

# The Virtuous Avocado

Guacamole and so much more.

By Anne Sears Mooney

**Creamy, dreamy, rich and satisfying,** the avocado has such a nice personality—it gets along with just about any food. The avocado half has that neat little depression that can be filled with anything from crabmeat to caviar. Long vilified for its high fat content, the avocado was eschewed by dieters and dieticians during the days of the low-fat diet vogue. Now researchers have learned more about the avocado's nutritional virtues—and they have changed their tune. In fact, it's hard to imagine how something that tastes this good can be so good for you.

The Avocado is full of essential fatty acids and easily digested proteins. It contains no fewer than 14 minerals and is an excellent source of iron and copper, which produce healthy red blood cells. Sodium and potassium promote a healthy alkaline blood balance. Low sugar content and absence of starch make it a good choice for diabetics and those with other sugar-sensitive disorders. It is high in Vitamins A, B1, B2, B3, C, phosphorus and magnesium. It has 60 percent more potassium than a banana. And—drumroll—the fat in the avocado is monounsaturated; it has no cholesterol. *Nada. Zip.*

The avocado's image took on some polish in 1996 at the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social in Mexico (*Archives of Medical Research*, Winter 1996). Forty-five volunteers who ate avocados every day for a week experienced a 17 percent drop in total blood cholesterol. Their levels of LDL (low-density lipoprotein or “bad fat”) and triglycerides went down, while their HDL (high-density lipoprotein or “good fat”) levels rose. Avocados are also rich in beta-sitosterol, a natural substance shown to lower blood cholesterol levels.

A more recent study in the March 2005 *Journal of Nutrition* found that avocados act as a nutrient booster. Health-promoting carotenoids (like alpha- and beta-carotene) are soluble only in fat, not in water. Consuming carotenoid-rich foods in combination with the monounsaturated-fat-rich avocado enhances their availability to the body. Translated, this means that putting a few avocado slices on your tossed salad or some chopped avocado in your favorite salsa will increase your body's ability to absorb the healthy carotenoids provided by the vegetables.

The avocado is native to Mexico, Central and South America. It has been cultivated in these regions since about 8,000 B.C. The history of the word avocado takes us back to the Aztec language Nahuatl, which contains the word *ahuacatl*, meaning both “the fruit of

the avocado tree” and “testicle.” The word *ahuacatl* was compounded with other words, as in *ahuacamolli*, meaning “avocado soup or sauce.” From this, the Spanish-Mexican word *guacamole* derives.

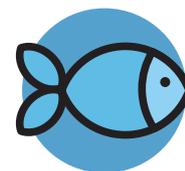
The avocado is classified as a fleshy fruit—a drupe or a berry, depending upon whom you ask. The University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources web site identifies it as a berry. Whatever it is, it is not a vegetable—it is a fruit. Although some 400 varieties exist, the most common in the U.S. is the Hass avocado, the one with the dark pebbly skin.

All Hass avocados are related to a single Mother Tree that was purchased as a seedling by a mail carrier named Rudolph Hass. He got the seedling from A.R. Rideout of Whittier, Calif., in 1926 and patented the tree in 1935. All Hass avocados can be traced back to the rootstock of that one tree. Alas, the Mother Tree died of root rot in 2002. California produces 80 to 90 percent of the U.S. avocado crop; Florida produces the rest.

In addition to its nutritional virtue, the California Avocado Commission catalogues the environmental virtue of the avocado. According to the Commission, in one year, a single avocado tree can absorb as much carbon dioxide as is produced by a car driven 26,000 miles. The same tree produces 260 pounds of oxygen in a year. Two mature avocado trees provide enough oxygen for a family of four. What a pity they won't grow in Manhattan.

