

The Self Cream - Beautiful & Elusive

by Margaret Tenner, 1992

I first fell in love with Self Creams when I saw a class lined up at the Bradford Championship Show, then held at Harrogate, in the late 1960s. . What appealed to me then appeals to me still - good size, lovely shape, expressive head, eye & ears, all set off by an even, pale cream colour. What I have since found out, in twenty years of breeding them, is that though Self Creams are indeed beautiful, that beauty can be somewhat elusive to obtain; and there a more than just a hint of frustration when you embark on the path to breeding the perfect Self Cream.

By the time I first saw them, Self Creams had been established for many years, being one of the earliest Selfs to be produced. The first Self ever to win at Bradford Champ Show was a Cream, belonging to Mr Tyldesley, in 1928, and this has been followed by five others at this supreme event, including, since the war, successes for two of the greatest of Cream breeders, Milton Baxter (1950) and Harold Carbutt (1960). The fact, though that no Cream has repeated these successes in thirty-two years, despite their constantly challenging at the top shows, just shows how difficult it is to breed a really outstanding example.

The perfect Cream

To start off a journey towards the Holy Grail of breeders, the production of the perfect cavy, we should first be clear as to what we are looking for. My vision is of a cavy balanced in all important features. From the front you should be struck by a full, broad muzzle, with good width between the eyes, and a broad shoulder. From the side, it should be seen that the shoulder is high, with the body of good size but still short and cobby. The eyes must be bold, the ears large and well-drooped, and the colour matt, level and pale with no lighter undercolour showing through. Handling the cavy you should find a soft coat, short and evenly groomed, and with the colour carried well down each hair, and still cream at the base. Be clear about vision, it is as near as you may come, because all this is very hard to get in one pig, certainly harder than in the Cream's greatest rivals for Self supremacy, Self Blacks and Self Whites.

Colour

Colour is the source of much difficulty and sometimes controversy in the Self Cream. Unlike all other breeds of Self cavy, except for some DE Goldens bred by crossing different colours, Self Creams are not 'pure- breeding'. In that a cross of a Cream to Cream is likely to produce Whites and Buffs as well as Creams of different shades. Genetically, Creams appear to be based on Agouti, Red and Chocolate genes, with the expression of the red colour suppressed by 'dilution' genes. The dilution gene, which when present is double strength produces Self Whites, is singly present in Cream, being accompanied by the gene in double strength produces Buffs. The Buff dilution gene appears to be incompletely dominant to the White one, thus producing the Cream appearance. Incidentally, though Creams and Whites are close cousins genetically, they are very different from Self Blacks in being based on Agouti, Red Chocolate and Dilution genes whereas Blacks are based on Non-Agouti, Non-Red Black and Non-Dilution.

Because their genetic basis is a combination of dilution genes, Self Creams can be bred in different ways:

Cream x Cream - 50% Cream, 25% White, 25% Buff

Cream x White - 50% Cream, 50% White

Cream x Buff - 50% Cream, 50% Buff

Buff x White - 100% Cream

Though Buff x Buff gives all Buff and White x White gives all White.

Creams can turn up in a variety of shades, from 'off white' to a strong, rich colour. A strong Cream is almost Buff, a pale almost ivory, but both are genetically Creams. The colour sought in exhibition cavies is as deemed by the Standard: 'Pale Cream, free from lemon or yellow tinge, with undercolour to match'.

However, all cavies other than Whites have some slight lightening in undercolour, and in the very palest Creams this can cause the undercolour to appear white, and these very light pigs can often appear patchy. A slightly darker colour, with the undercolour still pale Cream and a more even shade on top, is usually aimed for in exhibition stock; but the top colour should not be at all 'hot'.

In my experience it is very difficult to fix shade - random genetic factors seem to be at work, but as a general rule Creams bred from Whites tend to be paler and Creams from Buffs darker, at least in my strain. Readers may think that this is common sense, common-sense isn't usually a safe guide in colour genetics (it would not, I suspect, lead you to expect Agoutis from crosses of Cream to Chocolate), and these results may be a coincidence. More important to obtaining the right shade is the idea of keeping a balance within your stud. So, although primarily breed for type, I do keep horsey pigs of a pale Cream colour (I wouldn't keep a dark one, though thanks to Sod's law you don't usually get dark horsey ones); in this way can keep the factors for paleness, whatever they are, in the strain in the hope that one day they will come out on a typey pig.

