh, and slowly savored its rich, nutty taste—just as Dad taught me to. 🌿

THE PANTRY, page 104: Sources for various kinds of avocado. See www.saveur.com/avocados for a recipe for salmon with avocado relish.