

# The Self Chocolate - Queen of the AOCS

by Evelyne van Vliet

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Self Chocolates have for the best part Colour of their existence only been bred and shown by a rather small number of fanciers. Fortunately this situation has dramatically changed for the better in the last couple of years. It is good to see so many fanciers involved in this breed and also seeing double figures in exhibits especially in the adult sections at a lot of shows throughout the country these days.

## The history

There seem to be conflicting views about who was the creator of Self Chocolates. One document shows a Mr. Castle to be the originator of Self Chocolates when he isolated a mutation of the B factor (the gene producing Black hair in cavies) in 1905 through Self Blacks and managed to produce the first Chocolates. Another view is that a Mr. Allan Roberts produced the first examples out of a mixture of Self Reds, Buffs and the old Greys (this is an Agouti type cavy). One thing that everybody seemed to agree on is the fact that the Chocolate is the fifth Self breed to be established after the Black, Red, Cream and White.

The colour Chocolate has been the cause of a great controversy for many years. Originally the colour was of a light shade, although the standard has always called for a deep rich colour. At some point in time, discussions were going on to change the standard description to a lighter colour. Fortunately this effort (attempt) never materialised. We must be grateful to the dedicated breeders of decades ago who worked so hard and eventually obtained the correct colour, a colour that all of us can work with now.

## The Standard

So what makes a good Chocolate? To achieve success, the cavy should possess sound type, colour and condition.

The Self standard gives us an in depth description divided over six factors about the ideal pig we all hope to breed. Therefore we should know our standard by heart so that we can use it as a guideline.

### *Colour*

Thirty per cent of the points allocated to a Self cavy goes to colour (top colour and undercolour). In the Chocolate cavy, the colour that comes nearest to the required colour is that of plain, 'Bourneville' chocolate. The colour should be of an even shade over the head and body. The belly colour lacks lustre of the top colour and therefore appears somewhat lighter to the eye.

Ideally the top colour should carry right down to the skin, but unfortunately this not always so: the undercolour is usually somewhat lighter than the top colour, although the aim of course is to improve the undercolour all the time so that eventually we will hopefully lose so-called undercolour altogether.

### *Type & Shape*

The next most important aspect of a Cavy is its type and shape. The standard stipulates a short and cobby body with very deep broad shoulders (personally I always compare a cavy to a brick, equally broad in shoulders as it is in hindquarters).

The shape of the pig should give a strong, muscular impression. This feature is quite easy to achieve in a Chocolate as there is so much quality stock available

these days; however, Chocolates are perhaps not as bulky as some of the other Self breeds and this is brought about by their finer bone structure. No wonder a Chocolate is renowned for its elegance and therefore sometimes referred to as 'the Queen of the AOCs!

The head should have good width between the eyes and a well developed muzzle. It has a roman nose and full cheeks. A lot of improvement has been achieved with the shape of the head of Chocolates; the snikey heads are definitely a thing of the past! The head shape of Chocolates is not as good yet as those we see on Blacks; Whites and Creams, but a lot of them are certainly better than the heads of some Golden's these days!

### *Coat*

The third most important aspect on a Self cavy is the coat. This is defined in the standard as short and silky with a glossy sheen. This position is where the judge can quite easily award a Chocolate its full 15 points, because in my opinion the Chocolate has the silkiest and possibly shortest coat of all Self cavies.

### *Eyes & Ears*

The next two positions of the standard, namely eyes and ears, are again positions where full marks can be awarded to Chocolates. The ears should be rose petal shape, set wide apart, large and drooping. Most Chocolates have exactly got ears like that; years ago the tissue used to be rather thin, but that has been improved as well in recent years. The colour of the ears is Chocolate brown as are the pads.

The eyes should be large and bold and this has always been a feature in Chocolates, even in the days when Chocolates used to have snikey heads they always had the most beautiful and bold eyes.

### *Presentation*

The last position in the standard is presentation, i.e. condition, cleanliness and grooming. In my opinion this position is the most important of them all, because even the most beautiful cavy (coat-, colour- and type wise) will not get placed at a show if it is dirty, soft in condition or has long guard hairs. When judging I come across so many good exhibits that are totally spoilt through a lack of presentation.

### **Breeding**

How do you breed a good Chocolate that pleases the judge's eye? In theory this question is very simple to answer: breed from the best pigs and make sure that the offspring are of better quality than the parents; in practice it does not always work this way, though.

### *Initial Steps*

The first step to take when taking on Chocolates is to acquire sound breeding stock from a reputable Chocolate breeder. It is not difficult to find reputable Chocolate breeders, because the Chocolate seems to be very addictive, in other words, the people that are winning now were winning 10 and in some cases 20 years ago. If you are patient, the breeder will find you a trio that is well suited. This trio will form the basis your own stud of Chocolates.

Buying stock from one stud initially is always better than buying from various studs, because the stock bred together from different studs might not be compatible. Sound breeding stock will get you on the way in your new breed and you will find that you can breed quite a few generations of good quality cavies. In the mean time the odd boar or sow from a different stud can be introduced to your own.

So, all goes well until after some generations the going gets a little tougher. Chocolates seem to have a nasty habit not continuing to improve at all times. All of a sudden you will find some little fault has crept in, like for example the undercolour on your covies is getting lighter or that the size of their ears or eyes is getting smaller. When minor faults creep in it is time to introduce some new blood.

