

Avocado PIONEER

I knew Doug Brown's superb avocados long before I met him. This genial American-turned-Kiwi is one of the old-timers of the local organic sector. Recently he was honoured by BioGro as a member of the '30-year club' – one of three veterans who have been certified for three decades. About 15 years ago Doug and two colleagues wrote the *Organic Avocado Resource Guide* – it's still available from Soil & Health (see page 60 to order).

Doug and his partner Linda Downey live at Homestead, in a beautiful old farmhouse alongside the organic avocado orchard that he established 39 years ago. Doug looks after the trees and picks the avocados; Linda, a 'semi-retired' Montessori teacher, helps in the packing shed and looks after the large organic vegetable garden. While we talk, Linda brings in a plate of delicious avocado-filled eggs (see recipe).

A "farm boy from Illinois", Doug grew up in Hawaii. His cousins still have the family farm, 60 miles south of Chicago. Linda is New Zealand born and grew up on a dairy farm. In the 1970's Doug's father

built a trimaran in Hawaii, sailed to New Zealand and bought an orchard. Doug followed, bringing his family here in 1975. His father was growing tangelos and lemons. Doug had had an avocado tree in Hawaii and decided to grow what was then an unusual crop for New Zealand.

Doug was organic from the start: "I decided I didn't want the chemicals with kids around." People told him it wasn't possible, but that just made him more determined.

In 1977 he planted the orchard. By 1980 he was getting some fruit, and two years later he was exporting as well as selling in the local market. But demand soon exceeded supply. So he encouraged other growers to put in organic avocado trees, and he now has other certified growers supplying his packhouse and marketing operation at Homestead.

The right place

Doug took his time finding the right piece of land: a sunny, north-facing slope. You need free-draining soil and the right microclimate, he says. In spring you need the temperature at 12–13°C for 24 hours for three days in a row, when the trees are flowering. And avocados need regular rainfall. This is why the Bay of Plenty is New Zealand's 'avocado belt', he says.

Alice Bulmer meets veteran avocado grower and marketer Doug Brown, of Homestead Orchard and EcoAvo, near Katikati.

Homestead and EcoAvo at a glance

- 2 hectares; nice dark alluvial volcanic soil; deep loam
- 220 trees, 10 varieties
- Main crops: Hass (summer) and Fuerte (winter)
- Zutano rootstock grown on contract for nurseries
- Homestead produces 25 tonnes in a good year
- 80–90 tonnes of fruit per year through the shed
- Certified organic by BioGro since 1983



Doug gets leaf and soil tests done once a year. He works with an advisor, Malcolm Cooke. "If nutrition is out of balance, the trees will not set fruit, even though the seasonal flowering may be heavy," Doug says.

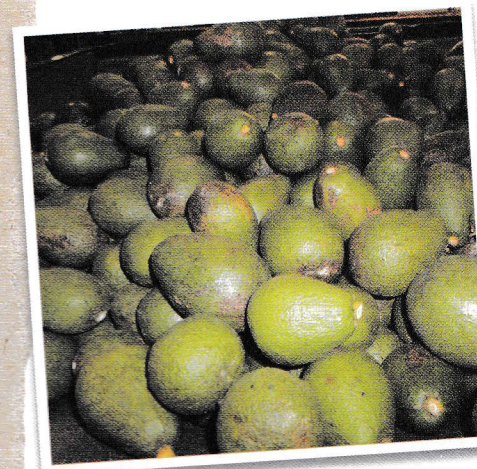
Doug feeds his trees with liquid vermicast, kelp, humates and compost (amongst other things). He makes his own "ultra-smelly" fish fertiliser, adding in homegrown comfrey. Avocado trees in an orchard need to be fed small amounts often, in an annual fertiliser programme.

Avocado advice

There are over 1500 varieties of avocado. Doug grows about 10 kinds, and sells eight. Hass and Fuerte are the two main varieties.

Hass is the kind people are most familiar with. It is the only variety that goes dark brown when ripe. With the other varieties, check if they're ripe by touch, or gently insert a toothpick into the stalk end. If it doesn't go in easily, the avocado isn't ripe.

Ripen avocados in a warm place – the hot water cupboard is ideal. For faster ripening, put in a bag with a piece of banana peel. Check at least once a day. Unripe avocados keep for weeks in the fridge. When Doug was shipping to the US, his avocados had a shelf life of up to 40 days under proper refrigeration.



metres is 'haircut time', because he wouldn't be able to reach the fruit.

Quite a few growers don't have their own picker, but Doug invested in his New Zealand-made avocado picker after nine years. It's customised with rams, which stop it tipping over on the steep orchard slope. He spends a lot of time in the bucket, high in the canopy of the trees. Linda wants him to take a cellphone in case he gets stuck. It's only happened once so far.

The picker also comes in handy for high shed maintenance, felling big trees for firewood and even for rescuing cats all over Katikati, Doug says.

Marketing avocados

Direct marketing is an important part of Doug's business. EcoAvo sells Doug's avocados and also the avocado production of around 10 local certified organic growers. Doug picks to order, usually weekly. He gets orders from individuals, groups, co-ops, distributors and shops, and has long-standing relationships with many customers. Sometimes it's just Doug or Linda in the packing shed, or it could be up to five people.

Now in his late 60's, Doug is starting to think about handing over the orchard one day. His two adult sons are both graphic designers. Jeff is based in London, and

Head for heights

Doug visits each tree five times a year, picking fruit and pruning. The trees grow to 12 metres high, but anything over nine

Farming and horticulture

David, the eldest, lives in Welcome Bay with his three children. "David has a very green thumb," says Doug. David has recently been named in the BioGro certification, as part of the process of setting things up so he can eventually take over from Doug.

Growing avocados is hard work, Doug says, but he loves it. "No two days are the same," says Linda. They manage to take time off between seasons. In July they travelled to Hawaii for Doug's high school 50th reunion, in between the Hass and Fuerte seasons. Doug started picking Fuerte a few weeks late to make time for the trip. 🌱

Alice Bulmer is a Hamilton-based writer and musician who loves writing about food producers. Her website is www.waikatofoodbasket.co.nz

Opposite page: Doug Brown and partner Linda Downey in the avocado orchard.

Above: Fuerte avocados ready for packing.

Photos: Alice Bulmer

Linda's avocado eggs

- 6 free-range eggs, hard-boiled
- 1 avocado, peeled and mashed
- 1/3 t Dijon mustard
- Juice of one lemon
- Ground black pepper

1. Peel eggs and cut in half lengthwise.
2. Remove yolks and mash with avocado, lemon juice, mustard and cracked black pepper until mixture is smooth.
3. Fill egg halves with the mixture.
4. Garnish with shreds of lemon zest and cracked black pepper. Serve on a bed of lettuce.

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