

## Opportunities Available for Spanish Avocados

Spain has a commercial avocado industry that has achieved success but one industry researcher believes opportunities are being missed in the European Union, which could lead to a much more robust program.

Iñaki Hormaza is a research professor at the IHSM la Mayora, a public research institute that belongs to the Spanish Council for Scientific Research (CSIC) and the University of Malaga. In an email interview with *From the Grove*, Mr. Hormaza gave an overview of the industry and the marketing potential that could lead to year-round production and sales to others members of the European community.

In Spain, he said about 80 percent of the avocado production is devoted to the Hass, with approximately 15,000 hectares (37,000 acres) of avocados in the ground. Of those, about 1,500 hectares are grown in the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago, and the rest are in continental Spain. The vast majority of Spain's acreage (12,500 hectares) are in the Andalusia region, which is in the south central to south east corridor. The area largely consists of the provinces of Malaga and Granada.

There are new plantings, including about 1,000 hectares in southern Portugal that are about one year old, and another 1,000 hectares in eastern Spain near Valencia (interestingly a high percentage of Lamb Hass) and western Andalusia (provinces of Cádiz and Huelva).

Hormaza said most of the new plantings are from new growers getting



into the avocado business (mostly replacing old citrus orchards). They typically use the existing packers for marketing the fruit.

“Interestingly, all the big avocado packinghouses import Hass avocados from other countries – mainly Peru and Chile and, lately, also Colombia – to re-export to other European countries,” he said. “So the avocados reach Spain by boat, are packed in southern Spain and shipped to the rest of Europe. The result of this is that the European customers do not really know when it’s avocado harvesting season in Spain.”

This is a practice which the Spanish researcher sees as a missed opportunity for the Spanish avocado grower. “I’m convinced that Spanish avocados

could reach a much higher price in the European market taking into account sustainability of the production and lower carbon footprint. In fact, I believe that either we do that or the Spanish avocado industry will not be competitive in the medium term.”

Hormaza argues that there are four or five avocado varieties that Spanish growers could plant resulting in year-round production and premium pricing. “We can produce avocados in Spain all year round but the big marketing companies are only interested in Hass. However, our window is narrowing since Peru is entering the European market as early as March, so most growers harvest Hass in Spain from December to March and from March the



packing companies import Hass from other countries, pack them here and send them to Europe. The problem is that those companies are not so interested in promoting Spanish avocados but only their labels.”

He said the cartons include the name of the Spanish packer and wording showing that they were packed in Spain. Country of origin, he says is in small letters if included at all.

Hormaza has been working with some smaller companies in an attempt to highlight different varieties and the advantage of buying local avocados grown in Spain. “For example, we are getting good prices on our Reed avocados in July-August; no big companies would buy Reed in those months since they are selling Hass from overseas,” he said.

Spain is a small player in the European market as its home-grown volume represent less than 10 percent of the European market, according to the university researcher. “In my opinion there is a clear niche to sell high quality avocados produced locally in Europe at a higher price than those imported from other countries.”

While the Lamb Hass variety is finding some growers that like it, Hormaza is not convinced of its viability. “The problem with Lamb Hass is that it is not sold differently,” he said. “It is sold

as Hass and it is harvested too early, before Peruvian Hass avocados arrive to Europe.”

As a result he said the Lamb Hass tends to be marketed in Europe with no distinction from the Hass. “The consumer usually does not distinguish visually between both but surely they notice that something weird is going on when they eat the fruit.”

He reiterated that with few exceptions, “European consumers only have access to Hass and, in some cases, to Fuerte.”

Not dissimilar from California, Hormaza said the main limitation to increasing avocado acreage in Spain is water availability. “With additional

water, either from desalination plants or bringing water from elsewhere, we could easily double the acreage but I do not see that happening in the near future,” he said.

Some groves in Portugal are already in production but most are still new plantings in the first years of production. Most of that fruit is marketed by Spanish companies.

As far as the Canary Islands are concerned, Hormaza said most of that fruit is marketed within the confines of those islands as that region is not allowed to import any (sub)tropical fruits from outside the islands. “Consequently, all the avocados consumed in the islands are produced locally. The excess is exported mostly to mainland Spain and, in some cases, also directly to the rest of Europe,” he said. “They are trying to develop a specific label for the Canarian avocados, similarly to what they have for Canarian bananas.”

According to Hormaza, avocado consumption in Spain is increasing but slowly. He said it is currently at about 1 kg per person (2.2 pounds) so most of the production is exported to other European countries, mainly the Netherlands, Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Belgium. 🥑

