

# OUT to Pasture

The demand and market for pastured, humanely raised veal means a tastier product on plates.

By Jan Greenberg



**THE** numbers speak for themselves. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 1944, Americans ate an average of 8.6 pounds of veal per person. By 2004 (the latest year for which data is available), consumption had fallen to less than a half-pound. As writer Marian Burros pointed out in a 2007 article in *The New York Times*: “The most successful animal-rights boycott in the United States started more than 20 years ago and had nothing to do with foie gras.”

It began in the late 1980s, when veal calves became a prime symbol of animal abuse. Animal-rights activists circulated

pictures of young calves tethered in stalls so small they couldn’t turn around and were often unable to lie down. Suddenly, highly touted white veal, so tender it could often be cut with a fork, became anathema to many, eschewed by consumers and causing many restaurants to remove it from their menus.

## WHITE VEAL PRIMER

Commercial veal may rightly be called a byproduct of the dairy industry. To keep producing milk, cows must produce calves, usually yearly. That’s a lot of calves—more females than are needed to

replace retiring dairy cows, and basically useless males. The males are sold for pet food, sent to slaughterhouses almost immediately after birth, and sold as “bob” veal or sent to veal producers.

The use of containers and tethers began in Holland after World War II as a way to add some value to the male calves and use up the excess whey generated by the dairy industry. This was the origin of white veal, which, when adopted by American veal producers, became the basis for the American veal industry. The meat, subject, for a while, at least, of a highly successful

marketing campaign, was the product of confined calves fed an iron-deficient and low-fiber milk replacer laced with just enough antibiotics to keep the anemic animal alive until slaughter.

Happily for all, from calf to consumer, things are changing, although for many, too slowly. Increasing numbers of farmers are raising what are called nature-raised, or free-raised, veal, animals born on pasture and raised in pasture with unlimited access to their mother's milk. Others have gotten rid of the crates but still keep calves in barns, feeding them milk replacer but allowing them to socialize and move freely. When the calves' rumens begin to develop and they need to chew, the animals receive enough grain for their biological needs (which, in the process, reduces the stress on the animals).

In some nations, crates are a thing of the past. The U.K. prohibited veal crates in 1990, and the entire EU phased them out in 2007. Here in the U.S., the American Veal Association, based in Meshoppen, Pa., passed a resolution in May 2007 recommending that all veal producers change production methods and abolish crates by 2017. As of now, it is estimated that about 35% of the veal marketed in the United States is pastured or group-raised. Although the American Veal Association points out that calves still in crates can stand, stretch, lie down and groom themselves, the fact that they cannot turn around is not addressed.

Consumers and chefs concerned with humane animal treatment are driving what is a growing demand and market for pastured and humanely raised veal. But sometimes

lost in the discussion of veal production is taste. Lori Dunn is executive director of the pasture-raised program for Strauss Brands, Inc., a Franklin, Wis., family owned business founded in the 1930s that produces veal made from pasture-raised calves or those group-raised in a barn with six to eight other calves. It is the only packer in the U.S. that is 100% confinement-free, and sells to restaurant and foodservice distributors throughout the nation and to consumers through Whole Foods Market.

"Until recently," Dunn says, "chefs in the United States were trained to look for white veal—the whiter, the better—and the flavor was bland. But that's not how a healthy animal should be. Free and group-raised veal will be pink, with a fuller, richer flavor. We are finding that younger chefs are not asking for white veal but instead asking for advice on where they can get natural-colored, tastier veal."

#### THE "NEW" VEAL

As with most livestock these days, chefs face an array of decisions in purchasing veal. Some, like Bill Telepan, chef/owner of Telepan, New York, wait for a single producer, Duane Merrill, Walton, N.Y., to call and say that he has a veal. Merrill's veal is so popular that Telepan now tweets on Twitter and announces on Facebook that "pastured veal is in the house."

"It tastes something very much like a mild beef," says Telepan. "And if it is on the menu, it sells."

Veal from Strauss Brands, Inc. is used in this osso buco with a saffron risotto cake at a dinner at Bacchus that paid tribute to free-raised veal.

In San Francisco, Chris Kronner took over the kitchen of Bar Tartine in October 2009. Named by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as one of its 2007 Rising Star Chefs, Kronner was the youngest ever to receive the designation. He is among the new breed of chefs, and spends his free days roasting a whole goat for friends in a Sonoma County field. With few exceptions (veal being one), Kronner does not serve protein raised outside California. Most of the Tartine veal is from Paolo Shere's 8IT Ranch in Laytonville, Calif., but on occasion, Kronner sources from Eugene, Ore.'s, Knee Deep Cattle Co.

"This is definitely not a white veal," he says. "It's a deep rose color, and sells very well. Our customers know that we are particular, and any questions are usually more about flavor and texture than any concern that we are serving veal."



