



Avocado-Toast and Drug Cartels

Superfood Production and its consumption in Germany

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Abstract

In recent years many Latin-American foods have become popular globally as “superfoods”. This article analyses the popular discourse in Germany (ca. 2015-2019) and its ambiguities around one of them: Avocado. On the one hand avocados are considered emblematic for the “millennials” and are embedded in a vague discourse around health and sustainability. On the other hand, their production causes negative ecological and socio-political impacts in the main production area, the Mexican state of Michoacán.

Keywords

avocado, nutrition, popular culture, superfood, Mexico

Avocado Toast und Drogenkartelle: Die Produktion eines Superfoods und sein Konsum in Deutschland

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahren haben viele lateinamerikanische Lebensmittel als „Superfoods“ weltweite Popularität erreicht. Dieser Artikel analysiert den populären Diskurs und dessen Ambiguitäten in Deutschland (ca. 2015-2019), um ein lateinamerikanisches „Superfood“: Avocado. Einerseits gelten Avocados als emblematisch für die „Millennials“ und sind in einen vagen Diskurs um Gesundheit und Nachhaltigkeit eingebettet. Andererseits verursacht ihr Anbau negative ökologische und soziopolitische Folgen in ihrer Hauptanbauregion, dem mexikanischen Bundesstaat Michoacán.

Schlagwörter

Avocado, Ernährung, Popkultur, Superfood, Mexiko

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Introduction

In this article I will analyse the popular discourse around avocados in Germany. They are often described as “superfoods” (meaning extremely healthy) with a rather vague notion of “sustainability”. The topics of “health” and “sustainability”, particularly in the context of food, have gained a wider importance in the last couple of years, but often it is unclear to what exactly these buzz words refer and whose consumption patterns are described with these terms.

This article is based on my master thesis, where I analysed the relation between the rising demand of quinoa and avocado in Europe and elsewhere and its production in Latin America. Due to the space restrictions I will focus solely on avocado, answering the following questions: How are avocados discussed in popular discourse and how is the rising demand impacting the Mexican state of Michoacán? Michoacán is the largest producer of avocado worldwide, thus offering a relevant insight. In an ever more interconnected world the relations between production and consumption, particularly of food, need to be brought together in academic analysis. Though there is already an extensive amount of investigations into the topic of specific foods and their presentation as being particularly healthy, I have not encountered any investigation centring on the idea of “superfood”.

In the following section I will discuss theoretical baselines of food production and consumption and how to bring them together in the analysis. Afterwards, in section three, I give an overview of several aspects regarding nutrition and its social components that are widely discussed in the relevant literature. In section four I discuss briefly the methodology I used. In the following section I present my research results regarding the aspects presented in the third section, and in sections six and seven I present the results of my research on how avocados are presented in modern pop cultural discourse and on the developments in Michoacán. The final section is a conclusion of the previous sections.

Analysing Food Relations

Since the focus of this paper lies on the consumption of food, the following will deal in broad terms with an analytical perspective of consumption: the commodity fetish.¹ Many studies on consumption refer to the concept of commodity fetish coined by Karl

¹ The term “fetish” is not unproblematic, since it was originally used by Europeans to refer to religious objects from various parts of Africa. This term was not used by African cultures themselves but employed as an umbrella term by European collectors (Dunzendorfer 2015: 634-635). Marx coined this term to explain his critique of “capitalist illusions” with the ideas of his time about materialistic superstitions of so called “savages” (Dunzendorfer 2015: 637). Since I am not aware of an alternative term I will use the term fetish in this paper.

Marx (for example Bryant and Goodman 2004). The term is used roughly to describe the relations of alienation between producers and products and consumer and product (Eden 2011: 171), which in turn leads to the product becoming the subject of these social relations and having “a life of its own”, while the people involved are relegated to being objects (Habermann 2012: 18). Eden explains this idea with the example of a sports shoe that “becomes not merely an object made of rubber and cloth, but a cultural symbol of much greater fantasy: of style and exclusivity, for example. The consumer can buy the symbol in order to buy into that fantasy - but the consumer does not want their fantasy to be spoiled by thoughts of exploited workers and tortured animals” (2011: 171). This fantasy is reinforced through advertisement and especially the connection to stars and other prominent people (Eden 2011: 17). The conclusion of the analysis of commodity fetishes is often that these have to be lifted like a veil, otherwise would “[...] consumers [...] remain in ignorance of the ‘real’ nature of capitalism as a social relation and accordingly can play no part in bringing about progressive social change” (Goodman et al. 2012: 5). Jackson critiques this idea strongly, stating that knowledge about the methods of production does not necessarily lead to neither a change in consumption nor to an improvement of the conditions of productions (Jackson 2002: 6). Furthermore, he explains that it is problematic to assume that consumers are not aware of the conditions of productions and could be manipulated so easily (Jackson 2002: 8).

