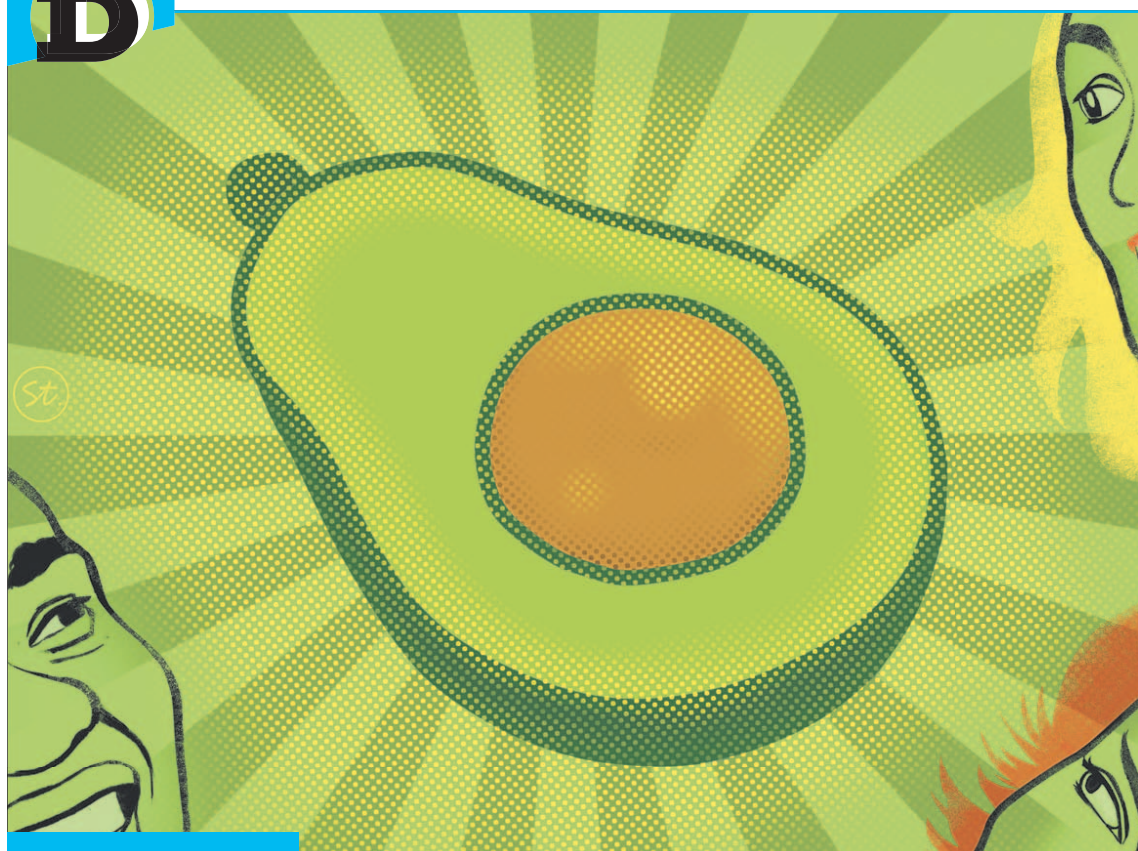


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ILLUSTRATION BY MARK STIVERS



OFF MENU

California's golden fruit

BY STEPH RODRIGUEZ / stephr@newsreview.com

Avocados are like California gold.

Enjoyed in salads and sandwiches, on toast and tacos or even plain with a pinch of sea salt, this versatile fruit not only brings rich flavor and silky texture to some of our favorite dishes, it's also packed with healthy fats, fiber and vitamins.

Here in the farm-to-fork capital, it's avocado season! From May through July the West Coast will see more and more alligator pears at farmers' markets and local grocery stores. But according to Jan DeLyser, vice president of marketing with the California Avocado Commission (the state's go-to source for information about the industry), avocados took a hit during its growing season, which is roughly from February through September.

"We're dealing with a smaller crop than we had last year. Basically, we're expecting 175 million pounds of avocados compared to 360 million pounds

from the previous year," DeLyser said. "When you think about the reasons behind the lower volume: Avocados are an alternate bearing crop. The trees work hard and take a bit of a break each season, but we also had extreme heat in the 115 to 120-degree range, which is very, very hot in California."

California is the largest producer of avocados grown in the United States with more than 3,000 avocado cultivators predominantly along the coastal region from Monterrey to San Diego.

The good news is that in early April, California growers began harvesting fairly healthy volumes of avocados. DeLyser says about 9 to 11 million pounds are being harvested every week and despite the heat wave, she anticipates avocados to be in good supply through July, particularly since California farmers are choosing to ship closer to home instead of throughout the country.

So when you see ripe avocados at the store or market, grab a few and know that you're eating seasonally and supporting local farmers. A ripe avocado will have a slight give when held in the palm of your hand. That's when it's prime for guacamole-making. Another helpful tip: Never press avocados with your fingers as it will bruise the fruit, and no one likes to eat those brown spots.

When asked how she prefers to eat avocados, DeLyser said she's simple.

"I really love it two ways and you can call it breakfast-oriented, but I enjoy it at all times of the day," she said. "On a piece of whole wheat toast, or I love avocados with eggs. I just think that's a combination made in heaven. Whether it's poached or scrambled with chunks of avocados. I just love it." □

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