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**Avocados are stuck in Mexico, but their prices are headed north**

We’re paying as much as $3 per avocado as growers in Mexico hold out for higher prices.

In 2014 we had the Great Lime Shortage. Is 2016 gearing up to be the year of the Great Avocado Shortage?

The causes are similar: A fruit grown in Mexico is not making its way north. While deeply embedded in California’s food identity — and a major crop here — most U.S. avocados are imported from Mexico.

Mexican growers are withholding fruit as they try to negotiate higher payment from packers, and now the wholesale avocado price is two to four times higher than usual. As the primary U.S. supplier this time of year, after California’s season has ended and not much is coming out of Chile or Peru, the growers in Mexico have leverage.

These Common Household Foods Are Actually Radioactive

 “Right now, it’s one or two countries supplying the world with avocados,” said Dimitri Vardakastanis, co-owner of three San Francisco grocery stores, including Gus’s Market. Vardakastanis has noticed sharp price increases over the past three months, and is now selling avocados for $1.99 each, $2.99 for organic.

Last year at this time, the United States imported 45 million pounds of avocados weekly from Mexico, but it imported only 13 million pounds last week, according to the [Hass Avocado Board](http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=food&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Hass+Avocado+Board%22). That’s after a somewhat difficult California harvest, which runs spring through summer, with a little bit in fall. The state’s avocado farms struggled with drought-weakened trees that produced less and smaller fruit than usual, said [Phil Henry](http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=food&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Phil+Henry%22), president of [Henry Avocado Co.](http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=food&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Henry+Avocado+Co.%22), a grower and importer in Escondido (San Diego County).

“There has been an extreme slowdown of harvest and in some cases a stoppage of harvest,” said Henry of the Mexican growers. Last week, they were down to 25 percent of normal volume, and this week less than 10 percent of usual.

Henry thinks price negotiations with growers should resolve any day now, but there will be a lag after harvest resumes. It takes several days to pack and ship avocados from Mexico to the Bay Area; the fruit then must ripen two to four days before it is sent to markets and restaurants.

Avocados have been imported into the United States from Mexico only since 1997, when a trade ban was lifted, and only since 2007 into California. In 2015, the U.S. brought in 886,392 tons of avocados from Mexico, while California supplied 131,289 tons, according to the Hass Avocado Board.

Limes sold in the U.S. also come primarily from Mexico, and they were severely limited in 2014 due to drought and a cold winter, and also because growers, some controlled by drug cartels, withheld supply. Many speculate there are similar forces at work with avocados.

“Most of the growers in Mexico have wanted to harvest, but it’s been a small minority of growers that have wanted to exert this work stoppage,” said Henry. “Of course it’s also hurting the workers, the harvesters, the people that do the packing and truck drivers going north.”

While larger supermarket chains won’t have as much of a problem because they have contracts in place that guarantee supply, smaller retailers and restaurants will be hit, said [Sarah Garcia](http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=food&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Sarah+Garcia%22), co-owner of [Pacific Produce](http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=food&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Pacific+Produce%22), a South San Francisco distributor.

“I think this is more severe than the lime situation, because we buy so many avocados in this country,” she said.

But Vardakastanis was adamant that his family’s stores won’t run out of avocados, because their suppliers have plenty in storage. They are just having difficulty getting properly ripe fruit.

He and his staff advise customers who crave avocados for their salads, smoothies and toast to keep them out of direct sunlight for ripening. “Don’t refrigerate them,” he said. “Put them next to apples or oranges that release gases that ripen avocados.”

At the four Bay Area Tacolicious restaurants, which go through more than 1,000 avocados a day for salsa, guacamole and other dishes, owner [Joe Hargrave](http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=food&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Joe+Hargrave%22) is philosophical about the shortage. Even though his cost for a 40-piece case of avocados is higher than $80, compared with the usual $39 to $59, he doesn’t plan to change menu prices.

He jokingly presented a strategy that’s unlikely to convince many avocado lovers: “Maybe we’ll have our waiters say you shouldn’t get the guacamole, it’s not very good.”