



I Am THE
**FOOD
ON YOUR
PLATE**

Avocados

A “Fat Bomb” for Hearts and Minds

BY *Kate Lowenstein*
AND *Daniel Gritzer*

THE PLANT KINGDOM contains a staggering array of fruits, nearly every one trading in the same old thing: sweetness. My fruit brethren whisper sugary promises to coax animals into eating their flesh and spreading their seeds. Their offer is understandably appealing—eating simple carbs is the fastest way for any creature on the move to get the burst of energy it needs. But me? I’m the oddball that plies my charms not with sugar but with rich, silky fat.

Once a nutritional pariah, that fat is largely what earned me my current spot as an American health darling, chunked into almost every salad and mashed into guacamole as if every day were Super Bowl Sunday. You’ll get up to 30 grams of fat from each of me, and 20 of those are the mono-unsaturated kind credited with raising “good” HDL cholesterol and lowering heart disease risk. I’m also great for weight control, since I’m high in fiber and abundantly satiating.

What’s good for the heart and belly is also good for the mind. Researchers recently found that people over 50 who ate one of me a day for six months improved (*improved!*) their cognition. That’s likely courtesy of a pigment I carry called lutein. You’ll find it in leafy greens, too—in greater quantities, in fact—but in me the built-in presence of my monounsaturates helps the body absorb it, eventually shuttling it to the brain. With greens, you need to add olive oil to get the same effect.

As health experts began emphasizing good fats, their wish became your desire. In 1985, America ate about 4 million pounds of me per week; that figure is projected to be 50 million in 2019. In other countries, I've been wildly popular for decades: In Brazil, I'm mashed with condensed milk, cream, and lime juice; in Indonesia, I'm whipped into a shake with chocolate syrup; in Morocco, I'm blended with milk, sugar, and orange-flower water.

But as much as you humans love me, you're not nearly the first species to clamor for my substantial flesh. Millennia ago in my native southern Mexico and Central America, there existed beasts with digestive systems large enough to process and then disperse my massive pit. These were the so-called megafauna: sloths that could reach ten feet tall; armadillo-like glyptodonts that were as big as small cars; and gomphotheres, cousins of the elephant, with their ginormous tusks. Historians and botanists don't know exactly which of these snacked on me, but they all would have been able to pop me into their mouths like peanuts, then poop out my pits far and wide for new trees to grow. Without them to spread my unusually large seed, my creamy green gift would have been little more than a weird and momentary blip in fruit's sugary history.

Fast-forward to about 13,000 years ago, when humans came along and hunted my behemoth patrons into

AVOCADO-COFFEE SMOOTHIE

Combine the flesh of 1 ripe Hass avocado, 1 cup whole milk, ½ cup sweetened condensed milk, a pinch of salt, and 8 ice cubes and blend until smooth. Blend in 3 tablespoons strongly brewed coffee, such as an espresso shot, cooled to room temperature. Drizzle chocolate syrup on the inner walls of the serving cups to make a swirl before filling with the smoothie. Makes about two 12-ounce servings. Note: This smoothie also tastes great without the coffee. And for a colder beverage, simply add more ice; prechilling the liquid ingredients in the refrigerator will also help keep the drink cold.



MARK DERSE/TOH, FOOD STYLIST: SARAH FARMER/TOH

extinction. That would have been the end of me, too, had people not decided that they also loved a dose of plant-based fat. While human digestion can't accommodate my pit, your hands can, and I was able to achieve even wider distribution via the thumb-carrying *Homo sapiens* who ate me and tossed my seed here and there.

With agriculture, things got even better for me. I spawned into hundreds more varieties, which are today grown from South Africa to New Zealand and California to Indonesia. Some of my strains are the size of a chicken's egg, with a peel so thin you can eat its skin and flesh together, like an apple. Others are as large as a football. Some, such as the Hass (which makes up most of the American market), turn black and pebbly on the outside when mature; others are green and smooth at peak ripeness. Thankfully for the farmers who transport me across the United States from California and Mexico, I ripen off the tree and therefore ship well.

If you buy me before I've ripened, you can put me in a brown paper bag

for a few days to speed things up, as I produce a gas called ethylene that promotes ripening. Adding an apple or a banana—also ethylene-producing fruits—makes the process even more efficient. To test me for ripeness, apply gentle pressure anywhere on my skin; if it yields, I'm probably ready to eat or to put in the fridge, where the softening process will slow.

One last word—of caution. There has been a spate of “avocado hand,” which is what happens when well-meaning guac makers whack their knives at my pit in hopes of dislodging it but instead find themselves with a blade in the palm. ER doctors report an increase in such incidents and strongly advise caution when preparing me. Please listen to them. My reputation for being both healthy and rich gets dinged when I bite the hand that breeds me. 

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Intergalactic Buzz

It sounds like a plot for a Martian movie, but scientists really are planning to unleash a swarm of robotic bees on the Red Planet. These bumblebee-size “Marsbees” (as NASA is calling them) could replace most of the clunky, expensive rovers that are busily searching for methane gas emissions and other signs of Martian life.

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