



# Expanded Variety List Could Offer Opportunities

By Tim Linden

*Reuben Hofshi of Del Rey Avocados looks at some alternative varieties he is growing at his nursery.*

**T**here is no doubt that the Hass avocado will continue to be the avocado of choice for both California growers and those around the world. However, voices just now are beginning to be heard that are urging California to diversify at least a bit for sales and survival reasons.

California Avocado Commission President Tom Bellamore said there is ample reason to believe that there is a niche market for some alternative varieties. He said recently a national magazine wrote an article about some of the non-Hass varieties indicating there is a strong interest in relatively unique fruits and vegetables. And there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that several heritage avocado varieties do very well in farmers' market. In addition, already both the Reed variety and Lamb Hass avocado have devotees on both the shipper and buyer side. Each offers a different profile than the Hass that some buyers like, if for no other reasons than to be different.

Bob Lucy, a partner in Del Rey Avocado Co., Fallbrook, CA, recently said non-Hass varieties are a very important part of his company's program. It is no secret that Del Rey sells a large percentage of its organic production of Reeds to the Whole Foods supermarket chain. Whole Foods tries to position itself as an upscale market that moves off the well-beaten path with its produce offerings. The Reed avo-

cado fits that bill nicely.

Lucy says the Reed variety has its flaws, but added that it does offer a niche opportunity for California growers fighting for market share and better pricing.

Another shipper -- Jared Bray who handles sales for Stehly Farms Organic in Valley Center, CA, -- said his packing shed does very well with five different avocado varieties: Zutanos, Bacons, Fuertes, Reeds and Pinkertons. "It's a very nice niche for us. We actually have a huge following for our Reed avocados."

Bellamore said additional varieties could offer another dimension to the California brand and help CAC expand its talking points to the buyer community as well as extend the California avocado season. Many of these heritage varieties have a different harvest time frame and could allow marketers to extend the season, and allow the commission to talk to consumers about California avocados for much more of the year.

Commission member Ron Araiza, who is director of sales

for Mission Produce Inc., Oxnard, CA, said from a packer's viewpoint there is no downside to pursuing other varieties as long as sufficient volume can be amassed. "If there is enough volume to pack and promote, we'd love it," he said. "We could keep our packing houses going longer and have something additional to market."

He did emphasize, however, that there has to be enough volume to make it economical to cover picking costs and keep the machinery running. "At this point I am not sure that's the case, but I am favorable to the idea."

Bellmore said an initial step in exploring the opportunity with non-Hass varieties is to get a handle on just how big the volume currently is. Virtually all groves use "off-varieties" as pollinizers but very little of that fruit makes it to the packing shed. Some stays in the grove; others go home to be shared with friends and neighbors; and a fair amount ends up in the aforementioned farmer's markets. "Is there enough to promote?" Bellmore asked. "We just don't know."

Longtime grower and handler Reuben Hofshi is a big proponent of experimenting with different varieties of avocados. In fact, his office doubles as a breeding lab for avocados with many different containers sprouting avocado seeds. He also has a nursery near his office where he is experimenting on a larger scale with many different avocado varieties.

From a practical standpoint, he said the industry needs to diversify as an insurance policy against a disease issue. He said if some disease swept through the Hass variety, the California industry could be ruined almost overnight. He argues that diversity of varieties not only is an insurance policy against that happening but also creates natural buffer zones in the event of a spreading disease.

Hofshi believes there are several varieties that could offer many niche marketing opportunities for the industry. In the first place, he said many of the heritage varieties – if grown and harvested properly – already can compete against the Hass. He said the Hass became popular because it was easy to pick causing most growers to eliminate their other varieties. Or worse, they were treated as Hass and not allowed to be grown and harvested according to their own timetable and needs. "The problem is they are handled like Hass and they are not Hass. If we developed protocols for each of these different varieties we could be a multiple variety producer," he said. "All avocados have their optimum picking time. Hass is excellent from April to July."

As a niche marketer, Hofshi said California growers have to sell their fruit at its prime tasting period – not before and not after.

A case in point is the Reed. Lucy of Del Rey said the Reed was harvested too early for many years. He said it is a later season variety that does much better if you leave it on the tree longer.



*Alternative varieties could offer an extended season for the California avocado industry.*

Bray of Stehly concurs. Stehly leaves its Reed variety avocados on the tree as long as possible and tries to market them in the September through November time frame. "By then the oil content is very good and it is just a great piece of fruit. I could absolutely ship more if I had them," he said, stating that he always gets a premium for that variety over the prevailing market price for Hass.

Hofshi said at farmer's markets, the Reed avocado is a trendsetter, always commanding a better price than Hass. But he said it is a very large avocado and would need a different packing protocol if it were to increase tremendously in volume. He said using foam pads or packing it in a one layer carton could work as the large size of the avocado can bruise avocados underneath it.

He said the Gem is another good variety that is getting serious consideration in South Africa, and could have great utility in California in both northern and southern districts. Hofshi also likes the Sharwil, which was developed in Hawaii. He has several of the trees in his nursery and is very happy about their progress.

Hofshi lists one more practical reason for expanding beyond the Hass: he says the Hass isn't as well suited to California growing conditions as it is in other climates around the world. The United States, he says, is the lowest producer of Hass in the world with average production of only 5,000-6,000 pounds per-acre.

Bellmore says if some California growers do go down this road of alternative varieties, they will have market differentiation. He said the other producers in the world selling in the U.S. market are very committed to the Hass, and almost certainly will not be offering direct competition to these alternative varieties, in part because they are more difficult to ship. 🥑