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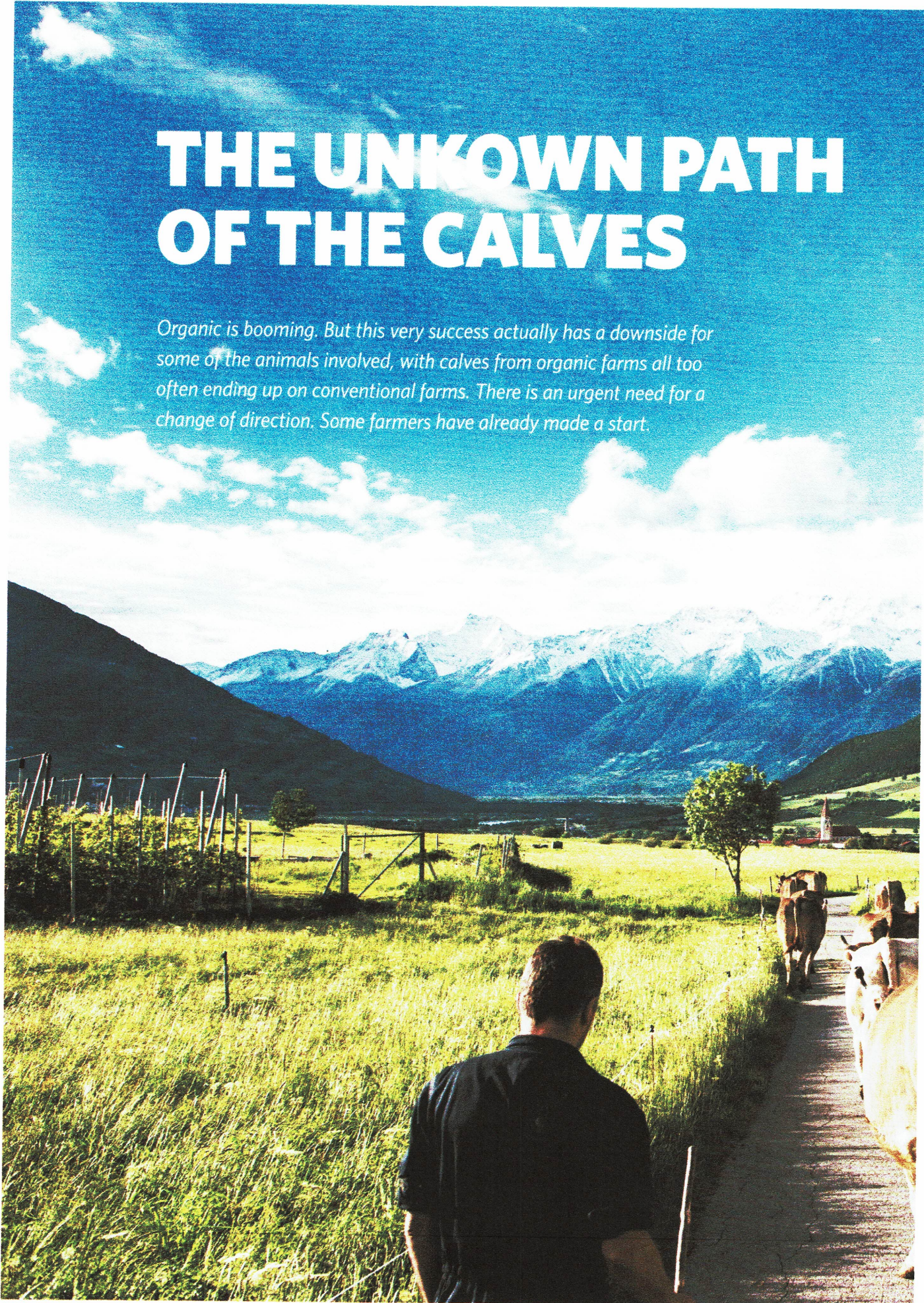
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The international magazine for sustainable animal welfare

THE UNKNOWN PATH OF THE CALVES

Organic is booming. But this very success actually has a downside for some of the animals involved, with calves from organic farms all too often ending up on conventional farms. There is an urgent need for a change of direction. Some farmers have already made a start.



The female calves are welcome as future dairy cows, but farmers don't really know what to do with their brothers. Rearing them to adulthood simply costs too much.

Alexander Agethle, an organic farmer in Italy's South Tyrol region, is trying something new: His male calves are now allowed to grow up where they were born.



