The Fruits Of Power

Posted on
The perfect
avocado is creamy green gold, a fruit that packs a powerful nutritional punch

Avocados, an immigrant species to Sri Lanka, pack a mighty nutritional punch.

Words Daleena Samara | **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

At this time of year, the avocado trees of central Sri Lanka are heavy with Rubensque fruit. Plump and luscious, they are a treat that visitors to Sri Lanka should not miss. Few other places can boast of such creamy avocado, an immigrant species relative of the laurel family, now firmly entrenched in the local landscape and cuisine. Nutritionally, it packs a punch far more powerful than any other fruit on earth.

Like many other fruits, the avocado's presence here is the result of colonisation. The species, a berry, is native to South America, where it was once a staple of the Mexicans. Archaeological excavations have found avocado seeds preserved in the tombs of the Aztecs who firmly believed in its potency, even in the afterlife. It is also a favourite food of the glyptodants, giant armadillos, of the Amazon.

The first three major species of avocado were recorded in South America, although hundreds of subspecies of different shapes and sizes exist. Sri Lanka is home to over a dozen of them, the island's wet zone providing perfect conditions for the propagation of the tree. The Dutch are credited for having introduced it to the island, although records show systematic cultivation of several different subspecies during the British occupation. Today, it is also a popular home garden crop, since it is very easy to grow.

The avocado is a hugely potent fruit, packed with beta carotene, sodium, potassium, magnesium, folic acid, thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, biotin, pantothenic acid, Vitamin E and Vitamin K, and beta-sitosterol, a compound that inhibits cholesterol production. It also contains gluthatione, which protects cells from oxidant stress, and the antioxidants lutein and zeaxanthin. Importantly, it has an alkalinising effect on the body, reducing acidity caused by meat and dairy products.

Avocados are also the only fruit containing Vitamin K, which aids blood coagulation. Its leaves have medicinal uses, and tender shoots can be used in herbal*kande* (congee).

The milk of the seed, which turns reddish or blackish brown when exposed to air, can be used as ink for art or writing, and as a natural rouge to heighten cheek colour. High Vitamin E content makes the creamed flesh of the fruit an effective face mask. The high penetration rate of the oil has made it a valuable ingredient in beauty treatments and products.

To choose a fruit, look for one that is evenly soft. Some varieties, such as the large green fruits, have a seed that loosens when the fruit matures. Shake the fruit gently and pick one in which the seed rattles. Also try to pick one with an intact stalk. Ready to eat fruit should be evenly soft but firm, and not leave a dent when pressed or have skin that appears hollow to the touch – such fruit are sure to have blackened bitter flesh. Store on a soft surface at a low temperature. Some wrap the fruit in newsprint because the printer’s ink is said to hasten ripening. Ripe fruits can be refrigerated for a few days. However, the longer you refrigerate the fruit, the more susceptible it becomes to blackening inside. The perfect fruit should be evenly soft and creamy. It has to be consumed immediately because the flesh turns brown when it comes into contact with air. The flesh is rarely cooked because it contains tannins, and becomes bitter when heated.

Cooks will find the avocado remarkably versatile, lending itself to dishes for almost any time of day or purpose – from light snacks to breakfast, lunch, dinner and dessert. It can be had straight off the fruit, sliced or diced, sweet or savoury. It can be part of a salad or a delicious sandwich filling, thinly sliced or mashed to complement other ingredients like chicken, salad leaves and tomatoes. Its nutritional content makes it a healthy alternative for butter and margarine in sandwiches, which is probably why the avocado is called “butterfruit” in India. To prevent discolouration, add a few drops of lemon juice. Avocado oil can also be used as a salad dressing.

Can avocado be curried? You would think not, and it’s rare in Sri Lanka. But there are a dozen recipes for curried avocado, ranging from a Thai mixed vegetable green curry with cubed avocado, celery strips, zuchchini and green beans, to a feisty Indian curry that mixes avocado with coriander, green chillies and mustard. Adventurous chefs can indulge.

For sweet tooths, Avocados make a delicious smoothie, blended with condensed milk, soy-milk and a dash of vanilla. It can be a creamy addition to soups, when blended and added after the broth has been prepared and slightly cooled.

Probably the most delicious avocado preparation is avocado cream for dessert. Take a few slices of fresh, ripe avocado and blend with milk – condensed milk is excellent for this one – and a few drops of vanilla flavouring. Blend into a rich, cream, pile it into stemmed dessert bowl, garnish with a red cherry. Or enjoy it plain, with a dribble of kithul treacle. If you also happen to step into Kaema Sutra there are a number of unusual but delicious starters and desserts to indulge in. These include the Avocado starter with fresh avocado and a dollop of maldive fish sambal and Avocado dessert, avocado with a serving of curd, a dribble of kithul honey, and a sprinkling of nuts.

Available in abundance, the avocado nourishes and delights, providing endless ways to please the body and the senses.

