

THE RISE OF THE AVOCADO

AMERICA'S FAVORITE FRUIT

by ROBERTO A. FERDMAN on JANUARY 22, 2015 on *Wonkblog*



Image courtesy of Flickr user cyclonebill

America is in love with avocados.

The country's appetite for the creamy versatile fruit (yes, avocados are fruit) has grown just about every year for the past 15 years, according to data from the Hass Avocado Board, invading kitchens and menus across the country. The rise is such that sales of Hass avocados, which make up more than 95 percent of all avocados consumed in the United States, soared to a record of nearly 1.9 billion pounds (or some 4.25 billion avocados) last year, more than double the amount consumed in 2005, and nearly four times as many sold in 2000.

Once a rare treat, enjoyed only by cities on the west coast fortunate enough to sell fresh fruit when they were in season, avocados can now be found year round piled high at supermarkets nationwide, on restaurant menus in even the most remote towns, and in Subway sandwiches across the country.

"The demand has just been incredible," said Emiliano Escobedo, director of the Hass Avocado Board. "I think avocados are pretty much mainstream at this point."

Fast food chains, including Burger King, Au Bon Pain, Panera Bread Co., and others use the beloved ingredient as a sales pitch in product launches and ad campaign. And it works—after Subway announced it was allowing customers to "add avocado" to sandwiches in some 25,000 outlets around the country, traffic increased. What's more, people have come to expect it as a given: Many were less than enthused when a blog, meaning well but misunderstanding the purpose of a financial statement, mistakenly reported that Chipotle was running out of guacamole. Ok, they were freaking out:

Recipe sites are flooded with options for those who arrive with one green buttery ingredient in hand. A search query for recipes with avocados on FoodNetwork.com returns almost 2,000 results. On Food.com the same query produces more than 2,500. Recipe site after recipe site returns hundreds if not thousands of options that include salads, tacos, soups, appetizers, and sandwiches, among other dishes.

Even Men's Fitness took the time to publish five chiseled paragraphs about the "simple combo of smashed avocado and whole-grain bread."

Los Angeles still consumes the most avocados—some 300 million annually—but other cities, like New York, Dallas, Phoenix, and Houston are catching up. And many others, including Roanoke, Raleigh, and Columbus, can now eat them by the truckload.

Why the sudden outpouring of love for avocados? A few reasons stand out.

The most tangible explanation is that the rise of avocados in the United States comes on the heels of loosened import restrictions, which used to ban shipments of the fruit from Mexico. The restrictions were problematic, because Mexico was (and still is) the world's largest producer. Without the supply, all of avocados the United States consumed instead came from California, which couldn't grow them year round or consistently put fresh ones on supermarket shelves outside of the west coast.

In the late 1990s those restrictions were lifted, albeit slowly, allowing incremental increases in the amount of avocados imported from abroad. By 2000, 40 percent of all avocados sold in the United States were already grown outside of the country. By 2005, the percentage has risen to 67 percent. Last year, it was 85 percent.

"It wasn't until 2007 that Mexico had full access to the United States market," said Escobedo.

All that extra supply, however, would have gone wasted if it weren't for improved production methods. Most avocado varieties can be exceedingly fickle, ripening too quickly to be shipped and sporting skin too thin to sit on supermarket shelves without bruising. On the other hand, the Haas avocado, which has been adopted as the mainstream variety produced and distributed around the country, ripens slowly, changes color when ripe, keeps for long and has a thick skin.

"They're just more viable as a mass produced fruit," said Escobedo. "They have a longer shelf life."

Beyond the benefits of the Hass variety and influx of foreign fruit, the country's growing Hispanic population has helped, too. Mexican cuisine, which regularly features avocados—often in the form of a lime-kissed dip—has itself gone mainstream, riding the coattails of the nearly 40 million Hispanics of Mexican origin who now live in the United States. Escobedo attributes much of the avocado's rise to the popularity of guacamole. Look no further than the success of fast casual Mexican chain Chipotle

for evidence that this country will take just about as much it can get. A similar trend can be seen in the demand for tortillas, which has grown considerably over the past decade.

Avocados have also benefited from an association with healthfulness. Numerous studies have linked consumption of the fruit to healthier overall diets, including one published earlier this month, and another in early 2013. A recent revelation that not all fats are evil has painted avocados in a much more becoming light. “Avocados do contain fat, but it is mostly the monounsaturated kind [the good kind],” New York University’s Langone Medical Center says on its website. “No matter how you slice it, the avocado has plenty of health benefits.”

And avocados are coveted. Despite prices that average more than \$1 per fruit at wholesale and several times more at many restaurants, Americans continue to buy more bags at the grocery store and add-ons for sandwiches at eateries each year. Chefs praise them for their taste, which is creamy enough to balance out acidity or spiciness but mild enough not to overpower other ingredients. They also celebrate them as a luxury of sorts—not quite as coveted as caviar, but hardly as basic as a slice of green pepper or coil of onion. “It’s like a beautiful sandwich with a Tiffany box,” Stefano Cordova, senior vice president of food and beverage innovation at Au Bon Pain, told the Wall Street Journal in 2012.

The whirlwind success of the avocado is in many ways a testament to so many trends at the heart of modern day America. And no one has benefited more than avocado growers, who have faced record demand seemingly every year. The growth has become something of a self-perpetuating process, largely because the industry’s marketing budget is directly linked to its sales.

“As volume increases, the Hass Avocado Board collects more revenue,” Escobedo said. “But we have to use it all to market the product, because we’re a non-profit.”

The industry’s budget is approaching \$50 million annually. And it isn’t going to waste. On February 1, Avocados from Mexico, one of the industry member organizations, is running its priciest advertisement ever, an avocado spot during the Super Bowl, on national television.

“It’s the first time we’ve ever had an ad during the Super Bowl,” Escobedo said. “In fact, I think it’s the first time any produce at all has ever been advertised during the game.”

Roberto A. Ferdman is a reporter for Wonkblog covering food, economics, immigration and other things. He was previously a staff writer at Quartz.

ORIGINAL LINK:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2015/01/22/the-sudden-rise-of-the-avocado-americas-new-favorite-fruit/>