In their work, Goodman and others criticise the dichotomy often raised between production and consumption, which makes them appear as two spheres closed off from each other (Goodman et al. 2012: 34). Instead, they call for food and commodities to be understood not only as fetishes representing economic exploitation, but also as objects that mirror society as a whole and whose study makes it possible to learn more about society and social change (Goodman et al. 2012: 34-35). To encompass both spheres, production, and consumption, they advocate for a focus on “food knowledge” that would allow to take the agency of consumers into account (Goodman et al. 2012: 35). They elaborate on this in the following quote: “[...] food politics encompasses worlds beyond the classical sociological terrain of the labor process, exchange, and meaning. In particular, food is also a realm of knowledge. Growing and eating are both practices imbued with ways of knowing the world, and with knowing the ways to construct the kind of world we want to inhabit” (Goodman et al. 2012: 44).

We can find a similar idea, the call for a focus on knowledge in the analysis of commodity relations, in the writings of Arjun Appadurai:

Commodities represent very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge. In the first place, and crudely, such knowledge can be of two sorts: the knowledge (technical, social, aesthetic, and so forth) that goes into the production of the commodity; and the knowledge that goes into appropriately consuming the commodity. The production knowledge that is read into a commodity is quite different from the consumption knowledge that is read from the commodity. Of course, these two

readings will diverge proportionately as the social, spatial, and temporal distance between producers and consumers increases. (Appadurai 1986: 41)

In my opinion, knowledge about the consumption of food also diverges strongly spatially, so that it is consumed differently or that certain techniques have to be learned first, for example the correct slicing of avocados (Rohwetter 2017).

Literature Review: Superfoods and Diets

In this section I give an overview of several aspects regarding nutrition which are widely discussed in academic literature.

It is important to keep in mind that nutrition is much more than the intake of food, as for example Barlösius points out, in reference to the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, food taste is an integral part of social habitus (2016: 119), making it a central part of identity and a way to demonstrate social status. The term “superfood” is not academic, but rather a term ascribed by the industry or media. If it appears in academic texts at all, it is generally put into quotation marks.² As it is predominantly a marketing term, there are no restrictions or guidelines to what food can be labelled as a superfood. Most often described with this term are “exotic” foods, exotic for European palates that is, like Chia, Goji and Açai berries, Moringa, Maca and less “exotic” ones like bilberries, beet root, salmon, pomegranate (Saleh-Ebrahimi 2016) and more recently kale.³ These superfoods are advertised as particularly healthy, often with reference to their high levels of antioxidants which are supposed to be beneficial for human health (Saleh-Ebrahimi 2016).

However, these claims are not yet scientifically proven, and the levels of antioxidants and other ingredients advertised on these products are often laboratory values, which can only be obtained under very specific circumstances often unfeasible in everyday consumption patterns (Simons 2019: 95). Another problem regarding the usage of superfoods lies in the fact that they are regularly consumed in highly processed form, as pills or powders, which often do not disclose the amount of the ingredients and could contain pesticides (Verbraucherzentrale 2018).

Apart from being presented as extremely healthy, superfoods are often described as originating from either an idealised past or an idealised nature, which often comes hand in hand with an idealisation of the farmers who produced them (Raether 2017). Thus, certain superfoods come with a nostalgic discourse about “the healthiness and wholesomeness of rural life” (Lupton 1996: 86). Lupton concludes that this discourse

² Some authors use the term “wonder foods” (see for example Scrinis 2008). Due to better legibility I will stop using quotation marks for the term “superfood” from this point on.

³ It is interesting that when used in a superfood context (for example in a smoothie) the German term “Grünkohl” is hardly ever used.

about “natural foods” is strongly spiritual, and that food has thus come to represent for many people “a secular means of attributing meaning and value to everyday practices”(Lupton 1996: 87).

Lupton summarizes the idea of superfoods affirming that their taste or in fact any gustatory pleasures they may provide, are hardly ever mentioned: “Alternatively, other foodstuffs are constructed as medicines, substances that should be eaten because of their nutrients or other components believed to be health-giving, or because they are low in salt, fats or cholesterol, rather than any gustatory pleasure they may provide” (Lupton 1996: 80).

Warde argues in a similar way that rarely “is it suggested that the care of the body might be a pleasure; rather it is an instrumental matter of efficiency and body maintenance” (Warde 1997: 92). He then elaborates this idea saying that this search for efficient body maintenance is strongly connected to middle class incomes and is also deeply gendered (Warde 1997: 92).

Benedictus adds another perspective to this question by stressing that often consumers eat superfoods to remedy their other food choices:

Few lies can be told in one word, but “superfood” manages it. It is such an appealing idea: that some foods are healthy, some unhealthy and some superhealthy. Why change your habits, when you can correct them by adding goji berries? Why settle for boring old good health, when chia seeds on your cereal can make you superhealthy? Little wonder that 61% of British people reported buying foods because they were supposed superfoods, according to a 2014 survey conducted by YouGov for Bupa (Benedictus 2016).