Choosing the right avocados at the store takes a little forethought. Avocados do not ripen on the tree. The leaves of the tree produce a hormone that inhibits ripening. Only after the avocado is picked, and deprived of its hormone supply, will it begin to ripen. This means the fresher avocado is going to have hard flesh and a bright green color, and it will not be ready to eat for three to four days after you bring it home. Putting green avocados in a brown paper bag along with an apple or a banana will hasten the ripening process because of the ethylene gas emitted by the fruit. Keep green avocados at room temperature—refrigeration will ruin them. Once ripe, an avocado may be refrigerated for a day or two, but the flesh will turn brown and spongy if it is left much longer than that.

Avocado flesh will turn brown fairly quickly after it has been cut and exposed to air. This discoloration is caused by the same enzyme responsible for the discoloration of pears and apples once they have been cut. A similar enzyme is responsible for the “tanning” of human skin in the sun. Introducing acid, such as





lemon juice or vinegar, will slow the browning process, but will not halt it altogether. The avocado should be consumed as soon as possible after it has been prepared.

One of the best ways to eat an avocado is just to eat it—straight out of the shell, perhaps with a little salt and a squeeze of lemon juice. In our household, avocado, minus the salt and lemon juice, was baby’s first solid food and remains to this day one of her favorites.

We all know that fat is the universal flavor enhancer. That’s why everything tastes better with butter—or mayonnaise. Avocado may be used in the same way, with far more beneficial health results. Spread avocado on your morning toast instead of butter. Use it instead of mayonnaise on sandwiches.

Make a salad dressing that is both beautiful and delicious by combining half a package of silken tofu, an avocado and a little water in your food processor. Season with salt, garlic, lemon juice and fresh herbs—parsley, cilantro, basil and dill all work very well. Process until very smooth, adding a little water to achieve the desired consistency. In her wonderful book, *Vegetable Love*, Barbara Kafka does a similar dressing using buttermilk instead of tofu. Both versions are

rich in nutrients and have low or no cholesterol.

Americans most commonly consume the avocado in the form of guacamole. The mild flavor and creamy consistency of the avocado pairs with most of the flavors we associate with Mexican food. The great debate seems to be whether to mash the guacamole, leaving a few lumps, or to puree it until it is smooth. Everyone seems to be an expert on this. Most of the experts I consulted favored mashing. All agreed that guacamole must include salt and lime juice. After that, recipes ran the gamut, with no two guacamole chefs in agreement. Possible additions include, in addition to salt and lime juice, minced onions, garlic, chopped tomatoes, cumin, cilantro, black beans, corn, epazote, oregano, jalapenos, chipotles in adobo sauce, scallions ... and the list goes on.

But the avocado can be more than just guacamole. I have chosen to leave the great guacamole debate to the experts and offer here some other uses for this lovely fruit, which I hope you will enjoy. <sup>sth</sup>

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### Chipotle Crema

The combination of Mexican Crema and chipotle peppers in adobo sauce is wonderful with any dish that contains avocados. It can be used to garnish all the dishes described here. Canned chipotles in adobo sauce are available in the Mexican food sections of most supermarkets. Mexican Crema is available in Latino grocery stores and in the refrigerator section of some supermarkets. Crema’s thick consistency and tangy flavor make it well worth the effort of a treasure hunt. If you cannot find it, use crème fraiche, sour cream or whipped heavy cream to substitute.

To make chipotle crema, simply combine eight ounces Mexican Crema and one or two chipotle peppers in the bowl of a food processor and process until the chipotle is pureed and thoroughly combined with the crema. If you want more heat, add a little of the adobo sauce in which the chilis are packed. This will keep refrigerated for up to a week.



### Avocado and Roasted Vegetable Soup

- 4 small Yukon Gold potatoes peeled and roughly cut (about 1 lb.)
- 1 ripe avocado, peeled and roughly cut
- 3 cloves garlic, unpeeled
- 1/2 onion, roughly cut
- 1 poblano chili, stemmed, seeded and roughly cut
- 2 tomatillos, husks removed
- 2 Tablespoons cilantro, large stems removed, plus more for garnish
- 1 Tablespoon lime juice
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 2 cups milk
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Chipotle Crema for garnish (see recipe above)

**Method:** Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Boil the potatoes until they are soft. Drain and let cool. Roast the garlic, onion, poblano and tomatillos in the oven for about 20 minutes, or until the skin on the poblanos begins to brown and the other vegetables are soft. Peel the skin off the poblanos; it should come away from the flesh easily once the peppers are cooked. Combine roasted vegetables with the avocado, potatoes, cilantro, lime juice and chicken broth in the bowl of a food processor and process until the mixture is a smooth puree. Turn puree into large container or mixing bowl and add milk until the soup coats the back of a spoon, or until it reaches the consistency you want. Correct seasoning and chill well.

