



Last year this Schoenfeld grove at La Mesa produced 40,000 pounds from 175 trees. Avocados do not soften on the tree and, once ripe, may be left unpicked for weeks if marketing conditions are unfavorable. Some growers cultivate and spray their trees, but the Schoenfelds believe in the hands-off policy.

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The Mysterious Avocado

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY GENE LESTER



Fruit, moving on a conveyor belt, falls into bins according to size, is then crated and shipped out.



From tree to consumer. Janie Cremer tries an avocado from her grandfather's La Habra groves.

Nothing in all California is more eccentric—or more profitable—than this strange fruit of which the experts say: "What distinguishes the avocado is the things we don't know about it."

Recently, provided his trees have developed no personality problems, the man with an avocado grove has been doing all right. When the orange grower in Southern California mentions a net of \$200 he will more than likely be talking about profits per acre, and even then he may be exaggerating a bit, but when the man with a well-behaved avocado grove mentions the same figure, it's a safe bet that he has in mind the take from one tree.

Known as the "mystery fruit" some years ago, more than three fourths of the avocado crop today is produced in Southern California. Total production, including that of Florida and that imported from Cuba, amounts to less than one half pound per person in the United States, and there are still vast areas in the Central and North Central

states where this strange fruit is practically unknown. To the epicure who has developed a fondness for the avocado, it rates high on the list of good things to eat, but to the uninitiated who have not yet acquired the taste, it is still a mystery. The mystery is why

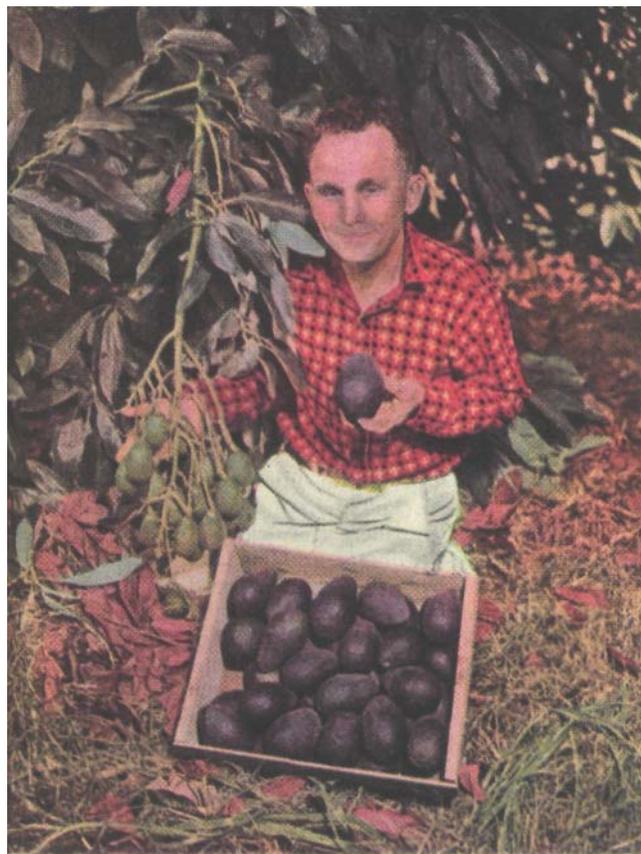
anyone should go into a rave about an article of food that is neither sweet nor tart and that has, when ripe, the consistency of soft soap.

California has experienced a couple of avocado booms. The first struck a quarter of a century ago. The second is currently in progress. The avocado is a Johnny-come-lately on the California scene. There were no groves of commercial importance twenty-five years ago, but here and there a backyard tree bore spectacularly. With single fruits selling for as much as a dollar each, it was a rare sight to stand beneath a full-bearing tree and count 500 or 1000 fruits hanging in rich profusion among the lush tropical leaves. In 1924 a single tree in the little seaside town of Carlsbad brought its owner \$2000. Others in San Diego, Hollywood and La Habra did almost as well. In the little Quaker town of Whittier a man was able to insure his pet tree for \$20,000 after building a high fence around it to exclude the crowds.

It was not long before California land promoters began to sit up and take notice. The boom in oil lands was beginning to peter out. Government officials were getting tough about sending certain types of literature through the mails. It was difficult to prove that there was oil where there was not even a well, but to convince a doubting prospect that there would be avocados where the plots were already staked out seemed like an easy thing to do.

Promoters bought land wholesale, put up flags and laid out flimsy streets named after the most popular varieties of the fruit they were boosting. The larger operators terraced or leveled the land and planted avocados. Resale values, generally, were determined by the number of young trees. These were purchased from nurseries at around \$2.50 each. Planting practice was seventy trees to the acre.

