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FEATURED

New book chronicles the history of avocados in California, Carpinteria

By Jun Starkey

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A 1927 promotion for the Calavo company's first shipment of a
COURTESY CALAVO GROWERS

Following months of interviews and strenuous research, San Diego County resident Rob Crisell has written a comprehensive history book about

avocados in California, titled "California Avocado: A Delicious History," which will hit shelves Nov. 5.

Crisell was born and raised in Fallbrook, which has a history of rivaling Carpinteria for the title of Avocado Capital of the World. Fallbrook even hosted the first California Avocado Festival in 1963. "The air we breathed was avocados," Crisell told CVN.

The book began as a suggestion from Crisell's editor, he said, after completing his previous book "Temecula Valley Wineries." Crisell then dove into the research, spending nine months researching and interviewing individuals from the avocado industry, including Rick Shade and Scott Van Der Kar from Carpinteria.

Crisell's book chronicles the complete history of the avocado in California, going back to the first avocado trees planted in 1850, when the state was founded. The California Avocado Commission was formed in 1915, and would put out a journal or report every year beginning in 1915. This was an important source of information for Crisell, he said, with 109 reports to sort through, spanning over a century.

Carpinteria didn't become a hub for avocados in the late '80s, Crisell said, after land, water and labor prices skyrocketed in the San Diego Valley. Avocado farmers began planting in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, and in 2010, the northern counties of Santa Barbara, Ventura and San Luis Obispo surpassed San Diego County in avocado

production. There are now about 30,000 acres of avocados in the northern counties, and about 15,000 in San Diego County.

“Carpinteria will be right there, with a great view of the future of avocados,” Crisell said.

Carpinteria’s community also began taking a more active role in the avocado world, with Shade taking over as president of the California Avocado Commission in the late ‘80s. Local community members — such as Rob Godfrey, Connie Korbel, Debbie Murphy, Fran Puccinelli, Bob Ealee and John Franklin — would go on to organize the first California Avocado Festival in Carpinteria after a meeting in 1986.

His book also ventures into the many types of avocado, with more than 200 varieties. Originally, the fuerte avocado was the well-known favorite. It shipped well and ripened in April, meaning it wouldn’t compete with any summer fruits. In the 1950s, a postman created the hass species of avocado, which has a thicker skin than other species. The hass became the dominant species of avocado by 1970, Crisell said, and now 85% of all avocados produced in the world are hass avocados.

Though the avocado originated in Mexico, the hass avocado was a California invention, and soon Mexico saw the appeal. The thick skin kept the fruit from getting bruised during shipment, and turned a darker color when it was ripe.

Farmers in Mexico began planting hass avocados, and now the country has over 200,000 acres of hass avocados alone. For comparison, the United States has about 50,000 acres of hass avocados.

In 2000, 90% of all avocados consumed in the United States came from California, but now, Crisell said, about 85% of all avocados eaten in the U.S. are from Mexico. Crisell argued for Californian avocados, explaining that while Mexican avocados were good, they created an environmental impact by being shipped so far.

“I don’t think anything compares to avocados grown in California,” Crisell said.

“California Avocado: A Delicious History” is 192 pages, and will be released Nov. 5.

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