

Animal Gender and Meat Taste



I mentioned in a customer letter that one of the pigs we harvested had a hidden testicle. In pigs, testicles frequently cause an off taste called “boar taint”. Boar taint is most evident when the meat is heated as in cooking. I had Quality Meats convert the entire hog into summer sausage for our family. Summer sausage is heavily seasoned, mixed with other meats (beef in our case) and served cold. The boar taint is avoided and we get a ton of excellent summer sausage.

April wrote and asked several relevant questions. While I was pondering the answers to April’s questions, Ken wrote with a few more good questions.

In this article I will answer those queries and a few others that come to mind.

Males of many domestic animal species are castrated at an early age. As early as reasonable actually. There are at least two good reasons for early castration.

One is that early castration is less stressful for the animal.

The other reason is that early castration minimizes the effects of male hormones. Those hormones affect animal behavior, physical characteristics and meat quality.

Males are frequently more aggressive and more active. They have a greater muscle mass. That results in generally a leaner carcass. In some species male hormones affect taste. Those taste effects are generally negative.

Males that have not been castrated are referred to as “intact”.

Mother Nature occasionally gets gender messed up in animals just as she does with humans.
I harvest around 100 hogs and 100 beef each year.
On average, I get one hog and one beef with mixed sex organs each year.
This year I got two hogs and one beef.
I may get zero next year.
It is just a matter of chance.
It seems that every biologically possible anomaly that can occur, does occur. Life is not that precise.
Most recently one hog had a single testicle just ahead of its left rear leg. Occasionally the person who castrates pigs misses one but that was not the case here.
A pig with a testicle, or two, can have what is called "boar taint". About a third of intact male hogs (boars) will have boar taint. Boar taint means that the meat has a strong, unpleasant odor.
That odor emerges when the meat is heated.
This year, with two "boars" we have plenty of summer sausage. To be served cold.
The resultant summer sausage is delicious, and it makes a great meat gift.
A castrated male pig is called a barrow. Barrow is an ancient English word referring to castration.
I normally buy young cattle at auction.
I prefer heifers. They finish easier on grass. They also finish younger and smaller than bulls or steers.
Very few farmers raise bulls or intact males of any mammal species for meat.
Bulls and boars are raised for breeding. Some farmers specialize in breeding stock. They then sell breeding males to other farmers and ranchers.
A pen or pasture of young males will waste a lot of energy fighting and just generally goofing off.
They are also harder to handle than castrated males and females.
I normally buy a trailer load of beef animals at a time. A trailer load of young heifers is eight to ten animals. Those heifers are almost always sold one at a time through the sales ring.
The sale barn people move the animals that I purchase, one at a time, to a holding pen.
I only do business at sale barns that have a good veterinarian on hand.
After the sale I have the vet check every animal for me. Often a heifer will need a vaccination or perhaps a pregnancy check. Heifers that are sold as "open", meaning not pregnant are in fact pregnant about ten percent of the time. Things happen.
Vaccinations are allowed in the organic regulations. Occasionally the animal will need other care.
We use antibiotics or medications only when necessary for the welfare of the animal. Off hand, I cannot recall how many years it has been since an animal has required antibiotics. I buy healthy animals.
At the end of a spring auction I went to "my" pen to walk my animals through the alleys to the vet's pens.
As I looked over my purchases, all of which were sold as heifers, I noticed a masculine face. I did not intentionally buy any males that day.
The penis of male bovines appears on the lower part of their abdomen. Midway between the front and back legs. This animal did not have that. However, the vagina and rectum, which are normally immediately adjacent on bovine females, were separated by about six inches.
I asked the vet to check for testicles.
He found one on each side of the animal. They were small and hidden on the insides of the back legs.
He surgically removed the testicles. The animal, technically a hermaphrodite, lived the rest of its life as a none bull.
The carcass was normal for a heifer when harvested.
Having a testicle has different effects on the meat in different species.
In beef animals the first effect is that bulls have a higher ratio of muscle to fat.

Bulls that have been breeding sometimes have more “bull” taste than young bulls. I cannot describe bullish taste but most of us do not prefer it.

Young bull carcasses, non-breeders, can be perfectly edible. The meat may be perceived as “tougher” but that is probably just overcooking. They tend to be lean and it is easy to overcook lean meat.

Mature bulls, both beef and dairy types are called “baloney bulls” in the slaughter trade.

That is because their final destination is normally some form of ground and cured product, e.g. as in sausage.

The meat of bison bulls however, is indistinguishable from females of the same age. There is no detectable bull taint in bison. Both genders are muscular and relatively lean. To most people, bison meat tastes like excellent beef, only better. I cannot describe that either. The English language has a weak vocabulary when it comes to tastes.

Sheep and goat males can be very challenging to eat. Males intended for meat are routinely castrated. Some cultures, however, favor the meat of male sheep and goats.

In poultry, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese etc. there is little if any difference in the meat of females compared to intact males. Neither texture nor taste is different.

Chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese can be castrated. It was commonly done for chickens when chickens were naturally raised. When I was a boy, a farmer aunt castrated young roosters (cockerels) for her flock and for others. The process is tricky. Bird testicles do not appear externally as in mammals. To castrate a bird, requires a small slit on each side of the bird near the spine. The testicles are then surgically removed. The resultant chicken is a capon.

Capons grow twice the size of pullets (young female chickens) and are said to be delicious.

In the US. Chicken production is so automated that the birds reach harvest size in five weeks. They are too young to be affected by sexual development. Caponizing would not make a difference.

Ken’s last question was about protein, nutrient and fat levels.

Those are complex issues affected by many factors.

Species genetics, individual genetics, diet and lifestyle all affect nutrients and fat ratios.

A very messy subject.

Common sense tells us that animals that are less domesticated and fed diets that are more natural (grass-fed, for example) are more nutritious. Go with that.

Tom