

## Happy Veal:

Funny Duck happy veal means no tethers, no tight confinement, no trying to achieve anemia for pale meat. Most people have some very upsetting ideas when it comes to veal, and I can't blame them when such awful things have gone on in the past. However, there is also quite a bit of misconception about how male calves are raised today on organic farms, and the use of veal hutches\* that you see on larger farms.

To start with, 'veal' just means a cow that is under 12 months of age, and how you raise it has nothing to do with the nomenclature. Many organic producers are using the term 'baby beef' but I'm not sure if that brings up better or worse imagery than the word veal. Back in our market days, we used to call it 'Happy Veal'.

Other than beef, veal is one of the oldest of all food animals when it goes to market. Chickens, turkey, duck, lamb, goat, etc., are all often taken to market at a much younger age than veal calves. However, it is important to remember that animals often reach sexual maturity at much, much younger ages than most people are aware of, so when we still see them as babies, they are in fact able to make babies!

The colour of the meat from a veal calf depends on what it eats. If it only has milk and no hay, grass, or grain the meat will be very pale. As soon as the calf starts to eat more than milk, the meat begins to darken. The same is true of pigs, if you keep them in confinement and only feed them milk the meat will be very pale. Sometimes meat colour is affected by genetics, but the feed used often plays a larger role.

On our farm, when a calf is born it stays with the cow regardless of whether it is a calf in the beef herd, or dairy herd, or whether it is male or female. The beef calves stay with their mother until the cow calves again the next year, by then it is weaned. It is raised on all the milk it wants, (until the mother weans it herself) and all the grass and pasture it wants. The calves are with the herd. It's the most hands off veal you can get.

For the dairy calves, it can be slightly different, but often not much. The cow and calf are together from anywhere 1 day to weeks and months. This depends on a few things. Lucy, one of our Jersey cows for example, doesn't like calves, not even her own! She gets very aggressive with them, so we separate her from the calf and either bottle-feed it, or foster the calf onto another cow for the safety of the calf.

Usually for the first week or two we keep cow and calf together, then we begin to separate them at night. This means the calf is with the cow all day and gets as much milk as they like, but after a night apart we can milk the cow in the

morning. We try to plan calvings so there is always at least two calves close in age to live together, and after a time they get rather chummy. They like to have friends, and having them in small groups helps them grow better as they show each other proper cow behavior like eating hay or grass or drinking water.

In some cases, the dairy calf begins to damage the teats of the cow quite badly, they can get very cut and torn depending on how rough the calf is. The lower front teeth on a calf are very, very sharp. I have had my hand cut open many times thanks to a calf! If the cow's teats are damaged, she can get an infection which can lead to mastitis, and she can get deathly ill should the infection be ignored or un-noticed. To prevent this, there are times we separate the cow and calf, this mostly depends on the cow as some have delicate skin and get damaged more easily than others. The cow and calf have fence line contact, (so there is grooming and other cow-like ways to show love that go on) and the calf is bottle-fed by us.

We also use something called a weaner ring, but some of the calves are too smart for it! A weaner ring is a clip on nose ring (much like a clip on earring) that allows the calf to drink water, eat grass or hay, and drink from a bottle, but not suckle on a cow. If the calf doesn't learn to get around the weaner ring, the calf then lives in the herd of dairy cows eating grass or hay, and getting milk from a bottle.

So that's how we raise our happy veal. 😊

\*Veal Hutches: Have you ever seen those big white dog-houses in front of commercial dairy farms that each have a calf tethered to it? Years ago, I would see those and feel so sad and upset for the calves that had to live their lives out in them. Until I learned how most farms actually use them.

On a large dairy farm, you might have 10 – 30 calves to deal with at any given time. Male or female, the calves need special care in the early days. On many organic farms the calf and cow are left together for a day, then they have to be separated. Quota farms must fill their quota to avoid penalties and fines, so the calves can't have unfettered access to the cows.

So, at a day or two or age they are given their own private hutch, which is bigger than they look from the road, and today most of them have a small run in front so the calf has lots of room to leap and move about. Usually, they are only in these hutches until they are all eating and drinking well. If you were to put them all into a large group right away it's not uncommon for the bottom third of the herd to get pushed out of the food. Then, you end up with a third of the herd being weak and sickly. Giving them a start in those hutches means they can then be housed in a group (on organic farms this is usually in a small field somewhere, conventional farms it might be a large pen) and raised together.