The sale price of the land was based on a round figure of \$100 per planted tree, or approximately \$7000 an acre. Most buyers were able to buy only an acre or two. The price was high and, since the trees may have been set out only the day before the purchase, there was a wait of five to seven years before the first crop could be marketed, but with a single avocado fruit worth as much as a couple of sirloin steaks, it looked like a sure thing. The promoters dreamed up a new name for the avocado. They called it "Green Gold."



Rudolph Hass shows the Hass avocado—the only variety that turns black while it is still on the tree.

The new groves came into full bearing about the time things were going bad in the stock market. WPA workers weren't buying any Green Gold. Outside of California, avocados were still being called alligator pears, a name frowned on today by the marketing associations as being too unromantic. Housewives considered it a curiosity, and the male members of the family thought of it as something that might just as well be left out of a salad. The price dropped to two bits a pound, and from there nosedived to four cents. The boom was as dead as a dried mackerel.

The avocado tree is indigenous to Mexico and Central and South America. A member of the laurel family, it is closely related to the cinnamon of Ceylon and the sassafras of the United States. The first trees brought north across the border were seedlings, most of which turned out to be merely handsome shade trees giving off a pleasant fragrance of anise. They were nice to sit under, but on the production side they were strangely erratic. The fruit, if the trees bore at all, varied in size from a walnut to that of a cantaloupe, might be either green or black, pear-shaped or round, and in many varieties it was nothing more than a giant seed wrapped up in a skin as tough as horse-hide. But a few "plantsmen were fascinated by the strange fruit that was known by forty different names south of the border; that was highly nutritious and carried an oil content often running as high as 30 per cent by weight. They developed varieties suited to the new climatic environment until the nursery lists numbered hundreds, but the queen of them all was a sport, called the Fuerte, brought in from Mexico City. The Fuerte ripens in winter, is green in color, is shaped like a pear and reaches the commercially ideal weight of about eight ounces.

Even though the Fuerte is a more consistent performer in its fruiting habits than other varieties, it is by no means predictable, and like all the others, it is very picky in its climatic demands. Besides which, there is the matter of sex.

Recently, a woman shopping for an avocado tree in a nursery asked, "Will it bear?" to which the nurseryman replied:

"Roses are red, violets are blue; but nobody knows what an avocado will do."

In the matter of sex, the avocado presents a curious phenomenon. Its flowers are bisexual—that is, the male stamens and the female pistils are carried by the same tree in the same flower. Flowers are in the habit of opening twice a day, once in the morning and again in the afternoon. But unless the conditions are right, the pistils of the avocado flower are receptive only during the first opening, while the stamens throw pollen off only during the second opening. This makes fertilization a chancy affair, and using the bees and avocado flowers to help Johnny understand the facts of life would make it all very confusing.

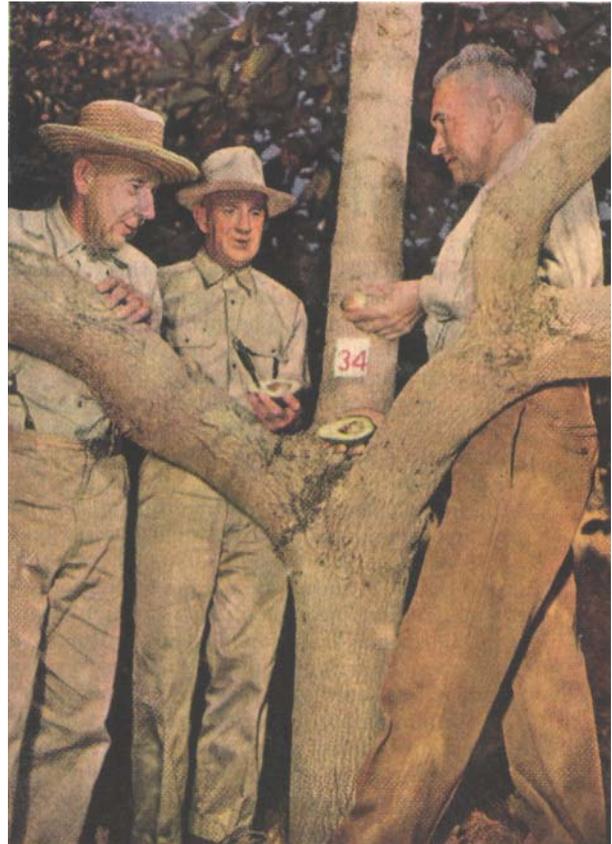
Aside from its strange sexual habits, the avocado is extremely temperamental as regards climate. When planted in the cool coastal fog belt it grows well, but often refuses to bear. When planted inland more than twenty-five miles or so, it resents the dry California heat, its leaves droop and it goes into a sulk. Too much water sends it into a spasm known as "avocado decline," too little causes it to drop its young fruit. And even where all the conditions are ideal, nearly every grove has its quota of drone trees which refuse to get into step. These curious habits help to explain why normally the price of the fruit is high, why there are only some 15,000 acres of avocados in all of

Southern California, and why it would be difficult to find another similar amount of land in the entire state suited to avocado culture.