The term superfood itself seems to ascribe to these foodstuffs an aura of being extremely healthy, as even nearly magical or in other words a “literal fetishism of commodities” (Appadurai 1986: 54).

Since some superfoods can be particularly expensive, it is not surprising that a study in the Netherlands showed a strong correlation between higher income and social capital (using as variables frequent participation in cultural events like visits to museums, theatre, and opera) with a higher consumption of different superfoods (namely spelt, quinoa, goji berries, chia, and wheatgrass) (Oude Groeniger et al. 2017: 1).

However, this idea of consuming particular nutrient dense foodstuffs to make ones diet not only healthier but more efficient, without regard to taste appears to be the logic result of wider trends in modern nutrition, which I discuss below.

Nutritionism

Nutritionism refers to the focus on particular nutrients in a foodstuff rather than on its entire composition or taste (Scrinis 2008). This leads to the idea that any problem with modern dietary patterns “can be tackled by the more or less precise quantitative tinkering of the nutrient profile of foods and diets—by nutritional tinkering rather than by means of more far-reaching qualitative changes in diets and the types of foods eaten” (Scrinis 2008: 43). While also leading to the idea that a diet based on a variety of “whole foods” (fruits, vegetables, nuts, whole grains, and fish) was not sufficient and instead people need to consume particular “nutrient-dense” foods (Scrinis 2013: 174).

Efficiency and self-control

Following the idea that it is necessary to consume particular nutrient dense foodstuffs and not just a large variety of “regular” food, leads to the idea that individuals need to monitor their own alimentation very carefully. Lupton explains that in lay and medical discourse food is presented as a mayor course of bodily health or sickness in a way that the assumption “is made that as long as the ‘correct’ diet is followed faithfully, then longevity and good health are guaranteed” (Lupton 1996: 74). On the other hand, other foods and dietary patterns are represented as unhealthy and the source of sickness (Lupton 1996: 77) and people not heeding the “warnings of health promoters are portrayed as lacking rationality and proper self-control” (Lupton 1996: 74). This idea can be summed up in the following quote by Lupton about the moralistic discourse her interviewees used to describe dietary patterns: “‘we are what we eat’, that we are personally responsible for our state of health” (Lupton 1996: 83).

Consequently, this idea leads to the conclusion that sickness or health are something that individuals have in their power to control (Reitmeier 2013: 266-267), and therefore people suffering from possibly dietary related sicknesses are blamed for their supposedly wrong diets (Reitmeier 2013: 270). Another example for this demand of self-discipline of consumers is overweight, which is extremely stigmatised (Klotter 2011: 125), particularly in women (Barlösius 2016: 292).

However, this focus on individual responsibility is not only referring to the individual’s bodily health but also the responsibility for the long term ecological and social effects connected to these food choices. Reitmeier states in this context that the common response by different politicians to several food scandals or excessive usage of pesticides in agriculture, was a strong petition to consumers to not consume these products rather than taking regulatory measures (Reitmeier 2013: 277). He comes to the conclusion that the “conscious consumer” is held responsible through his consumption choices for global problems like deforestation, social justice for food producers, humane husbandry etc. (Reitmeier 2013: 275).

Guthman concludes that the focus in discourses around “consumer choice, localism, entrepreneurialism, and self-improvement demonstrates the extent to which food politics have been at the cutting edge of neoliberal regulatory transformations” (2008: 437).

Gender roles

Food is gendered (Barlösius 2016: 5), so much so that certain foods and dietary patterns are considered male or female (Barlösius 2016:130).⁴ She explains that in her interviews many women and men presented themselves as consuming a large amount of corresponding “gendered food” like fruits and salads (female) and sausages and meat (male) (Barlösius 2016: 130). However, the actual differences in what people ate were a lot smaller (Barlösius 2016: 130-131). This led her to the conclusion that many people feel a desire to present their eating patterns in a gender-conforming way (Barlösius 2016: 131). However, not just the type of food is gendered but also the mode of preparation: on the one hand barbecue and restaurants with their focus on taste and delight are considered male, whereas the everyday food to fill you up and home cooking are considered female (Barlösius 2016: 131).

Many authors underline that the care about a healthy diet is considered typically female (for example Parsons 2015: 83). This preoccupation about health and eating healthy on the one hand refers to women themselves and on the other hand to being responsible for the health and eating patterns of the entire family. This female coded responsibility is not only assumed by women themselves (Barlösius 2016: 286), but also ascribed to them by society since in public discourse about the rise of diet related illnesses, this rise is often explained with the rising number of women in the workforce (who are therefore assumed to have less time to adequately feed their children) (Barlösius 2016: 132).

