

a future in veal**Provitello offers dairies another option for their bull calves**

By Eleanor Jacobs



A joint venture of CY Heifer Farm, Elba, N.Y., and Grober Group, a Canadian company, wants to give dairies a different way to handle their bull calves. Provitello, the company created by the joint venture, could be a good deal for western New York dairy producers, consumers of veal and the two companies. "We want to offer an alternative to the current model of taking bull calves to market and selling them for the going rate," says AJ. Wormuth of Agricultural Development Services (ADS), the Elba, N.Y., business that facilitated the venture.

Jeanne Wormuth and Jurian Bartelse work together at CY Heifer Farm, Elba, N.Y., to bring in bull calves for the newly formed Provitello veal-raising business.

Provitello capitalizes on the strengths of its two founding companies. CY Heifer Farm LLC is a contract heifer-raising facility. And the Grober Group is a 30-year-old integrated veal business that, under various divisions, does everything from manufacturing milk replacer (Grober Nutrition) to raising, processing and marketing veal under the Delft Blue brand. The company, headquartered in Cambridge, Ontario, is known for its research and development in veal-raising technology, much of it incorporated into the Elba facility. Owned by the Bartelse & family, the Grober Group raises 150,000 veal calves a year in Canada it has a U.S. processing operation near Utica, N.Y., and raising operations in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Prior to bovine spongiform encephalopathy's (BSE) appearance in Canada, Grober bought New York calves, raised them in Canada and shipped them back to New York for slaughter. When the border closed to cattle shipments, Grober looked for a way to grow veal calves in New York.

"We wanted U.S.-based production," says Jurian Bartelse, Provitello's manager.

High tech veal

Provitello's new veal barn, built at CV Heifer Farm, took in its first calves in January. The barn incorporates current veal-raising technology such as group housing and computerized feeding machines. Grober has refined this veal-raising system of group pens since 1981.

Provitello's barn has two pens with capacity for 120 calves in each. Each pen is split into two rooms housing 60 calves each. Eventually the company plans 96 rooms, allowing it to grow out 15000 veal calves a year.

When delivered to the facility, each calf has a computer chip tagged to its ear and is trained to eat from automatic feeders. Staff enters into the computer the amount offered each calf gets at the feeder, where its tag is read. A computer records how much each calf eats. The system also has the capability to track each calf's health, temperature and weight.

Grober's website states that "computer-controlled feeding programs take the pressure off of calves to eat twice a day," as happens with stall rearing. "Digestion is better and more complete, resulting in a healthier and better muscled calf."

"We combine technology and agriculture," Bartelse says. "It saves labor and may help keep young people interested in agriculture. This system requires a strong knowledge of technology along with a good sense of animal husbandry."

Through years of research, the Grober Group has improved ventilation and manure handling in its facilities. Manure drops through slats in floors, made of imported hardwood, into a shallow pit. For ventilation, each room has two large fans controlled by thermostats. Fresh air is drawn into the corridor from outside through large baffles and mixes with heated air in the winter. The tempered fresh air is then drawn into the room by the fans and exhausted out the back wall.

The facility is built to Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) standards, providing 17 square feet per animal. "This meets Europe's standards for raising veal so we can export in the future," Bartelse says.

Supply and demand

"Veal production is limited by the number of calves," says Bartelse. But in western New York the supply seems almost limitless.

Basing calculations on USDA figures of 120,300 cows in seven north-west New York counties, ADS' Wormuth determined there are 50,000 to 60,000 bulls available for veal if dairies average 40 to 45% bull calves. "Within a 10-mile radius of Provitello, there are 7,000 cows on large, well-managed herds," he says.

Ideally, dairies that contract with CY Heifer Farm to raise their heifer calves will supply bull calves.

Both can be picked up at the same time. "It's appealing to dairies that they can have their bull calves picked up early," says Jeanne Wormuth, manager of CY Heifer Farm.

Sourcing calves from a few larger dairies helps Provitello put together groups of uniform-sized calves. That, plus healthy calves, improves the company's ability to raise veal efficiently. Provitello's goal is less than 2% death loss but has budgeted for 5%.

The company expects a daily gain of approximately 2.5 pounds. Calves are finished at 133 to 140 days, weighing 450 to 500 pounds.

Calves that start well, finish well, Bartelse says. And that's essential to a businessman determined to grow the veal industry in New York and gain market share.