

Chenin blanc • East Lodi Avocado Sauce (Guacamole)

Lodi is one of the few places on the West Coast where you can find the once plentiful **Chenin Blanc** (pronounced SHEN-in blonk). In the 1960's, Chenin blanc wines outsold other white varietals by two to one. Most of it came from Lodi. White table wines from California at that time were almost all made from Chenin blanc grapes. Sales really took off when winemakers started adding a little residual sugar. We always had this crisp fruity wine on our table at holidays and special meals. Unfortunately, in the 1980's, the popularity of Chardonnay and white Zinfandel eclipsed Chenin blanc, and just about everyone replaced their plantings with other varietals. Luckily, a retired California Community College administrator named Gerald Cresci planted Chenin Blanc in his 10-acre vineyard near the town of Herald, just north of Lodi. Today, this Palermo vineyard is the main source for California wineries that make Chenin blanc wine.

Origin: Chenin blanc originated in the Anjou wine region of the Loire Valley in France sometime in the 9th century. Recent DNA studies suggest it's descended from Sauvignon blanc. It's a fairly neutral grape, with the aromas and flavors mostly coming from the soils and climate ("terroir"). Vineyard management is critical to the quality of Chenin blanc wine. If the grapes are harvested too soon, the resulting wine will have excessive acid and will taste nasty. If the grapes are harvested with too high of a yield, they will not retain Chenin blanc's distinctive character notes. Growers sometimes need to harvest the same vineyard two or three times to ensure that only clusters with the desired ripeness make it to the crush pad.

Tasting and Serving: Most Chenin blanc wine styles have a slight mineral character, but the color, aromas, and flavors will mainly depend on how ripe the grapes were at harvest. An early harvest produces a pale straw color with aromas of passion fruit and apple, while a later harvest produces an amber color with aromas of pear and peach. Oak aging adds vanilla, butterscotch, and baked apple notes. The acidity is usually high. Some styles retain a little residual sugar, creating an off-dry wine with richer flavors of ripe pears. Higher residual sugars may add mango to the profile. Serve Chenin blanc at 50 degrees (30 minutes in a refrigerator).

Pairing: Chenin blanc is high in acidity and always has some sweetness. Regardless of the style, it pairs best with foods that have a sweet and sour element. It goes well with light meats (veal, chicken, turkey, and pork), hearty fish (like halibut and smoked salmon), and is great with a Thanksgiving dinner. It was always on our table on Turkey day. I chose Six Hands Winery 2016 Chenin blanc to pair with my East Lodi Avocado Sauce (aka guacamole). This traditional Lodi Chenin blanc is a medium-bodied, barrel-aged wine that offers classic aromas of pear and vanilla, mineral notes, and just a touch of sweetness. The acidity both cuts through the oils of the avocado to cleanse your palate and highlights the flavor of the tomatoes. The residual avocado in your mouth holds onto the wine, leaving a pleasant fruity aftertaste minus the mouth puckering astringency you would feel after drinking the wine by itself.

East Lodi Avocado Sauce (Guacamole)

Here on the east side of Lodi, we aren't fancy. When we find some good avocados at the Fruit Bowl, we want a creamy, chunky dipping sauce that showcases the flavor of those delicious California gems. We prepare a simple avocado sauce (better known as "guacamole") with some tomatoes from the garden, a little garlic from Gilroy, a fresh lemon from our tree, and some Old Uncle Lester's Pepper Sauce. We don't have a molcajete--just a stainless steel mixing bowl and a spoon. We don't use onions and cilantro that can make the sauce crunchy and leafy. We use garlic to enhance but not overwhelm the flavor of the avocado and because, well, everyone loves garlic.

One important thing we do is prepare our tomatoes concassée, removing the skins and seeds so that the soft red flesh blends with the creamy texture of the avocado. There's nothing worse than taking a bite of creamy avocado and having to sift little pieces of tomato skin through your teeth. The tomatoes add a nice color and provide a little extra acid to help preserve the avocado flesh. Guacamole looks easy to make, and it actually is. However, it takes a certain technique to get the all the fresh ingredients cut to the right sizes and produce a guacamole with an appealing texture and appearance that everyone will love.

Ingredients

4 Haas avocados, cut medium dice (3/8-inch cubes)
2 Roma tomatoes concassée (page 59)
4 cloves garlic, cut fine brunoise
2 tsp Old Uncle Lester's Pepper Sauce
1/2 lemon (or 1 TBS lemon juice)
1 tsp salt
1 tsp pepper



Cutting the Avocados

The key to achieving the right texture of the final avocado sauce is to cut the avocados into approximately 3/8-inch cubes. There's an easy way to dice an avocado. Hold the chef's knife in one hand and the avocado in the other. Until you get good at this, I recommend using a cut-resistant glove ("knife" glove) on the hand holding the avocado.

Press the knife into the side of the avocado lengthwise, from top to bottom, until the knife stops at the avocado's pit. You may have to first pierce the skin with the tip of the knife, then gently push the knife forward into the avocado. With the knife embedded in the avocado and resting against the pit, carefully and slowly spin the avocado around on the knife until the flesh is cut into two halves. Pull the knife out.