Sometimes, when Alexander Agethle thinks of the things he used to do, he can only shake his head. Because he never asked what would happen to his calves after he sold them. Until the day a cattle dealer was loading a bull calf onto his truck. "A beautiful animal," Agethle recalls. That was the day this organic farmer from Vinschgau in South Tyrol actually did ask where the little bull would go.

"This one? He'll be in Poland tomorrow," was the answer. More than 1,000 km in a cattle truck lay ahead for the barely three-week-old calf from an ancient

breed, born on the Enghorn farm in Mals, known throughout South Tyrol as a dependable organic operation. "That was the day I realised what was going on and how naive I was," Agethle admits.

A lot has changed since then. That lovely little bull calf wasn't the only one allowed to stay behind. None of Enghorn's male calves have to leave on the cattle dealer's truck any more. They can stay at home and grow up into bulls in the open air until they are slaughtered as three-year-olds. Until then, they live life as landscape gardeners in the local vineyards, which is good not only for the soil culture but also for the quality of their meat. Recently dubbed by the press as "farming's gentle rebel", Alexander Agethle has come up with a solution to a problem faced by many organic farmers, which is that very few of them can afford to rear their own calves.

Cows only produce milk if they give birth once a year. So without calves being born, there would be no butter, no cheese and no yogurt. And Germans consume about 84 kg of these products every year. But what happens to the by-products of milk, the calves? (Because that's what the calves are: by-products.) Sales volumes are booming for organic milk – but not for organic meat, which remains a niche product. Organic meat has less than a 2% market share in Germany, and that's a problem for organic farming. One that has so far not been discussed enough.

The female calves are welcome as future dairy cows, but farmers don't really know what to do with their brothers. Rearing them to adulthood simply costs too much. It's only different when cows are deliberately used for suckling in beef farming. In those cases, the mothers aren't used to produce milk for sale, but to feed their calves naturally. But that is a genuine exception. Most cows today – both organic and conventional – are found on dairy farms.



Mother and calf the natural way (left). Calves kept apart from their mothers (below).



Raising the calves means very strict requirements for the organic farmer. The EU Regulation on organic farming and labelling requires that the calves be fed organic whole milk for at least 12 weeks – and not the much cheaper milk substitute usually used in conventional cattle farming. Good for the calves, bad for the farmer's balance sheet. A calf drinking whole milk for three months consumes 1,500 litres of milk that earns the farmer nothing. To make that back, the farmer would have to sell a bull calf for more than 1,000 euros – in an ideal world. But this is the real world.

And the real world looks like this: A male calf is usually picked up by a cattle dealer when it is two to three weeks old. He pays between 50 and 150 euros, depending on its weight and the current market value. The dealer then drives the calf to a farmer who will rear it to its slaughter weight of 150 kg in seven months at the most. These fattening farms are scattered all over Europe, which is why millions of calves are driven thousands of miles to

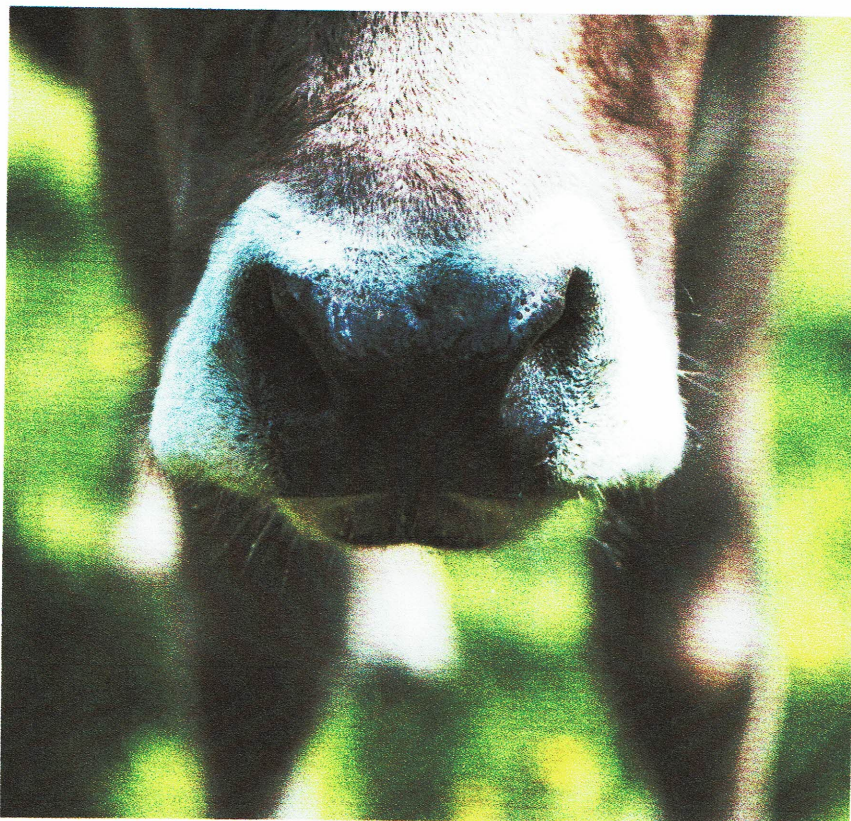
live a cooped-up life before ending up on a supermarket shelf. This is true for calves from both conventional and organic farms.

