

FIRED UP ABOUT AVOCADOS

Grilled, raw, pureed or mashed—they're all good

For many years, the avocado was the forbidden fruit. Its rich taste and creamy texture fooled everyone into thinking that it was a fatty food, one for the calorie-conscious to avoid at all costs—except, of course, when made into irresistible guacamole and served at Super Bowl parties and Cinco de Mayo celebrations.

Today, people are falling in love with the avocado for its nutritional value and the many ways to eat it.

“Avocados are our friends again,” said Ruth Frechman, a registered dietitian in Burbank and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. “Yes, they are a fat. But they provide

healthy monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, which help keep our cholesterol levels down and lower our risk of cardiovascular disease.”

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, one medium avocado has 240 calories and 22 grams of fat. But about two-thirds of that is the good, cholesterol-busting fat. Frechman said some of her clients actually eat one avocado a day. “About 30 percent of your daily calories should come from fat, and if you're getting them from avocados, I don't see a problem with that,” she said.

In fact, there are scores of health benefits to eating the fruit. The California Avocado

Commission reports that avocados provide nearly 20 essential nutrients, including fiber, vitamin E, B vitamins, folic acid, iron and potassium—more than twice the amount found in a banana—which helps regulate and lower blood pressure. What's more, the USDA says avocados also contain cancer-fighting carotenoids.

With bountiful harvests from California, where 90 percent of the country's avocado crop is grown, as well as imported fruit that fills in the gaps during California's off-season, avocado lovers can get this healthy fix year-round. And it appears they are doing just that. Jan DeLyser of the California Avocado Commission

said that just under 1.6 billion pounds of avocados moved through the U.S. and across our plates in 2012, and the commission estimates 515 million pounds will come out of California alone in 2013.

Sure, they taste great in a salad for lunch. But avocados are such a versatile fruit, they can be eaten at all three meals and in nearly every way—raw, sliced, diced, mashed, pureed, baked, fried or grilled, to serve up a few ideas.

As for the perception that guacamole is fattening, Frechman, author of “The Food Is My Friend Diet,” said it's OK to indulge in it from time to time, without guilt. “Guacamole is a super healthy food. It's all

vegetables: avocado, tomato, cilantro and onion,” she said. However, instead of eating it with fried tortilla chips, she recommends dipping raw vegetables into your next bowl of guacamole for a healthier option.

From the tree to your door

California is home to nearly 5,000 avocado growers. But one Escondido farmer, in particular, is going the extra mile to make avocados part of everyone's diet.

Twenty-eight-year-old Ben Holtz owns a 70-acre avocado farm started by his grandfather in 1965 in San Diego County, an agriculturally rich region that provides 60 percent of all the avocados grown in

COOL WAYS to eat avocados

- Grill 'em! Brush with olive oil and lime juice, and place cut-side down on the grill for five to seven minutes.
- Known as “nature's mayonnaise,” avocados can be mashed and used as a spread on sandwiches.
- Puree in a blender with cilantro and drizzle over vegetables.
- Remove the pit and pour salsa into the depression.
- Make your cakes moister by using avocados in place of butter, eggs and half the required oil.
- Blend with cooked egg yolks, instead of mayonnaise, for a new, healthier twist on deviled eggs.
- Toss the mashed fruit with noodles for a healthier pasta Alfredo.





Ben Holtz of Escondido, left, is one of about 5,000 avocado farmers in California. Above, he demonstrates what an ideal avocado looks like. Below, he packs a shipment of avocados for a customer who ordered through his online retail business.



Holtz, left, manages daily operations of his 70-acre avocado farm in San Diego County and online retail business. Below, empty boxes await fresh-picked avocados for more than 3,000 online customers.



Megan Baker greets Holtz, below, who makes weekly deliveries to her family's print shop through his latest venture aimed at local businesses: Farmer Ben's Fresh Fruit Delivery Service.



California. Holtz, who holds a bachelor's degree in bio-resource and agricultural engineering, grew up surrounded by avocados. "I worked the farm in the morning and after school, and I'm still here!" he said.

Two years ago, Holtz decided to shake the trees of the family business by starting California Avocados Direct (www.californiaavocadosdirect.com), an online retail business that packages and ships fresh avocados the day they are picked directly to the consumer. Prices range from \$12 to \$70 per box, plus shipping.

"The idea was, if I can get my products from my hands to the consumer's hands, then I could deliver the highest-quality product," Holtz said. He grows mostly Hass avocados, but also produces the Fuerte, Reed and Bacon varieties. "It basi-

cally goes from the tree to the box to your door," he said.

The fourth-generation avocado farmer—his great-grandfather grew avocados on a different property—said the concept has really taken off, and he has shipped more than 3,000 orders all across the country—and to Germany. He said half his clients are return customers.

Linda Schumacher of Holliston, Mass., is one of them. The teacher orders avocados for parties and as gifts: "I even bought a subscription for my mother-in-law, who lives in Georgia." With Holtz's mail-order service, she said, "I know every avocado is going to be perfect."

So, how do you pick the perfect avocado? According to the California Avocado Commission, if the avocado yields to firm,

gentle pressure, you know it's ripe and ready to eat. If not, it is considered still "firm" and will be ripe in a couple of days.

Holtz recommends looking closely at the label: "If the label says California, the odds of getting a good avocado will go up significantly. California avocados are known for their consistency and quality."

In January, Holtz launched another venture—Farmer Ben's Fresh Fruit Delivery Service, which brings avocados, oranges, tangerines, apples and bananas directly into San Diego County businesses. "It's for companies looking to promote healthy living among employees and get rid of vending machines," he said.

In fact, the farm-to-cubicle trend seems to be catching on, as a handful of entrepreneurs across the country, like Holtz, are

delivering fresh, seasonal produce to local businesses interested in a healthy perk for their employees.

Megan Baker said she looks forward to Farmer Ben's weekly delivery at Printing Solutions, a print shop in Escondido owned by her family. "Our employees love it," she said. "Everything is so delicious, juicy and fresh."

Holtz works sunup to sundown, seven days a week, to grow this super food and get it to market. But he said it's a labor of love. "Avocados are one of the healthiest fruits you can put in your body," he said. "There's so much they can do for you." 🌿

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Meet the California-grown avocados

Believe it or not, there are about 500 varieties of avocados in the world. However, only eight varieties are grown commercially in California. The most popular among them is the Hass, which accounts for about 95 percent of the state's total crop. Recognize any of these varieties?



Bacon

Taste: light

Appearance: oval with smooth, green skin

In season: October to March



Fuerte

Taste: creamy

Appearance: pear-shaped with smooth, thin, green skin

In season: November to March



Gwen

Taste: creamy

Appearance: plump and similar to Hass, with green, pebbly skin

In season: January to September



Hass

Taste: creamy

Appearance: oval with thick, pebbly skin

In season: January to October



Lamb Hass

(the newest California variety)

Taste: smooth, creamy and nutty

Appearance: large and symmetrical with pebbly skin

In season: June to October



Pinkerton

Taste: creamy

Appearance: long and pear-shaped with thick, green skin, slight pebbling

In season: January to September



Reed

Taste: buttery, rich and nutty

Appearance: round, largest of all known varieties; thick, green skin, slight pebbling

In season: early fall to early winter



Zutano

Taste: light

Appearance: pear-shaped with shiny, yellow-green skin

In season: October to February