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'Free-raised' veal calves gain a new market

By **KIM ODE**, Star Tribune

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Veal is back -- from way back, by some definitions.

"When we refer to our program as authentic, we mean before the industrialized farming of the 1960s," said Randy Strauss. "We're going back to the fatted calf in the Bible -- the original veal."

Strauss is co-president and CEO of Strauss Veal in Hales Corners, Wis., near Milwaukee. There, he and his brother are reinventing the third-generation veal and lamb operation, seeking to persuade those who criticize veal production as cruel that there is a better way.

Strauss calls their product "free-raised" veal. It's a departure from the longtime practice of raising calves in tight crates that limit movement and feeding them an iron-free formula to keep their meat pale and tender.

Two years ago, the company began shifting its practices to what it calls crate-free group housing in which calves can move about in pens. Now they're further shifting to calves raised outdoors in pastures alongside their mothers.

The calves drink their mother's milk, eat grass and sometimes grain, which results in meat that is pinker than the pale veal of recent decades. Far from downplaying the meatier color, Strauss said "This is your assurance that this calf was raised the way we're telling you."

While the company's goal was to find a less controversial process, Strauss doesn't criticize practices of the past, which his own family followed. "No one thought they were doing anything negative," he said. "We did the best we could with what our knowledge base was. It took a lot of years in this country to realize that animals needed to be granted a certain quality of life."

Strauss is among the largest of several U.S. veal producers that no longer confine calves in crates. Its veal has been available at Whole Foods and now is at Lunds and Byerly's stores, with other regional producers serving their markets nationwide.

U.S. veal consumption has tumbled from a peak of 6 to 8 pounds per person in 1944 to about a half-pound a year. Strauss said he believes that people who say they're opposed to veal are opposed to how it's been raised. "Once they know that this is the kindest, most gentle raising system, they're OK with enjoying it again."

New consumption data is yet to be tallied. But another, perhaps more important group has changed its stance. Two years ago, the American Veal Association went on record in a New York Times article as saying that group-raised veal didn't deserve to be called veal. "By definition, any animal that's grass-fed or grain-fed has taste and texture and characteristics of beef animals," a spokesman said. "We believe they should be called calf or young steer."

Today, the association's website highlights a Group Housing Resolution stating that it recognizes "both traditional and group-raised methods as viable and acceptable means of raising veal calves" and recommends that the entire veal industry convert to group-raised methods by 2017.

Still, Strauss knows there's one other issue for some diners: the idea that eating veal is eating a baby animal. The truth, he said, is that many meat eaters regularly consume animals younger than veal calves, which generally are slaughtered at 19 to 22 weeks of age. Most pigs and turkeys are processed at 16 weeks and chickens end up in the grocery case at 5 to 9 weeks of age.

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