Organic farmers estimate that 80% of their male calves end up on factory farms, because there is no other market for them. Because consumers are willing to pay one or two euros for a litre of milk – but they won't pay 20 to 40 euros for a kilo of meat from an animal that grew up roaming free on an organic farm with the feel of grass under its hooves.

What do the producers have to say about this problem? At Bioland, Germany's largest organic farming association, they say: "The fact that organic farms sell not only to other organic farms, but also to conventional ones, is certainly not what organic farmers want. But even organic farmers have to follow consumer demand. For example, beef consumption has been falling for some time now, but organic dairy products are booming." And Demeter, the association with the strictest standards in the industry, says:

"The very way that male calves are marketed and used is a problematic, unsatisfactory situation. We currently view solving this problem as one of our main challenges."

Everyone we spoke to agrees that the only way to solve the problem is to close the loop. Cattle farming always used to mean producing milk and meat. But modern farming separated the two into dairy and beef cattle, which is the crux of the problem. Today, most of the cows in the stables are efficient, high-performance Holstein Frisians or Brown Swiss, over-bred to increase their milk production. Cows with rickety bodies, but with huge udders that squeeze out 30,000 litres, exhausting their milk in just a few years. The male calves of these breeds are slightly built, adding little muscle mass and so are ill-suited for meat production. If the industry wanted to make a genuine move toward livestock farming that is sustainable for both animal and environment, they could consider turning back to breeds that are suited to free-range farming that



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respects the needs of the cow. It would mean turning from factory milk production back to traditional farming methods.

There are pioneering projects doing exactly that. Like Alexander Agethle's farm in South Tyrol. Or the one run by Werner Haase in the picture-postcard Bavarian village of Fischbachau in the Leitzach Valley. This Demeter member runs a goat farm, but also keeps 14 Murnau Werdenfelser cattle there. This breed has lived in that part of the Alps for centuries, and is robust and adapted to the area. It doesn't need any power-feed, just grass and water. These beautiful grey cows came close to extinction because they have a lower yield than today's standard high-performance cows. Only a few farmers have remained loyal to the Murnau Werdenfelser and Werner Haase is one of them. His animals are important to him and he says he won't just sell them at any price. "I'm not letting anyone dictate to me what my work and my animals are worth."

That's why he's decided to go down the direct marketing route. Most of his customers live in the area around Munich, and some of them have invested in his farm, getting the interest paid in kind, in the form of cheese, butter and sausage.

The male calves stay on the farm for 150 days, when they are slaughtered. And now Haase has offered his investors the option of having one of the calves reared to full adulthood, to be sold as a bull.

But this only works when city people and farmers work as a community. For all his love of traditional farming, Werner Haase is also a realist: "If there's no other option, I have to hand the calves over to a conventional farm. That would be a bitter pill to swallow. We put so much effort into rearing them. But I can't do

everything myself. The people that come after me in the supply chain have to look out for themselves, too."

If organic farmers are to avoid selling off their calves at any cost, consumers must be prepared to pay significantly more for their meat than they do now. The Naturland Association sums it up like this: "Whether male calves from the organic dairy industry can also be raised and marketed as organic depends on whether consumers are prepared to pay what that costs." Or not.

ORGANIC FOOD: A PERCEIVED AFFINITY

Germans claim to be big fans of organic meat: More than half of them say they would pay up to five euros extra on top of a base price of ten euros for a kilo of meat. Almost a quarter say they would even pay up to ten euros more.

However, the naked truth is that Germans actually still buy the cheap meat and leave the organic cuts on the shelf. The market share of organic red meat (beef, pork, lamb, mutton and veal) is around 2%, and it is only 1% when it comes to processed meat and sausages.

(Sources: German Food & Agriculture Ministry's Nutrition Report 2018; German Organic Food Industry Federation)

