

Veal Calf Consultation

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The veterinary profession has been very delinquent in recognizing and meeting the needs of the modern veal industry. The milk fed, fancy veal industry is only 25 years old. It was born out of the government's support system for milk which resulted in large quantities of milk powder. Soon, enterprising entrepreneurs began to put this surplus government milk powder and unwanted Holstein bull calves together and the modern veal industry began.

The "fancy veal" or modern milk fed veal is a Holstein bull calf that is raised entirely on milk or milk substitutes. He is raised in individual pens made of oak. This pen is raised off the floor and the bottom of it is slatted. He is fed twice a day a diet of milk which is 20% protein, 20% fat and less than 1% fiber. Calves are generally raised until they are 15 weeks old, at which time they weigh approximately 350 lbs. live weight. A calf will consume approximately 400 lbs. of feed, dry weight, with a feed conversion of 1 lb. of gain to 1.6 lbs. of feed.

The veal eating public wants veal to be "white" in color. Actually it is "pink" versus "red" for regular beef. Many cooking and tasting tests have been performed and it is well documented that people cannot distinguish the difference in taste between "white" and "red" veal. Veal is tender and tastes the way it does because of the calf's milk diet—not because of its color. "Bob" veal or calves 2 to 3 days of age are not as "tasty" as milk fed fancy veal. Sometimes packing houses will sell "white" meat which is really calves which run with their mothers in a pasture and are free to suck milk as well as consume vegetation. Although some of these calves are "white" in appearance, they do not have the true texture and taste of the modern milk fed veal calf which is raised in confinement.

Historically, bovine practitioners have been taught that the monogastric calf begins to consume roughage at approximately 2 weeks of age and in a few weeks is well on his way to being a functioning ruminant. The veal calf on the other hand, remains a monogastric. He lives in an insulated building which is temperature and humidity controlled. His environment is completely different from that of a range or dairy replacement calf.

Every veal raiser traditionally calls upon and initially depends upon his veterinarian for support, guidance and help in managing his new enterprise. Unless he is fortunate enough to be in an area where there is an unusually large number of veal calves, he quickly discovers that he knows more about the technology of confinement housing and the disease problems associated with it than does the professional he called. Many well intentioned veterinarians

have, through inexperience and lack of knowledge, caused high losses, discouraged veal farmers and caused many farms to go out of business.

The average veal raiser complains bitterly that his local veterinarian is either unknowledgeable, unwilling, or suspects him of cruelty and refuses to come to his farm. Because of this lack of mutual understanding, the veal raiser has had to turn to other sources for information. There are many reasons for this situation.

The geographic distribution of veal calves is very limited. The majority of the farms are located in Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland. There are less than 1 million veal calves a year being raised. The U.S.D.A. does not keep any records as to the number of veal calves in this country. On a *per capita* basis, veal consumption is approximately 1 lb. per person in the U.S.A. The average European eats approximately 3 lbs. of veal per year. The average bovine practitioner has less than one veal operation in his or her practice area.

American veterinary colleges do not put much emphasis in teaching confinement housing or conducting research on veal nutrition or confinement calf raising. This is directly opposite of many European schools. There, many of the most noted professors have several projects revolving around veal.

The veal industry has come under heavy criticism by the animal welfare groups. Some of this is justifiable but the majority is sensationalism. The veal industry has not had the benefit of professional help in its growth. The industry has had to grow by trial and error. Contrary to what the animal welfarist would have us believe, veal calves are not raised in the dark. Most all the new barns are being built with windows and skylights. The calves are not fed diets totally deficient in iron and minerals. The average veal calf gets more attention than any other bovine calf.

Traditionally the veal calf operation was sold as a "get rich" scheme by promoters. People were told it would only require a few hours a day and no experience was necessary. Unfortunately, most people who went into veal had never been on a farm, or owned livestock before. This inexperience coupled with a new industry, led to many errors. The feed companies were extremely jealous and protective of their clients. It has not been until the last few years that a successful organization, the American Veal Association, has been formed. Many state organizations have also been formed.

The modern veal industry is going through a transition period. Due to the impact of the animal welfarist, new ways

of raising veal calves have been developed. Approximately 10% of all calves are now being raised successfully in group pens of 25 calves. The calves have access to feed 24 hours a day. An automatic machine mixes ½ liter of milk on demand for each calf. The calves are bedded on wheat or barley straw (low in iron). Although this method has only been in use for ten months, it is becoming very popular. A major disadvantage of this program is that it presents a whole new series of problems for which there is no prior research or experience.

The veal industry has been maligned and criticized by the press, vegetarians, and animal welfarists. The veal industry has looked to the veterinary profession and in particular to

the bovine practitioner for guidance. The public also looks to the veterinary profession to guarantee a wholesome meat product which is raised in an ethical and humane manner. To date, the veal industry has only had itself to provide this guidance. It is trying hard to organize, be competitive, and at the same time be humane. Most all veal raisers recognize the fact that animals do have rights. These rights include: good housing, management, nutrition and care. The veal industry invites the veterinary profession to get involved and supply the guidance and leadership that they provide in all other facets of meat production.