

Let's Talk about Veal

These days, veal calves are treated more humanely. Are we ready to embrace veal's sustainable—and flavorful—attributes on the menu? By Maggie Hennessy





You'd be hard-pressed to find a more successful animal cruelty boycott campaign in the U.S. than that of veal 30 years ago. As late as the 1960s, Americans were eating about four pounds of veal each year on average—in such luxurious forms as blanquette de veau, breaded cutlets and calf's liver with bacon. Then, as imagery started circulating in the '80s of calves tethered in cramped crates and subsisting on artificial formulas, sales took a nosedive, and they've never fully recovered.

The industry hopes that recent efforts to pull itself out of its ethical quagmire will spark a turnaround on dinner plates. Some chefs have embraced veal's more sustainable—and flavorful—new direction, though others doubt broader consumer buy-in.

Last year Americans ate just one-fifth of a pound of veal on average, down slightly from a third of a pound in 2014, according to the American Veal Association (AVA), Gladstone, Missouri. We can't seem to get enough beef, however—averaging around 55 pounds each year since 2015, per the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Beef production was up 8% from 2014-2017. Veal production shrunk 21% over the same period, even as veal calves' quality of life has surpassed that of most beef cattle.

Veal calves are raised on small, family-owned farms, the majority of which have fewer than 200 animals, according to the AVA. They're not castrated, their tails are not docked, nor are their horns removed. Use of growth hormones on calves is illegal, and antibiotics are used only if an animal gets sick.

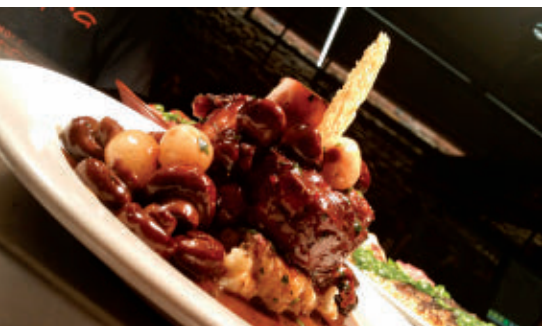
And as of 2017, they're no longer tethered or raised in confinement. All 700-odd AVA member farmers transitioned to group housing, a process that took 10 years and a collective investment of more than \$150 million to build new facilities or renovate existing ones.

"The goal we're meeting for these animals and for customers is the expression of natural behavior in calves—the ability to sit, stand, stretch, lie down and socialize," says AVA president Dale Bakke. "I think we're really changing perceptions and giving people permission to eat it again."

Better life, deeper flavor

Raised on a mix of milk formula and grain, veal calves are about 6 months old and 500 pounds when they go to market—five times older and twice the market weight of calves 30 years ago. Beyond the obvious animal welfare benefits, the nutritional changes and increased movement are impacting the flavor of a meat historically known for being little else besides exceptionally tender.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: Veal osso buco.



“It’s become richer. But it’s not gamey, it’s not beef-like,” says Adam Siegel, executive chef/managing partner of The Bartolotta Restaurants, Milwaukee. “Whereas before, it was just this luxurious, exotic meat that was super-delicate texturally and milky white-pink in color.” Now that the calves are getting proper nutrition and exercise, he adds, the meat has much more flavor and a deeper pinkish-red color.

Veal has been a staple on the menu at Lake Park Bistro for about a decade, where Siegel features liver and cutlet specials every Tuesday and Thursday, respectively, and regularly menus cuts such as tenderloin in summer and braised veal cheeks in winter. He sources free-raised veal almost exclusively from Franklin, Wisconsin-based Strauss Brands (which supplies a quarter of the country’s veal), and occasionally buys whole calves direct from local dairy farmers.

“We really pushed the educational part at the beginning,” he says. “Veal cutlets are an easy sell, but when it comes to a chop or tenderloin cooked medium-rare, we had to talk about how it’s raised, the nutritional value and how it compares to other cuts. It was slow at first, but once people started trying it and saw the staff reaction, they really went for it.”

Because veal is lighter than beef without the funk of lamb, Siegel takes a softer approach to cooking and saucing. He’ll lightly grill a bone-in chop to mid-rare and pair it with bright summer vegetables and infused oil, or bathe it in a light peppercorn pan sauce. At Italian sister restaurant Bacchus, he’ll stuff ravioli with ground veal and spinach and serve in a pool of *beurre fondue* with toasted pine nuts.

Combating the pricey myth

Jonathan Hicks, chef de cuisine at Cosima, a Southern Italian and Sicilian restaurant in Baltimore, hasn’t had a challenge with perception about veal—beyond maybe its premium price. He sources cheaper butcher cuts directly from Souderton, Pennsylvania-based Marcho Farms, which counts distributor giant Sysco among its clients, so is also able to keep pricing relatively affordable through economies of scale.