The avocado business picked up during the war. Most Californians pride themselves on knowing something about the gastronomies of the avocado. Many like to eat the fruit with only a pinch of salt or a squirt of lemon juice. The real connoisseur, however, disdains even these slight condiments and eats it out of the half shell with a spoon. Highly nutritious, an avocado was a handy article of food to pack into the lunch box before starting off for the shipyards or the airplane factory during the war. Californians ate two thirds of the crop, thereby helping to boost prices, but it was only after the shooting ended that the second boom, still very much in progress, got off to a good start.



Oil content determines ripeness of the fruit. Chemists can give the answer after a series of laboratory tests.



The Schoenfelds keep a record of each tree's yield. Brown seed indicates maturity.

In spite of the fact that many people, even today, hardly know what an avocado looks like, there are simply not enough avocados to go around for those who have acquired the taste. The top varieties are once more bringing growers twenty-five cents, or better, a pound. Raw land in proved avocado districts, with nothing on it but a sparse covering of sage and a few boulders, is selling for upwards of \$1000 or even \$2000 an acre. This time there are no large-scale promoters, simply because big blocks of cheap land suited to the temperamental demands of the avocado are no longer obtainable. A bearing

grove with a good production record is harder to come by than a bonanza gold mine.

There is, for instance, the Schoenfeld grove in the La Mesa district on the eastern outskirts of San Diego. This is no vast acreage of undulating orchards. It consists merely of a modest home and 175 bearing avocado trees. But recently the Schoenfelds refused an offer of \$50,000 for the place.

The Schoenfelds, two brothers and a sister, all single, came out from Pittsburgh, where the men held jobs in an engineering concern. Because of the sister's delicate health, climate was the thing of first importance, and it was almost by pure chance that they selected a spot for a home in a real-estate project called Avocado Gardens. There were some avocado trees on the place, but the Schoenfelds put a heavy discount on the salesman's claim that avocados represented the road to health and wealth. They were more interested in raising flowers, planting a year-round vegetable garden and enjoying the view of the ocean.

"We thought we were going to retire," says Oliver Schoenfeld, "but avocados put us back in the harness." The Schoenfelds have a few drone trees in their grove, but also they have individual trees that produce as much as 1,000 pounds of fruit in a season. During the past year they harvested slightly more than 40,000 pounds of fruit, for which they received approximately \$10,000. They belong to the school of avocado culturists who hold to the theory that the avocado is a jungle tree and that the less it is monkeyed with the better. They spray not, neither do they cultivate, but they keep records that are as accurate as those kept of a trap-nested prize hen. Each tree bears a number, and the yearly production of each is carefully put down in a book kept for that purpose.

"What distinguishes the avocado tree," said a plant expert at a recent meeting of avocado growers, "is the things we don't know about it."

There has been a good deal of Kinseyesque prodding into the private life and habits of the avocado, but thus far the tree has managed to keep its secrets pretty well hidden. The two best varieties now on the market were discovered purely through chance. No one knows exactly why an entire grove will suddenly go into an alternate-year bearing cycle, and the isolated drone tree, as far as the experts are concerned, is still a mystery.

Even though the avocado is a worrisome tree, it is nevertheless ideally suited to the man who has an aversion to hard work, blames most of his bad luck on the sunspots and is able to take his troubles in stride. Once planted in a suitable locality and nursed to maturity, the avocado tree is likely to go on about its uncertain business regardless of what is done or not done to step up its production, and even the worries may be passed along to others. Nearly all growers belong to one of the cooperative-marketing associations, and these organizations send out fieldmen—eager young experts mostly—who make moisture tests and advise members when to irrigate, recommend fertilizers, arrange for picking crews, suggest when to market, test for ripeness and schedule trucks to haul the fruit from the groves. Curiously, the avocado does not get soft on the tree. Ripeness is determined by the oil content of the fruit. This test is a laboratory procedure and the minimum legal standard on the California market is 8 per cent of oil by weight, though it may run to more than three times this in some varieties when ripe. Once ripe, the fruit may be left on the tree for a matter of weeks if marketing conditions are not favorable.