Holding a half of avocado in each hand, gently twist the two halves in opposite directions, around the pit, until one half comes free. Take the half with the pit in one hand (pit facing up), and carefully tap the center of the pit with the center of the knife so that the knife digs in about 1/8 to 1/4 inch. Rotate the knife to turn the pit within the avocado, and it should pop out. If the knife pops out instead of the pit, tap the knife a little harder into the pit and rotate again until the pit pops out. The pit should be embedded on the knife. Hold the knife over the garbage can, with the pit on the bottom, and tap the pit with a utensil to knock it off the knife and into the garbage. Don't try to pull the pit off of the knife. That will expose your hand to the knife edge.



Hold a half avocado in the palm of your hand, flesh side up, and gently push the tip of the chef's knife into the avocado at the top, near one side. Ease the knife into the avocado until you feel it touch the skin. Run the knife down the inside of the avocado, holding the tip *lightly* against the skin, to produce a slice. The skin of a Haas avocado is pretty thick, so your knife should not go through and cut your hand. You may feel the tip of the knife through the skin as you make the slice, which feels weird, but your hand should be OK. Starting from the top again, make another lengthwise slice about 3/8 inch from the first one. Repeat until you reach the other side.



Make slices across the avocado every 3/8 inch. You now have the avocado meat cut into near perfect cubes inside the avocado half. Take a spoon, run it through the avocado along the inside of the skin, and scoop out the pieces into a bowl. Remove any pieces of the stem (which looks like a little black pepper corn) and remove any brown flesh. Repeat for the rest of the avocados. You will eventually have a bowl full of beautiful 3/8-inch yellow cubes with some slightly green. This whole process sounds like a lot of work at first, but it goes pretty fast once you've done it a couple of times and get the feel for the knife against the avocado skin.



Making the "Sauce"

Squeeze the juice from the half lemon over the chopped avocado. I put the lemon half in a Chef'n citrus juicer to get a full tablespoon out of it. Mix the avocado with a spoon just enough to spread the lemon juice around without mashing the avocado chunks. Push the back of your spoon down on the avocado chunks, pressing the spoon to the bottom of the bowl. Move the spoon around to several spots until you push down once on every part of the surface of the mix (*not* every chunk). Stir once.



Add the tomatoes, garlic, and pepper sauce and mix just enough to distribute them evenly without mashing the avocado. Push the back of your spoon down on the avocado chunks again, pressing the spoon to the bottom of the bowl. Move the spoon around to several spots until you push down once on every part of the surface of the mix (*not* every chunk). Your sauce should now have a mix of about half cream and half chunk. If it's still too chunky, repeat the pressing with the spoon until you get the consistency you want. Taste it. Add salt and pepper if you think it needs it. You can serve it immediately, but it's best to refrigerate it covered for about an hour to let the flavors blend.

Presentation

You can serve avocado sauce any way you want. The traditional way is in a stone bowl (molcajete) with homemade tortilla chips. I like to serve it in individual 6-ounce stainless steel sauce cups so that everyone can dip however they want, and 6 ounces is a perfect portion. Serves 4 people.

The California Ingredient

A lot of avocados you see in the store, especially during fall and winter, are from Mexico, which has an ideal climate to grow them year around. However, the Hass (pronounced HOSS) Avocado is a California native, discovered in La Habra Heights in the 1920s by Rudolph Hass. Every Hass Avocado in the world can trace its lineage to the original Hass Mother Tree. California produces 90% of the nation's avocados, mainly during spring and summer. We have 4,000 growers who produce over 200 million pounds a year.

Tips and Tricks

The key to success in making guacamole, or any other avocado dish, is to get avocados with exactly the right ripeness. The flesh inside should be bright yellow with a touch of green near the skin. Green flesh will be tough, hard to cut, and will taste bitter. The avocado skin should be dark brown (not green). When you press into the skin, it should give about 1/16 of an inch. An unripe avocado with green skin will be rock hard if you try to squeeze it. On the other hand, you don't want a squishy avocado that feels too soft inside. The good news is that if you go to the store and find only bright green hard avocados, you can take them home and let them sit for a day or two (or three). They will eventually ripen to perfection. The trick to making good guacamole time after time is getting good at judging the ripeness of an avocado. What's the easiest way to get good at it? Buy and eat a lot of avocados.

Many stores sell other types of avocados besides the Haas. You can try these, if you want, but make sure you are buying them intentionally and not because you didn't look for "Haas" on the label. If you want the typical avocado that you are used to having in restaurants, and you buy something other than a Hass, you will probably be disappointed.

Avocados, like grapes and many other fruits and vegetables, contain an enzyme called polyphenol oxidase, which turns brown when it comes in contact with oxygen. Nothing can stop this reaction, but you can slow it down. Wrapping the avocado in plastic limits the amount of oxygen available. Once you cut an avocado open, this reaction starts, and the avocado flesh by itself will turn brown in a couple of hours. Adding lemon to the mix lowers the pH of the avocado flesh, making it more acidic, which slows the rate of oxidation. The lemon juice gives you about 24 hours of good eating, if you store it in an air tight container in the refrigerator. However, you should serve this dish within a couple of hours of making it, if you want that bright yellow-green color.

Add less salt than you think it needs. If you add salt, then taste, the salt has not had time to fully distribute throughout the sauce, and you may be tempted to add more salt. An hour later, the sauce will taste like seawater. Remember that there will usually be plenty of salt in the chips. Try letting the garlic and pepper sauce do the seasoning.