Even though particularly organic food can be much more expensive than highly processed food, the discrepancy in alimentation is hardly ever explained with the higher costs. Instead, people not eating as the recommendations propose are considered uninformed or lacking a connection to “good eating” (Reitmeier 2013: 282-283). This is why different actors, being state representatives and organs (Barlösius 2016: 294-295) or food activist (Guthman 2008: 436) are putting a particular stress on transmitting information, believing that, following the ideal of the responsible citizen, consumers will follow the advice given to them consciously and rationally (Barlösius 2016: 296). However, the idea that alimentation is completely rational or chosen completely freely does not take into account that the options available to a person are limited by economic factors or cultural norms (Parsons 2015: 11).

⁴ There are a myriad of gender expressions other than male or female. However, due to a lack of more nuanced sources I will only use these terms here referring to cis-gendered regimes.

Methodology

Since I used a discourse analysis for my investigation, I will firstly present a short definition: "Discourse analysis is the study of the rhetorical organization of texts, investigating how constructions of the world are designed so they appear as stable facts and how alternatives are undermined" (Farbotko 2005: 284). However, there is a debate around the question 'What constitutes a text?' and thus can be used in the analysis, since some authors expand the definition of text beyond the written word to include images and movies (Traue et al. 2014: 497).

The topic of the discourse is not only discussed by and in the discourse, but rather is the topic produced through the discourse (Traue et al. 2014: 498-499). The focus of social science discourse analysis is thus the analysis of forms of knowledge in their context of use, over a certain period of time. This is not a matter of investigating concrete speech situations, i.e. the individual "utterance" (*énonciation*), but rather an investigation of the interaction between the statement (*énoncé*), the social conditions and the consequences of this statement (Traue 2014 et al.: 494-495). Following Michel Foucault, the analysis of power relations is often a central element of discourse analysis: power relations can be conditions of discourse - for example, when accessing and occupying speaker positions ("Who may speak?"), but they can also be understood as an effect of discourse - for example, when they produce normative, normalising or legitimising interpretations ("What can/cannot be said?") (Traue et al. 2014: 495).

The media I analysed are several recipe books by well-known authors (Jamie Oliver and Attila Hildmann⁵) which included the word superfood in their titles. For the same reason I added the recipe book "Gabel statt Skalpel" based on the popular documentary "Forks Over Knives" (Del Sroufe et al. 2013). Furthermore, I included several popular German food blogs ("A Very Vegan Life", "Backen macht glücklich", "dinnerumacht", "Eat This", "Geschmacksmomente", "Julie feels good", "Veggies" and "Ye Olde Kitchen"), manuals on healthy eating, different newspapers and Instagram posts in my analysis. Thus the concept of discourse in this paper expands beyond the written or printed word and includes images and the internet as omnipresent aspects of our lives. Particularly the internet, in this case blogs, offers an opportunity to observe the interaction between authors and readers, and the possibilities for participation in the discourse are different than in "classic media", as theoretically anyone with an internet connection can take part.

Since all quotes from the analysed media are in German, I am giving a translation in the footnotes where I believed them to be necessary.

⁵ When I finished my research in 2019 Attila Hildmann was known as a controversial but influential cook, recently he has become more widely known in Germany for spreading conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and anti-Semitic utterances.

Analysis of the Blogs and Other MEDIA

One aspect that is recurring frequently is a kind of moral obligation to eat healthy to prevent sicknesses. This moral obligation refers on the one hand to oneself (see for example Hildmann 2015: 24) and on the other hand to prevent the suffering of loved ones caused by one's illness:

Krankheit ist nicht nur mit zunehmend teuren Arzt- und Arzneirechnungen verbunden, die teils aus eigener Tasche gezahlt werden müssen, sowie mit Versicherungsbeiträgen (und den versteckten Kosten, mit denen Versicherungen hinter den Kulissen kalkulieren), sondern es hat auch einen negativen Einfluss auf all das, was in Ihrem Leben die größte Rolle spielt, sei es Zeit mit der Familie und Freunden zu verbringen, körperliche, geistige und persönliche Ziele zu erreichen, sich für die Gemeinschaft zu engagieren oder einfach Ihr Leben zu leben. Die Kosten einer Krankheit sind nicht allein für Sie hoch- sie sind es auch für die Menschen in Ihrem Umfeld. (Del Sroufe 2013: 14)

This moralising tone is also very present in the descriptions of different foods, which are categorised as "good" or "evil" (see for example Oliver 2015b: 225). It is however, noteworthy that particularly this author, Jamie Oliver, implies that "evil" or unhealthy foods are able to provide greater gustatory pleasure than healthy ones stating that: "ganz ohne kulinarische Sündenfälle ist ein dauerhaft entspanntes Verhältnis zu gesunder Küche wohl gar nicht möglich" (Oliver 2015b: 9).