For the big-city type of gentleman farmer, such as Hollywood movie directors or retired admirals who refuse to be concerned even with fieldmen, there are the avocado-management companies. These, for a fee, will take over both the work and the worry, leaving the owner of the grove nothing more arduous than cashing the checks that are brought to the door by the mailman.

Individual acreage, in comparison with other fruit crops, is small, averaging, in districts like San Diego, something less than one and a half acres per grove. A good share of the crop is produced by retired doctors, postal employees and firemen from the East and Middle West who have come to California to take off their shirts, dig in the dirt and get a sun tan. For many, as for the Schoenfelds, the avocado represents the open-sesame to a way of life with a strong tropical flavor.

Frequently these out-of-staters are the most successful simply because they have no preconceived notions about raising the fruit, join up with a growers' association and follow religiously the advice of the fieldmen. There is, for example, the case of the Wiley sisters, Ethel and Alma. Still in their early forties, both sisters have a strong sense of adventure, have few conventional inhibitions and are spoken of admiringly as "characters."

During the war the Wiley sisters left Texas, came to California and got jobs in a San Diego aircraft plant. When the war ended they returned home, got secretarial positions in Fort Worth and were bored with jobs that held little excitement and no future.

"I came home from the office one night," Ethel relates, "and I decided we were both in a rut. I didn't think so much of Texas after seeing other parts of the country. We had money enough. I told Alma we were going to pack up and never work again unless we had fun doing it. We like people and we thought it might be fun to own a restaurant or run a motel. The next morning we got into our car and struck out."

They traveled over most of the Pacific Coast, but eventually came back to San Diego. There, while looking for a restaurant, they bought a house to live in. Until then they had never seen avocados growing on trees, and it was purely incidental that the house was surrounded by a small bearing grove. But avocados took them out of the restaurant business before they got into it.

"We didn't know a thing about avocados," said Ethel Wiley. "We hired a man to irrigate, fertilize and pick the fruit. That cost us a little over two hundred dollars, but the thirty trees in our grove brought us twenty-five hundred dollars the first year."

Among avocado growers in California there is a surprisingly large number of hobbyists. Fieldmen explain this simply by saying, "They don't have enough work to keep busy," and point out that the average grower is likely to be someone who has come out from the East with ideas of semiretirement and is caught by the spell of California's lushest glamour tree. Besides which, there are the lush financial prospects. In a lot of cases the avocado represents the ideal job solution, and the neophyte buys a grove. But as already pointed out, the acreage in most instances is small, the work is light, and the newcomer, with time on his hands and not yet imbued with a mañana philosophy, is forced to look for a hobby.

The most notable example among the hobbyists is probably Clarence Friend, of

Escondido, who rode a hobby to fame and recognition in the world's most erudite astronomical circles. Just for kicks, Mr. Friend, who lives within easy looking distance of Mount Palomar, took some auto parts and a length of sheet-iron pipe and between irrigations built himself a telescope. In the process of tinkering with things, he discovered a couple of comets.

A grower in San Diego invented and now manufactures a pocket-size motorized tiller that operates a hoe. Two others in Santa Ana make precision rifle barrels. Several growers tie flies or make fishing rods, and others do expert work in photography.

A man who has probably done as well with avocados as anyone else is Rudolph Hass, whose occupation is that of a mail carrier and who has made avocados a hobby. Mr. Hass came from Milwaukee some years ago, lined up a job with the post office, and just out of curiosity planted 300 avocado seeds. Two hundred and ninety-nine of the young seedling trees were worthless, but one showed amazing characteristics. Its fruit had a high oil content and a rich, nutty flavor; it possessed fine shipping qualities, was about right in size and, best of all, it matured in summer when the winter-bearing varieties were not to be had in the markets. Buds sell for two dollars each, and for every bud sold by nurserymen Mr. Hass collects a royalty. Checks have been coming in lately at the rate of \$2000 a month.

In spite of the avocado's eccentric habits, growers for the most part are fascinated by the strange new business. Most belong to avocado societies, associations or clubs and find it easy to develop an affection for trees that show real or potential returns of \$200 or \$300 each in a single season. One man recently suggested that the avocado be adopted as the state tree. Another has named his trees after the Presidents of the United States, and being a New Dealer, calls his favorite Franklin Delano. But fieldmen warn that there is such a thing as carrying enthusiasm too far. "When a man starts talking to his trees," they say, "he ought to sell his grove and get out." And then they add, "But with prices the way they are, try and get them to do it."



Supply never catches up with the constantly increasing demand. Pickers, using either clippers or shoulder bags, put some early winter fruit into cartons.