



The Hass® the Hass avocado



Rudolph and Elizabeth Hass
in front of an avocado tree

As with many good things—penicillin, X-rays, Bob Ross paintings—the avocado that most people know and love resulted from a happy accident.

The year 1925 was a big one for letter carrier **R.G. “Rudie” Hass**. That year, the former door-to-door salesman began using that experience in his new job at the Pasadena, CA post office, going door to door on a walking route.

It also was the year that the Pasadena Branch 228 member purchased a small avocado orchard in the nearby city of La Habra Heights, hoping to make money from “green gold.” He reportedly was inspired by a magazine advertisement with dollar bills hanging from avocado branches.

Hass’s 1.5-acre grove contained a variety of cultivars, including Lyon,

Pueblas, Nabras and Fuerte, the last being the most popular at the time.

The following year, Hass bought avocado seeds from a farmer in Whittier, CA, planning to grow his own seedlings and graft branches from the Fuerte onto them.

The experiment was a success—with one stubborn exception. One holdout simply refused to graft. In frustration, Hass wanted the resister cut down, but the professional grafter he had hired for the job persuaded him to leave it be.

As the outlier grew, it bore unusual fruit. Avocado skins then were green and smooth; these were dark and bumpy. The maverick sapling also began bearing at a very small size—a mere 14 inches high—far smaller than other avocado trees. Perhaps most

Far right: The Hass avocado mother tree in La Habra Heights, CA, before it died

Right: A plaque was placed near where the mother tree used to be.

Below: Hass's patent documentation for his avocado tree



surprisingly, his children preferred the taste of the eccentric avocado to the others.

When the tree bore more fruit than his family could eat, he sold the extra avocados to his co-workers at the post office. Eventually the oddity found its

way into a local supermarket. There, the avocados sold for \$1 each—the equivalent of \$14 today—with chefs in well-to-do homes being among the buyers.

In 1935, Hass patented the peculiarity using his name—which is often misspelled (as Haas) and mispronounced (to rhyme with boss). He then entered into an agreement with a local farmer to produce and market Hass trees.

Unfortunately, there would be no grand-scale reaping of dollars from avocado branches for Hass. His patent was widely flouted by many farmers, who simply grafted Hass branches onto other seedlings to get what they wanted, bypassing royalty payments. The carrier-farmer made less than \$5,000 over the 17-year life of his patent, the equivalent of \$90,000 now.

One month after the patent expired, Hass, who had been working as a letter carrier throughout his orchard adventures, suffered a heart attack. A month later, he died. He was 60.

Hass would no doubt be shocked at how his avocado has taken root not just in California, but the world. As author Brian Handwerk notes in “Holy Guacamole,” his story on avocados for *Smithsonian* magazine, there is good reason the Hass is the cream of the crop. “The trees grow vigorously, are easy to propagate and produce an impressive amount of fruit by only the

second or third year. They have a longer harvest season than other avocados and, perhaps most importantly, the Hass’s thicker skin makes it superior ... when it comes to handling fruit and shipping it long distances.”

Today, the Hass varietal accounts for 95 percent of California’s avocado crop and 80 percent of the crop worldwide.

The last surviving of Hass’s five children, Charles, as well as several grandchildren, were interviewed in 2014 by the *Ventura County Star*. They were amused by people thinking they’re rich, and are philosophical about the wealth that could have been theirs if Rudie and Elizabeth had been a bit more business-savvy.

Grandchild Jeff Hass said his grandmother Elizabeth felt that the Hass avocado was God’s gift, not a money-making venture. “She was very religious,” he said. Son Charles cited something his mother wrote saying that Rudie thought the tree was “God’s doing.”

Fortunately, the carrier-farmer kept his day job during his orchard adventures. Perhaps that also was divine intervention: Elizabeth long outlived him and needed his postal pension to survive. **PR**