When breeding we must always make sure that the boar and the sow complement each other; if the sow has a minor or a feature that is far from ideal, we have got to make sure that the boar is outstanding in this aspect. This, of course also works vice versa. In my own stud the boars have got a far better undercolour than the sows, yet, my best coloured babies always seem to stem from certain sows irrespective of which boar they have been mated to. Could I therefore presume that in covies the mothers determine the colour of their babies?

### *Improving colour*

The most talked about subject between Chocolate fanciers is how to improve colour on their pigs. The easiest way, as mentioned before, is to find a cavy that excels in colour and introduce it to the stud. If this is not possible the need arises to cross the Chocolate with another colour. The most obvious choice, namely to cross out to Self Black, is by no means the correct procedure! The Black will improve the head shape of the Chocolates, but strangely enough ruins the colour. To cross out to a Self Red is a much better way to improve the colour on your Chocolate, but unfortunately it generally worsens the head shape and to a certain extent also the type (my apologies to all breeders of Self Reds!). The best breed to use as an outcross is the Self Beige; this outcross improves the colour of the Chocolate considerably and it does not deteriorate the head shape and type.

Like other Self breeds, Chocolates also suffer from coloured hairs. Exactly like Self Blacks, Chocolates can suffer from white, cream or red hairs. According to quantity, these coloured hairs are a fault on the show bench, but this does not mean these covies are unsuitable for breeding. A few coloured hairs do not worry me at all. If there are loads scattered all over the pig however, I personally tend not to breed from such a cavy. If the coloured hairs are confined to one area rather than scattered, I will breed from such a pig, only if the different coloured patch consists of red hairs. I always think that such a pig carries a good colour. White patches or worse still white toes or feet, I speedily send off to the pet shop!

### *Assessing potential*

When a litter of Chocolates is born, it is possible to assess the quality or lack of it within the first two days after birth. Whatever the newly born babies look like in these early days, they will look like that again as adults.

It is important to examine the babies in these first few days as 'they go off' soon afterwards. By 'going off' I mean that the babies start growing and immediately lose their cobbiness and desired head shape which goes snipey; some of them even stick their ears up. At the age of about three weeks the deep rich chocolate colour gets lighter and duller and the coat consists basically of thin long guard hairs. The coat and colour revert back to their original length and colour after the first moult which usually takes place when the babies are about 2 months old. The type, head shape and drooping of the ears will take a little longer depending on the stud it can take up to five months to get these aspects back to normal.

As a final remark in this chapter, I would like to state that some Chocolates can be temperamental breeders. When I first came to live in this country, now 5 years ago, some Chocolate boars had a habit of mating a couple of sows whilst young and then 'dry up' soon afterwards, never to breed again. This problem seems to have

disappeared, though. My own Chocolate sows seem to stick very closely to nature, in that they will not breed very well during late autumn and the winter months, but once the days lengthen and especially once the grass starts growing, they more or less get in pig straight away. I usually have a baby boom in May and early June!

### **Showing**

The ultimate test of a breeding program is to enter the cavies in a show. No matter how grand and beautiful we think they are, the cavies cannot be known to be of show quality until they have been scrutinized by the judge and awarded a card, whether this is red, blue or yellow.

### ***Preparation***

Once we start showing a cavy we are working on its presentation constantly. Firstly there is the feeding - the pig must have enough green food, roots, hay and dry mixture so that it is fit all the time.

A bit nearer the date of the show, the cavy's coat needs preparing for the show. As mentioned before Chocolates have an extremely silky, short coat, so grooming is never usually too great a problem, although it is very easy to over groom a Chocolate. Great care has to be taken whilst grooming the flanks; it is usually better to leave a few guard hairs on the flanks, because when too many are taken out the undercolour will show through which will produce an uneven shade.

If the cavy feels greasy or looks dirty, it is best to give it a bath at least one week before the show, so that the coat has time to settle down. The last job to do is to check if there are any odd coloured hairs (if so, they have to be removed with a pair of tweezers) and clip nails (not on u/5 months exhibits).

### ***Slow developers***

Generally speaking Chocolates are slow developers. They take a long time to look their best as an adult exhibit. My own strain produces some very good u/5 months exhibits, but after 5 months they tend to lose their glamour. Most of my sows are mated up at age of 6-7 months, they rear their litter and after this has been weaned, I usually run the mothers together in a large pen. During this time I examine them regularly and decide whether they are showable as adults.

Invariably they will not be shown until they are about 18 months old; most of my adults do not really look the part until they are almost two years old.

As a final remark in this chapter I would like to appeal to all exhibitors of Chocolates to support their local shows; only this way will we get rid of the amalgamated classes (e.g. Red/Chocolate or worse still Chocolate/Beige/Lilac) on certain schedules.

### **Final comments**

If, after reading this article, you feel attracted to the Self Chocolate, why not get some from a good stud and have a go at breeding them yourself?

The Self Chocolate is catered for by the English Self Cavy Club, for details see elsewhere on this site.

N.B. This article on Self Chocolates is based on my personal ideas and experiences of the breed and may contradict other people's opinions and/or experiences.

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