Strauss Brands



Kronner uses the whole animal, and preparations have included air-dried loin "bresaola," breaded pan-fried leg cutlets served with spicy brown butter, lemon and rocket, roasted loin chops with celeriac mash and grilled treviso, and a braised shoulder with hand-cut egg noodles.

At the Milwaukee restaurants Bacchus and Bartolotta's Lake Park Bistro, where he is executive chef, Adam Siegel, the 2008 James Beard winner of Best Chef: Midwest, has free-raised veal from Strauss Brands, Inc. on his daily menus. "I used the group-raised before I was able to get free-raised. It isn't quite as dark as the free-raised, but it is still a lot more flavorful than what we used to get. Having veal on the menu actually works well here, as this is real beef country and people want more flavor on their plate. And I notice that when customers see free-raised on the menu, they get it. They want meat that is raised humanely. And as far as cost goes, it doesn't cost any more. If anything, we have been spending a bit less for better veal."

Siegel recently prepared a free-raised veal dinner that included hors d'oeuvre of veal hangar steak brochettes, veal burgers and veal carpaccio. Main dishes included veal dumplings with mushroom broth, scallions and sesame oil; veal agnolotti with arugula pesto and preserved tomatoes; a salad of veal dolmades; osso buco with a saffron risotto cake; veal schnitzel with braised red cabbage; and a filet mignon "au poivre" with a potato mousseline and a cognac/green-peppercorn sauce.

## HUMANELY RAISED

In the Boston suburb of Newton, Mass., Michael Leviton is chef/owner of Lumière, a sustainably focused restaurant for which he was designated "Best New Chef in America" by *Food & Wine* in 2000 and named to *Saveur's* Top 100 in 2002. He serves as a director on the Chefs Collaborative Board of Overseers, and is among the nation's go-to chefs for an understanding of the all-too-frequently complex issues involved in sustainable and socially responsible food purchasing, sourcing and restaurant operations. To put it simply: Purchasing veal for a restaurant that endeavors to be local, sustainable and responsible is not always easy.

The Lumière menu changes daily, and Leviton often features veal from a Vermont cooperative that raises veal on pasture. "We are able to source a decent amount of locally raised pastured veal," he says. "Often, standardization can be an issue when dealing with local producers. In the

beginning, for instance, we might get a veal that yielded a nine-ounce chop and another, a 14-ounce. I had to price them differently, which, of course, sometimes got confusing for my regular customers. But over time, we worked it out, and now I not only know where my veal is coming from and how it has been raised, but also what size and weight I will get."

When veal is not available through the Vermont supplier, Leviton orders from D'Artagnan, a Newark, N.J.-based specialty food purveyor. Its "humanely raised" veal is sourced through a cooperative in upstate New York, and is group-raised. The D'Artagnan veal goes to market at 18 weeks, before the rumen is developed, so, theoretically, they do not need supplemental grain. But according to D'Artagnan, the young calves are given a "three-ounce barley cookie, almost like a pacifier, so that they have something to chew on."

However, points out Leviton, as "group-raised" veal becomes more widespread, it is important for chefs and consumers to be aware that group-raised, under some circumstances, could potentially turn into a veal feedlot. "You must do some homework when you are purchasing group-raised. You want to know your supplier, its reputation, who is raising the veal and how they are housing and feeding the calves."

Leviton purchases whole animals. "We take off the fore and hind legs. The legs are then "seamed out," boned, and broken down into individual muscles for either braising (tough muscles) or pan-roasting (tender muscles). The neck is also boned out and used for



This veal burger with Mercks cheddar cheese was the second course of the free-raised veal dinner prepared by Adam Siegel at Bacchus.

Strauss Brands



Strauss Brands

Filet mignon “au poivre,” with potato mousseline and a cognac/green-peppercorn sauce, is free-raised Strauss Brands, Inc. veal.

braising. The middle of the animal is then boned out, with the loin being reserved for pan-roasting and the breast being saved either for braising or for charcuterie. All of the bones are saved for stock, and then the stock is used for braising and the braising liquid reduced for sauce.

“Right now, we are offering a trio of young Vermont veal—roasted loin or tender leg

muscles, braised shoulder and shank, and bratwurst made from the belly and trim. We have also recently made a veal and mushroom terrine.”

As long as there is a dairy industry, points out Leviton, there are going to be calves.

“What enters into my thinking is that things are so rough for dairy farmers right now that there could be a huge-value product

in local, pastured veal. I’m willing to pay for it, and so are a lot of chefs and consumers.

“Basically, right now, if you are a dairy farmer and you have a male calf, you can sell it on the commodity market where someone will do whatever they please with it, or you can hold onto it for a little while. You don’t have to worry about feeding it too much, because it can nurse. You will end up with a value-added product that is good for the farmer and good for the consumer.”

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