In mentioning the use of Whites in the breeding programme I am referring to the White bred from Creams. The problem with using a White is that you don't know what the albino colour is hiding - would the pig have good undercolour or bad if it weren't White? When the White has been bred from Creams with an even shade and good undercolour, the chances are that it will carry these factors and pass them on. If the White is from a 'pure-breeding' White strain you can have no idea what is being hidden and the results are likely to be unpredictable. I have used one or two crosses from my 'pure' Whites successfully, but these Whites used to be mixed with Creams by their originator, J.R. Wood, and I would not advise a cross to an 'unknown' White strain.

Breeders in the old days were far more adverse to using even Cream-bred Whites. Ernest Dixon, a top breeder of the 1930's, claimed that the use of Whites might 'produce nice pale Creams but it is also the forerunner of many ills that cannot be easily cured - flakiness, light chests and feet and so on'.

Apart from shade and undercolour, the other occasional colour problem is unevenness, most often found on paler pigs in the form of light flashes visible when viewing the cavy from above. I would not breed from pigs such as this, as I believe that the problem could easily recur in future. Now and again you also get a clump of Cream hairs with a Chocolate tip (betraying the Cream's Agouti basis) - this is so rare as not to be a problem in breeding.

One final thought on colour is that in my experience that good linked good coat. If you can breed a cavy with a short, close coat the coat lies flat and the colour is

matt and level, with no undercolour showing through; so attention to coat quality is a breeding issue not just a showing one, for it critically affects the appearance of the top colour of the cavy.

Head

Width of head, between the eyes and around the muzzle, is all important in the top-class Cream. This width, though, must be balanced by appropriate size of head: pigs with too short a nose can look small-headed and unbalanced.

Although, big, broad heads are a feature which can be obtained regularly in Creams, they are another feature which cannot be fixed - wide to wide can throw horsey ones, and overall you get more plain pigs than typey ones. They are like Self Whites in this and again unlike Self Blacks, where type qualities appear to be more consistently thrown. Again, in the stud the trick is to have some cavies of the right type qualities - they may be too dark or even buff, but if the desired feature goes into the strain eventually it will come out, hopefully with the other good features, on a pig which lives!

I am often asked for a good trio of young Self Creams, which if I had one would never be for sale. You have to breed your own; but if you start with stock which have all the factors between them (perhaps a boar with good head, eye & ear, too dark; a sow plain, horsey, good ears, light colour; a sow typey, small on ears, a little dark) you at least have a chance. I try to provide all of the ingredients when selling a trio, but you cannot expect to obtain a trio of 'nearly theres' as you might with Blacks.

Along with width, the head needs to be of good shape, but to me shape cannot compensate for a narrow frontal in a show pig. You are looking for a Roman appearance and a good size of head, giving a bold appearance. In Creams both boars and sows can be obtained with a good enough shape of head to be showable.

Eyes

Self Creams have ruby eyes, this feature being consistent in all the top lines, although I have seen odd Creams (and they were odd) with Black eyes, presumably based on a Black rather than Chocolate colour base. The eye should be large and bold, size being fixable by selection against use of small-eyed pigs in the breeding pen. A bold eye is essential to lend expression to the head.

In terms of faults, fatty eye is the most insidious, this being a deposit of white fatty tissue on the lower rim of the eye. It is most likely to appear progressively as pigs get older and overweight, especially in boars; but in some strains it can appear in young pigs before breeding age. The advice in these cases is 'do not use', for this is a hereditary characteristic; but if fatty eye occurs in a pig which has already been widely used for breeding all you can do is be careful about how to mate the offspring (i.e. not to each other). The other occasional eye fault is that you can get a deep-set eye, large but not bold. This seems to come up more often in Self Goldens, and again selection is the answer - concentrate on cavies with the well-set bold eye.