“I try to find cheaper, lesser-known cuts that I may have to put work into, but they give you a sizable portion for prices that won’t make you shy away,” Hicks says. “Plus, a lot of that association the older crowd had with veal as just a pricey center-cut chop is gone.”

He braises veal short loin in black garlic brodo, served in a crock with charred cipollini onions alongside crostini. He marinades veal hanger steak, then gives it a quick turn on the grill, and turns the less-expensive veal end chop into milanese. On a recent winter menu, he made Bolognese starring veal breast that he cured for four days, seared and braised with veal stock, roasted garlic, herbs, onions and carrots before the fall-apart meat was mixed into creamy tomato sauce and served atop lemon thyme pappardelle with roasted mushrooms and grana padano.

Beyond liking veal’s flavor and texture, Hicks likes to work with cuts of meat that not everyone else is using. “There has to be something that separates us,” he says.

Then again, given its historic ubiquity in European cooking, veal tends to be an easier sell on Italian and French menus. According to AVA data, veal also has a leg up in markets such as Philadelphia, New Jersey, New York, Florida and Chicago.

Maxwell Robbins, executive chef of Chicago’s Longman & Eagle—and the grandson of a veal butcher, to boot—can’t say the same of his experience with Chicago diners. “People who grew up eating veal love it,” he says. “It’s hard to imagine opening an Italian restaurant and not serving veal, or a restaurant in New York, where there are deep community ties to veal. In Chicago, it’s just not much in demand.”

Veal isn’t currently on Longman’s menu. Robbins has served Strauss veal at previous restaurants where he’s worked, although “the darker color made it a harder

ABOVE: Veal osso buco in black garlic brodo at Cosima, Baltimore.
OPPOSITE, TOP: A Pennsylvania veal barn.
OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Dijon-glazed veal chop.

sell,” he says. He had a similar issue when serving milk-braised Duroc pigs, whose meat is typically dark-red, at Chicago’s The Purple Pig. “We’d braise it for four hours, but people would send it back for being raw. Public misconception and lack of information rushes people to assume that things are bad or mishandled.”

Amid Longman’s broader shift away from menu quotas and toward supporting the local economy, Robbins is open to adding veal, though lack of demand makes it hard to justify, even from a sustainability angle.

“At the end of the day, I’d menu it if people were asking for it,” he says. “Veal is out there being raised, slaughtered and sold. We can consume it or let it go to waste, because the fact is, we’re never going to slow down the dairy industry.”

The dairy connection

Indeed, oft-overlooked in many diners’ struggle with consuming these young animals is that veal is largely a byproduct of the massive—and growing—dairy industry. Moreover, whey solids make up the bulk of the milk-based portion of veal calves’ diets, and are themselves byproducts of the cheesemaking process underutilized because of a lack of demand.

To keep producing milk, a dairy cow has to produce calves each year—about half of which are born as bull calves. With little demand for male calves, many farmers can’t afford to keep them beyond birth. The lives of surviving bull calves can take three paths, according to Marissa Hake, staff veterinarian at Midwest Veal, North Manchester, Indiana.

“A few genetically superior calves can be used as breeder bulls,” she says. “Others can be moved into dairy beef and raised to 1½-2 years, though Holstein bull calves are less genetically desirable for beef than breeds like Angus. The third line is to become a veal calf, which is solely based on demand.”

A few months ago, in a tweet linking to a story in *The Guardian* about bull calf euthanization in the British dairy industry, Dan Barber chef/author and co-owner of Blue Hill, New York, and Blue Hill at Stone Barns, Westchester County, similarly placed the onus on diners, noting, “Eating veal is the most sustainable thing you can do for a dairy farmer.”

It was enough to grab the attention of Neal Brown, chef/owner of Pizzology, Libertine Liquor Bar and Ukiyo in Indianapolis. “I’m not a proponent of veal necessarily, but [Barber’s] thoughts on veal kind of made me start thinking this is a flavor we really haven’t explored for a long time,” he says.

However, given the lack of demand and context for a product that’s been “essentially eradicated from menus for 20 years,” Brown admits that he likely won’t be the one to pioneer it in Indy. “It comes down to perception, and I just don’t see perception shifting anytime soon.”

Siegel, in turn, put some of the onus on supermarkets to help break down consumer misconceptions and lack of context for working with veal, particularly in our era of one-stop shopping. “It’d be great if grocery stores bought more veal and put it in display cases, rather than just in prepackaged formats,” he says. “The days of butcher shops are almost gone. We now depend on grocery stores for that.

“The truth is, we have to find an outlet for every byproduct. We have to work together to do that.” ■