If everyone is responsible for their own health it is no surprise that forcing oneself to eat healthy is a recurring topic, as Attila Hildmann puts it in very drastic terms: "Aber man muss jeden Tag lernen, den Arsch hochzukriegen. Wer wirklich erfolgreich sein möchte, muss durch das tiefe und dunkle Tal der Selbstdisziplin gehen. Du bekommst nichts geschenkt im Leben, deine Lebenszeit ist begrenzt- investiere sie ganz bewusst!" (Hildmann 2013: 272)

This focus on self-discipline implies that people, whose diets are considered unhealthy, are lacking discipline. Since superfoods are considered extremely healthy, many authors recommend them as part of a "correct" diet and as an unspecific cure-all (see for example Hildmann 2015: 14).

As mentioned above this moral demand is particularly true for women in two aspects: regarding their own bodies but also regarding the diets of their families. In my research this gendered approach to healthy eating was particularly visible in the food blogs: The majority of the blogs analysed were written by women (or heterosexual couples) and also used by women (I am basing this assumption on the user names in the comment sections). Especially the Blog *Julie feels good* leaves the reader with the impression that men do not care about healthy eating and it therefore being the responsibility of women to give them healthy food: "Selbst mein Schatz war begeistert – und wer hier schon

länger liest weiß, dass das das Schlüsselwort ist, um die Bowl auch an euren Männern zu testen :)” (Julie feels good 2017).⁶

In this blog the preoccupation with one’s health, but particularly with a slim body is visible quite frequently in the comments and articles and appears also to be a predominantly female preoccupation: “Als ich vor Jahren das Clean Eating und den Sport für mich entdeckt habe und die Erfolge damit sich an meinem Körper zeigten, war ich natürlich Feuer und Flamme [...]. [Alle] (Frauen) in meinem Umfeld wollten natürlich mein Geheimnis wissen und meine Rezepte bekommen” (Julie feels good 2018).

A last aspect that is mentioned in several of the analysed sources is the personal responsibility of consumers to prevent climate change and the implementation of ecological standards through their diets and consumption choices:

Der Zustand unserer Erde ist -betrachten wir es objektiv- katastrophal [...]. Dabei ist es doch eigentlich so einfach, dieses System zu kippen, wenn wir begreifen, welche Macht wir alle besitzen: die Macht des Konsums. Ich habe lange gebraucht, um darauf zu kommen. Aber heute bin ich mehr als zuvor davon überzeugt, dass wir mit jedem Kauf, den wir tätigen, die Welt ein Stückchen schlechter oder besser machen können. (Hildmann 2012: 254)

It is striking that the only power individuals hold are perceived as consumption choices and that other aspects are not included as an option. However, this author in particular stresses the health impacts of a vegan diet, especially on the improvement of body weight and looks (Hildmann 2012: 13).

Avocado

In one small fruit, you can see a glimpse of how the modern food industry works – year-round availability, improved retailing, the elevated status of so-called “superfoods”, the influence of social media and millions spent on marketing. (Saner and Morales 2015)

The oldest evidence of a domesticated avocado was found in the Coxcatlan cave in Mexico, dating 8000-7000 BC (Bost et al. 2013: 12). However, I have hardly ever encountered this being mentioned to promote avocados, in striking contrast to other superfoods where the past is a constant point of reference as stated above.

Avocados contain many different minerals and vitamins and large amounts of unsaturated fats (Rather 2017). This unsaturated fat is a good example to show the change

⁶ “Even my darling was thrilled about it- and those of you who are already reading [this blog] for some time, know that this is the keyword to try this bowl on your men :)” (Julie feels good 2017, own translation).

in health perceptions: until the 1980s avocados were considered to be unhealthy due to their large amount of fats, since an entire avocado contains about 240 calories (Benedictus 2016). Only with the differentiation between “good and evil fats”, that is saturated and unsaturated fats, did this perception change (Rolff 2018). Since the turn of the century a steady increase in avocado consumption can be observed worldwide: in Germany the numbers nearly doubled between 2010 and 2015 (Raether 2017). One reason for this increase might be the inventions of special techniques to sell avocados ready to eat in the supermarkets (Saner and Morales 2015). Avocados arrive unripe in Europe and are then put into special ripening facilities (Saner and Morales 2015) which consume large amounts of energy. Waak contributes the rising demand of avocados to their presence in social media: “Wie viele Foodtrends verbreitete sich auch dieser von Nordamerika aus im Rest der westlichen Welt, nicht zuletzt dank Instagram. Mit wenig lässt sich gleichzeitig Gesundheitsbewusstsein (so vegan! Superfood!) und Genussfähigkeit (das ganze gute Fett) beweisen wie mit dem Bild eines hübsch arrangierten Avocado-Toasts” (Waak 2016).⁷

The Avocado Toast referenced in this quote seems to be the most popular version of eating avocados, at least outside of Latin America.