Ears

Large, well-drooped ears, set as close to the eye as possible, are essential to set off the expression of head and eye, and are quite obtainable in Creams. The problems which occur are that ears may be small, high-set or have hems. I would never want to use a pig with really bad ears in the breeding pen, and I would never

use one with a hem, for this is an unsightly fault, arising from a recessive gene, which can easily become established in the stud and crop up too regularly.

To me, ear setting is more important than size - the ears should be set wide apart as the Standard calls for, not high up and close together. As the cavy grows and the ears settle you can get away with a smallish ear if they are well-set, but a small high-set ear is dreadful. The basic advice is that one of the parents in a mating should have perfect ears. It comes back to balance:

You are trying to produce a balanced pig and to do this you have to balance the different features in your stud and in each mating. If you keep all of the desired features in your stud you can correct things before they go too far wrong.

Body type

Body type is like frontal in that, in my view, width is prominent, particularly on shoulders, where you want plenty of width; but this full-fleshed appearance should not be accompanied by a flabby body. Even worse than the flabby exhibit, is a long narrow pig. Viewed side-on, the shoulders should be deep, with a pronounced dip to the back; and the back should level briefly before dipping again over the hindquarters - it should not go on like a pantomime horse, a fault to which some judges seem oblivious.

Creams can achieve very good size, although it is harder to produce this with the prettiest pigs - like other breeds of Selves, the ones best as babies often don't make up as adults. Pigs with larger heads and deep muzzles are more likely to develop good bone and substance as adults, whereas small-headed pigs often fail size and are unbalanced. As a breeder of Creams, you need to learn to judge your own youngsters in terms of which will make up and which will not. Selection for size and bone is important as well as selection for type and colour. Feeding matters greatly, but you can only develop by feeding the size and substance which are genetically there.

Coat

Apart from being groomed short and even, and bathed to be silky and clean, the coat needs to be naturally fine and close in order to get evenness of colour. Avoid using heavy coated pigs or the fluffy ones which occur in both Creams and Whites, and attempt to fix a close coat in your stud.

Creams are inclined to break in coat, especially as they put on weight, particularly in the middle of the belly; and continual bathing and cleaning of the coat, as well as a good, balanced diet, are necessary to minimise problems.

Creams which are bred for a close coat and an even top colour and good undercolour should then be able to be groomed short. The coat will have a gloss and sheen which are essential to add a touch of class to the Self cavy. This can turn a cavy with the right type and colour from a good exhibit into an outstanding one.

Breeding principle

Every breeder has to decide for themselves, based on what experience and knowledge they bring to the task and how they learn from further experience, how they will pursue the Holy Grail - the production of a perfect cavy from a stud which has the strength in depth to follow on with others. With Creams, so many things can go wrong that the pursuit of this challenge has many frustrations and tribulations - the essential combination of all the features is hard to achieve in a

single pig. In my opinion selection and balancing of features within the stud are the keys. You must always guard against emphasising some points and losing others, against going irrecoverably far in one direction, e.g. all typey but too dark or flaky in colour, or good-headed but high-set on ears. To do this I keep as many pigs good on type as I can, select against small eyes or high-set ears, and keep a variety of colours - Whites from Creams, Creams of pale, medium or dark shade, and Buffs.

Selection continues when the youngsters are born. At birth you can tell many of the things about them - the width of head, boldness of eyes, size and carnage of ears. The colour is darker than it will be later on, but the lightest ones will always be lightest and a Buff won't become a Cream. At around 3 months, when the initial fluffy coat goes, the final colour comes through. Intense selection is necessary: Creams often breed large litters, but many are useless, being too small or plain or the wrong colour. Death rates, too, can be high, so it can be hard to produce show stock consistently let alone 'nice trios of Creams for sale'.

Creams, though, are one of the most beautiful of cavies if one of the hardest to produce at the pinnacle of their potential. The vision of a good one must be pursued with dedication and a constant thought of balance. Frustrations are common, but the end product, when you can achieve your aim, means that you have met a tremendous challenge and produced a pig able to beat Blacks and Whites on type, shape and size and with the beautiful pale Cream colour which is so appealing to the eye. Self Creams were the first cavies I fell for, and they still represent my ideal.

Margaret Tanner (Palemoon Stud), 1992