Serve cold garnished with a tablespoon of chipotle crema and a sprig of cilantro.



## Empanadas Stuffed with Sweet Potatoes & Avocados

*Adapted from Hass Avocado Board*

- 1 sweet potato, peeled and diced
- 1 small yellow onion, roasted
- 2 cloves garlic, unpeeled and roasted
- 1/4 cup olive oil for roasting vegetables
- 1 ripe Hass avocado, peeled and lightly mashed with a fork
- 1/2 cup Chipotle Crema (see recipe)
- 1/2 bunch of cilantro, leaves only
- crust for two 9-inch pies (the prepared kind from the refrigerator case at the supermarket is just fine)
- 1 egg beaten with a little water for egg wash

**Method:** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a sheet pan either with parchment or a Silpat Mat. Boil sweet potato in a little salted water until soft, then drain and cool. Meanwhile, roast onions and garlic in olive oil for 15 to 20 minutes, or until they are quite soft. When vegetables are roasted, mash them together with the sweet potato to make a coarse paste. Peel and mash the avocado (separately from the sweet potatoes). Roll out the piecrust dough and cut into 3- or 4-inch circles using a biscuit cutter or round cookie cutter. Place a teaspoon of mashed sweet potato in the center of each circle. Top with a half teaspoon of mashed avocado, and top that with a small dollop of chipotle crema and a cilantro leaf. Fold the dough circle in half to cover the filling and seal edges with the tines of a fork. Place on prepared cookie sheet and lightly brush each empanada with the egg wash.

Bake at 350 degrees for 20 to 25 minutes, or until crust is nicely browned. Serve warm with chipotle crema on the side for dipping. Makes 24 3-inch empanadas.



## Avocado & Chicken Tamales

*Adapted from Chilean Avocado Importers Association*

### For the tamales:

- 1/3 cup vegetable oil
- 1 Cup instant masa harina\*
- 1 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2/3 cup lukewarm water
- 12 corn husks\* or sheets of waxed paper

### For the filling:

- 1 boneless, skinless chicken breast, boiled and shredded
- 2 ripe Hass avocados, peeled and diced
- salt and pepper

**Method:** Put 15 or 16 corn husks (if using) to soak in warm water, to soften them. Sift together masa harina, baking powder and salt. Add vegetable oil to large mixing bowl. Add 3 tablespoons of the masa harina mixture at a time to the vegetable oil and mix well with a wooden spoon until all the masa harina mixture is combined with the oil. Slowly add lukewarm water to the masa harina mixture, bringing the dough together with your hand or with the spoon. Knead the dough for a minute or two until it is smooth. Gently combine the shredded chicken breast and diced avocado and season well with salt and freshly ground pepper. To assemble the tamales, place about 1 tablespoon of dough on a corn husk and flatten it into a rectangle with the back of a spoon, leaving a generous border on all sides. Place a tablespoon of filling lengthwise down the center of the dough. Fold one side of the husk a little more than halfway across the filling, then bring the opposite side up to cover the rest of the filling. Tightly roll the husk so that it covers the seam and tie either end with a strip of corn husk.

Steam the tamales over lightly boiling water for an hour. Use a steamer, a colander placed over (not in) boiling water or a bamboo steamer placed over (not in) boiling water. A bamboo steamer, if you have one, works wonderfully. Be sure to keep an eye on the boiling water and replenish as necessary. Serve warm with chipotle crema garnish.

Makes 24 small to medium tamales.

\* Corn husks and instant masa harina are available in Latino grocery stores.