However, Waak is not the only author attributing the rise of avocados to social media: Raether states that they were the most popular food in 2015 on Pinterest (Raether 2017). In early April 2021 there were more than twelve million entries under the #avocado on Instagram (Instagram 2021a). Often avocados are presented as some kind of symbol or reference to the so called millennials (Herrmann 2018), people born roughly between 1980- 2000 (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). At least in the German press avocados are also often considered to be an integral element of a vegan diet (see for example Rolff 2018), therefore contributing to the vague perception of being a sustainable food: “Die Avocado ist die Frucht der Weltenretter, beliebt auch bei vielen, die zwar keine Veganer sind, sich aber ab und zu das Gefühl gönnen wollen, im Einklang mit der Umwelt und sich selbst zu sein” (Raether 2017).⁸

An example where this vague notion of sustainability is observable lies in the fact that the largest online store for “Eco Fashion & Green Lifestyle” in Germany is called “Avocadostore” (Avocadostore 2021).

Another reason why avocados became so popular surely is due to the fact that their taste is very mild and they can therefore be combined in a wide array of ways. Some

⁷ “Like many food trends this one also spread from North America to the rest of the Western world, not least thanks to Instagram. With few [things] can one simultaneously demonstrate one’s health awareness (so vegan! Super food!) and one’s capacity for enjoyment (all this healthy fat) as with a picture of a nicely arranged avocado toast” (Waak 2016, own translation).

⁸ “Avocados are the fruit of the world saviors, popular also by many who are not vegans themselves but like to treat themselves to the feeling of being in harmony with themselves and the environment” (Raether 2017, own translation)



Figure 1 (left): Avolatte (Instagram 2021c) / Figure 2 (right): Avocado proposal (woman 2018).

of these combinations are strange and sensational on purpose: “See the avolatte (coffee served inside an avocado shell), the avocado toast cocktail (a vodka-based avocado cocktail) and the avocado proposal box, which merged an avocado with lifelong commitment” (Ferrier 2018). Figures 1 and 2 show examples of these usages of Avocado.

Ferrier describes these peculiar combinations as the last throws of the avocado trend: “In our hearts they were delicious, but by 2018 it was too late for them. They had already internalized the weight of a generation struggling to find work and affordable housing, becoming stale metaphors on panel shows and a cheap and easy way to elucidate hipster culture if you weren’t quite sure what it was” (Ferrier 2018).

One could argue that these peculiar ways of consuming an avocado are ways to distinguish oneself from other people who are not familiarized with these forms, as well as from people who cannot afford to eat avocados that frequently. A similar argument can be made about the very large amount of videos which explain how to open an avocado without hurting oneself, which apparently is so common that these wounds are called “Avocado Hand” (see for example Oliver 2015a). As stated above this is also a clear example of circulating food knowledge.

Avocados were also popularized by different celebrities as for example Gwyneth Paltrow (Orenstein 2016). They are also a popular motif for tattoos, as exemplifies the singer Miley Cyrus (Larmer 2018) and on Instagram there were around 10.000 entries under #Avocadotattoo (Instagram 2021b). These tattoos are often used as symbols for

friendship or a couple, that is one person with an open avocado half with the stone, the other one without the stone, thus symbolizing unity (see Figure 3).

Avocados are not only used in a tattoo to represent unity, figure 4 shows a picture where avocados are used to represent a family, with the stone posing as the child. In this imagery we can see a neat representation of a healthy food linked to ideas about nurturing (a child), family and love, even lifelong commitment. In a way this relates to the ideas mentioned above about female responsibility for nurturing their family with healthy food.

These strong, positive emotions can also be found in the recipes and comments in the blogs, as the following quote shows: "Auch ich liiiebe [sic] einfach Avocado und Guacamole!" (Eat This 2014).

However, this extremely positive representation has changed slightly in the last couple of years due to the increase in critical publications about the production of avocados. Several national and international newspapers published articles about the problematic aspects related to avocado production: the immense usage of water (e.g. Raether 2017) and the involvement of organized crime in the production (e.g. Henkel 2016). In the blogs cited above this critique is addressed, but avocados are still used nonetheless (Julie feels good 2017 and Eat This 2017) and in fact those articles are sometimes even referenced ironically: "Hipstern tritt der Schweiß auf die Stirn, Trendverweigerer schütteln einfach nur den Kopf und es werden wieder die kritischen Beiträge des letzten Jahres herausgeholt: Wir feiern heute die Avocado. Aber so richtig! Mit Partyhütchen und Tröten. Es gibt ... jetzt halt' dich fest ... Avocado Fries!" (Eat This 2018).⁹

If we take those critical articles as a lifting of "the veil of commodity fetish", these ironic reactions seem to prove the hypothesis formulated by Jackson that knowledge about the production methods does not necessarily lead to a change in consumption patterns (Jackson 2002: 6).

