

The Lost Boys of the dairy industry; why we should eat more veal

The director of communications at the RSPCA once called the many male calves that go to waste each year 'the lost animals of the dairy industry' which is a fairly accurate, and chilling, description of what goes on behind the scenes in our quest for cheap milk and cheese. To say that veal fell out of favour in the late eighties and early nineties would be a massive understatement. Protestors took the streets in often violent demonstration, and television screens were filled with haunting images of baby animals packed into crates and transported under abominable conditions across Europe to be sold into their burgeoning veal industry. On the continent they like their veal white, in the classic veal style, which means that they continue to feed the animals a milk-only diet, long after they should have been weaned onto solids. This ensures the much prized pale and tender meat whilst keeping them penned with severely restricted movement stops the muscles from toughening. The calves are kept in an anaemic state, with all its inherent problems, so that the meat stays pale and is not turned red by the iron pigments.

Buy only British veal from a reputable butcher

Now, I can see why you may be asking how I could possibly suggest that we eat more veal, but we need to understand just how far we have come and underline the fact that although many of the horrific practices have been brought to a halt only a small part of the problem has been addressed.

The crate system was banned in 1990. A system in which calves were separated from their mothers just days after birth and placed in boxes of no more than a few square feet. They were then fed a completely liquid diet until slaughtered for veal at 5 months maximum. The animals were often shipped to Europe, packed standing into crates and piled high onto trucks that took twenty hours to complete their journey. When the crate system was eventually banned, groups of compassionate people continued to campaign for a ban on the exportation of the animals completely. The ban was only passed in the wake of the BSE scandal and was lifted in 2005.

It all sounds pretty horrific doesn't it? But that is just half the story; there must be a reason for the surplus of male calves in the first place. Well, all dairy cows have to give birth once a year so that they can continue to produce milk. When the calves are born the females are raised to be milkers, but the males are either shot or exported for the European veal industry. Why; because they cannot produce milk nor are they deemed suitable for beef. If we all had Daisy the family cow supplying our dairy needs then perhaps the opposite would be true, but how likely is that really? Some forward thinking dairy farmers rear Guernsey cows for their milk and grow the male calves on to produce fully-fledged beef of excellent quality. The major problem lies in the mass industrial farming of Holstein-Friesians that are the classic black and white milking cow, which is another good reason to support smaller local farming initiatives.

Buy meat from animals raised to RSPCA food standards

Rosé veal is British veal that is reared in accordance with RSPCA Freedom Food standards. Slaughtered between 8 and 12 months old, the calves are fed on milk for the first 8 weeks and then on solids. This produces a darker, more flavoursome meat. Using the right blend of modern agriculture and traditional techniques, the producers of UK rosé veal raise their animals to the highest standards of welfare and hygiene. Calves often come from the farm's own dairy herd, or they take in animals from neighbouring farms. Raised on a proper diet, with plenty of companionship, space and light, these calves are kept in conditions no different to other well cared for livestock and are slaughtered at ages no younger than pigs or lambs. The varied diet and ability to move freely gives much more flavour and texture to the meat which is often described, somewhat euphemistically I feel, as young beef. Championed by many top restaurants, British rosé veal is the ideal alternative.

I have written before about meat, using the unmentionable word slaughter and whispering blood in a very low tone, my point always being that to get back to basics with our food chain, we need to understand and accept the realities of where our food comes from. That doesn't have to involve supporting barbaric practices, but it does involve accepting that we rear animals in order to eat their meat and have done for millennium. Once we have that understanding then the next leap forward is surely to see that it is better to raise an unwanted animal under humane conditions for meat rather than shoot it at birth or sell it to an inhumane system?

Buy British Rosé Veal once a week

What happens to a young male calf from a dairy cow is up to all of us. It can be raised to high standards and produce delicious healthy meat, it can be shot at birth, or it can be transported to Europe under stressful conditions and fall prey to the far less humane European veal industry. That's the bottom line, so unless we all stop consuming milk and cheese, which is not my suggestion here, these calves are going to be born, regardless of the consequences. Without a market for quality-standard British veal, these lost animals will continue to be shot or exported and to me that is a huge pity and a dreadful waste.

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