Production in Mexico

It is very important to underline the fact, that avocados are generally considered to be sustainable because they are vegan. Due to the space restrictions of this article, I will not be able to discuss this more profoundly, however it needs to be said that though avocados need a lot of water in their production process, around 849 l/kg (Mekonnen and Hoekstra 2010a: 20), this number shrinks in comparison with, for example, the water needed to produce one kilogram of beef: 15.400 l/kg (Mekonnen and Hoekstra

⁹ "Hipsters will start to sweat, objectors to new trends will shake their heads and somebody will dig out the critical articles of the past year: We are celebrating avocados. For real! With party hats and trumpets. We are making...hold your breath...Avocado Fries!" (Eat This 2018, own translation).



Figure 3 (left): Avocado as a partner tattoo (Instagram 2021d) / Figure 4 (right): Avocados representing a family (Spreadshirt n.d.).

2010b:5) or other tropical crops such as coffee 18.153 l/kg or mangos with 1.314 l/kg (Mekonnen and Hoekstra 2010a: 20).

Mexico is the largest producer of avocados worldwide, and the Mexican state of Michoacán is by far the largest producer in Mexico with about 80-90% of the annual national harvest (Henkel 2016). This is mainly due to the fertile volcanic soil which, combined with a mild climate, enables four harvest per year (Henkel 2016). Mexico exports most of its production to the United States, nearly 90% of all imported Avocados in the US come from Michoacán (Larmer 2018). This development has only been possible after the signing of the free trade agreement (NAFTA) in the 1990s, lifting the import ban from 1914 (Larmer 2018) and financial support by the Mexican state and federal government (Martín Carbajal 2016). This shows that consumption patterns are to a certain extent influenced by political decisions impacting supply and demand.

Agren (2017) states that the profits from the exportation of avocados have already surpassed the revenue from oil exports in Mexico: “Not surprisingly, many believe that huge amounts of capital were invested in avocado orchards as a means of laundering drug money” (Maldonado Aranda 2013: 51).

Michoacán is a state in western Central Mexico and has been traditionally an area of marijuana and opium cultivation and “is now considered the global capital of synthetic drug production” (Maldonado Aranda 2013: 47). Due to its strategic importance, especially for the cocaine smuggle along the pacific coast up into the US (Maldonado

Aranda 2013: 47), Michoacán is fought over by several competing drug cartels (Vogel 2015: 46) and it is also the state where the then-President Felipe Calderon declared his war against the drug cartels in 2007 (Hernández Navarro 2014: 234).

After several years the cartel “los caballeros templarios” (The Knights Templar) became the dominant group in Michoacán (Vogel 2015: 45).¹⁰ *Los caballeros templarios* make their money in an array of different areas, apart from marihuana and opium production, racketeering, pirate copies, “rental fees” and steel exports using the port of Lázaro Cárdenas (Hernández Navarro 2014: 236-237).

However, one of their main profits comes from the avocado production: “Every link in the avocado production chain is a cash cow for the cartel, from the cuadrilleros, or pickers (whose employment agencies are forced to pay \$ 3.50 per worker per day), to those who buy, develop and sell plantations. The extortion racket is lucrative. In some municipalities, the estimated proceeds come to \$ 3 million per year” (Hootsen 2013). Hernández Navarro estimates that the *Templarios* earned more than one billion dollars per year through the avocado and lime trade alone (2014: 338). Producers had to increase their prices to compensate for the extortions which led to increased prices for lime in Mexico-City (Hootsen 2013). Prices for avocados have been climbing steadily in Mexico so that the per capita consume fell from ca. 9 kg/year to 7, 5 kg (Agren 2017). However, it is not proven that this price increase is directly linked to the cartels.

Furthermore, the *Templarios* have reportedly taken over plantation and packaging plants (Hootsen 2013), which also provides the possibility to plant marihuana between the avocado trees (Hermann 2018). Due to space restriction I can’t go into the complex question of the *autodefensas*, local self-defence groups against the cartels, for those interested in this topic I recommend Hernández Navarro (2014).

Apart from this, avocado plantations in Michoacán also play a huge role in local deforestation and other ecological hazards. According to the *Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales, Agrícolas y Pecuarias* (INIFAP) the amount of land dedicated to cultivate avocados grew between 1976 and 2005 by 95% mainly through deforestation, causing a loss of forestland of more than 500 ha/year (2009: 1). This leads to several problems: since avocado trees need more water than the predominant pine trees, the deforestation leads to local droughts and changes in the microclimate (Herrmann 2018) and secondly to a reduced absorption of CO₂ of about 0,5 tonnes per hectare less than the pine forests (INIFAP 2009: 1). The loss of forest grounds also has a strong impact on the local fauna, causing a stronger competition for diminishing food and space between all animals and

¹⁰ Since the turf wars among Mexican cartels are an ongoing process, the power dynamics among the cartels are shifting constantly. By early 2021 the *Templarios* have joined forces with other cartels to become the “*Carteles Unidos*”. However, regarding the impact on the avocado industry nothing has changed through the change of names and involvement of new illegal organisations (Hamilton and Fernández-Flores 2021).

microorganisms (INIFAP 2009: 19). This, alongside the widespread usage of pesticides, has led to a disappearance of local pollination insects, so that some plantations have had to import bees to pollinate their trees (INIFAP 2009: 20).

The amount of pesticides used have reached staggering heights, as the following quote shows: “cerca de 1,200 millones de kg de pesticidas y 11,000 millones de kg de fertilizantes se aplican directamente cada año a una superficie de 187 millones de hectáreas de cultivo” (INIFAP 2009: 45). Of this amount humans are exposed to around 50.000 substances from which only 2% have been studied at all (INIFAP 2009: 46). However, it is known that some of these pesticides are highly toxic and not only kill microorganisms but can also cause damage to human lungs and can contaminate the water for years (INIFAP 2009: 46). Since climate change will most likely lead to rising temperatures, thus leading to a higher activity of pests and plant diseases, this will in all likelihood lead to a further increase of pesticide usage (INIFAP 2009: 55).

Even though the pesticides cannot penetrate the thick skin of the avocados, they can however accumulate on the skin and get into the avocado flesh during the process of opening it (plusminus 2018), which shows how production hazards and consumption can be connected on a very direct level.

Further problems caused by the rising amount of plantations is the increased soil erosion, nearly 50% of soils in Michoacán are showing distinct signs of erosion (INIFAP 2009: 42). This is particularly true for the avocado plantations since there are very few plants covering the grounds between the trees, due to the pesticides and the thick shade of the avocado trees, thus presenting the danger that these soils could be washed away by heavy rains and possibly lead to landslides or inundations (Arroyo 2018).

The aim of this section was to show how Avocado production is caught up between the rising demand in the US (and elsewhere) and the specific local circumstances which influence the production to meet this demand. The adverse effects caused by the increasing production are relatively well known to consumers, or the information is at least accessible to consumers, thus showing that knowledge alone does not necessarily lead to a change in consumption patterns.

Conclusions

Food and its consumption are never just about the mere intake of calories but are socially and personally important aspect of our selves, while also being a useful example to study economic relations and socially constructed meanings and believes.

Avocados are an interesting case study because they have become so ubiquitous in popular culture that they are now perceived as much more than just food: They are often used to refer to an entire generation and on social media they are used to repre-

sent strong positive feelings or relationships. They are also seen as extremely healthy, demonstrating how societal perceptions of “healthy eating” have changed during the last decades, and as vaguely sustainable since they are vegan, in fact in many German newspaper articles they are presented as an integral part of a vegan diet.

This idea of sustainability contrasts strongly with the environmental impact their production has in Mexico and their importance for local drug cartels. However, it has to be said that they are not the only food which is used for profit by criminal organizations; another example is, as stated above, the lime production in the same state of Michoacán. Even though this information about the ecological and societal impact of the avocado production is readily available to consumers, this information is often addressed in the analysed media but does not lead to a change in the consumption pattern. This is at least noteworthy, as many of these blogs and media stress the personal responsibility for the environment through one’s consumption choices.

Their status as a superfood also exemplifies a general trend in contemporary discourses around food: a focus on nutrients and thus on efficiency in the consumption of food, disregarding other aspects of eating like taste, texture, emotional or cultural relations. Several ideas I have discussed in sections three and five are visible in the avocado: they can be used as a mode of distinction through their price but also through the particular creative modes of consuming it. Their usage as representation for family and love also alludes to the aspect of female caregivers through healthy eating and the analysed blogs with the strongest positive descriptions of avocados are written mostly by women. Strikingly enough, though we have seen this strong emotional relationship with avocados in these blogs, their taste is hardly ever mentioned and instead the authors tend to focus on their nutrient content and other health aspects.

As stated above superfoods are often presented in an idealised way, in the case of the avocado we can certainly observe an idealisation of the avocado itself, but also of healthy food and bodily health in general. However, in contrast to other superfoods I did not encounter an idealisation of the past or present of avocado production; rather the producers are hardly ever mentioned to promote avocados. This stands in an interesting contrast to other (Latin American) superfoods like Quinoa or Chia seeds, where we can find mentions of different pre-Hispanic cultures or modern day farmers quite frequently.

In conclusion we can observe that avocados are a neat example for wider trends in contemporary nutrition and the popular discourse surrounding it. Furthermore, they mirror certain societal ideas about personal responsibility (for a healthy body as well as ecological sustainability), gender relations (ascribing women the role of caretakers for their family’s eating patterns) and global connections between consumption and production of foods and the circulation of knowledge regarding these foodstuffs.

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