

# Edmonds Farm: Where the buffalo roam



by Audrey Thomasson

**A** trip to the Edmonds Farm in Ottoman is like a trip back in time. For turn-of-the-century nostalgia, start the excursion by catching the ferry at Merry Point to cross the Corrotoman River. It's free. Then drive a mile or so up Ottoman Ferry Road to meet Don and Kim Edmonds. The couple apply the best practices of organic farming in raising a variety of farm animals as well as growing their feed. There are ducks, pigs, chickens, pets, horses, and a couple of herds of bison. It's a great way to experience a real working farm. For the complete experience, purchase some wholesome bison or pork steaks, sausage and ground meat for your next barbecue.



Thor races at full gallop alongside the family truck. A bison can run at speeds up to 35 mph. Photo by Audrey Thomasson



Elvis weighs 2,300 pounds. Photo courtesy of Edmonds Farm



Kim, Don and little Valerie Edmonds are at home where the buffalo roam. Photo by Audrey Thomasson



Above and below: Bison cows and their calves. There is always new life on the farm. Photo courtesy of Edmonds Farm



Big Guy, the main bull. Photo courtesy of Edmonds Farm



A scratching post comes in handy for a one-ton buffalo with an itch. Photo by Audrey Thomasson



Many Americans are moving toward healthier eating habits and away from meats that come from factory raised animals fattened up with hormones and the same antibiotics used to treat people. The trend is resulting in revived interest in what was once a staple that fed an Indian nation—the American buffalo.

Buffalo, also called bison, meets the standards of high protein/low carbohydrate diets and it's rich beef-like flavor make it a healthy choice for every meat dish from steak to brisket, short ribs, roasts, hot dogs, and even ravioli, according to the National Bison Association.

Consumer demand has taken off in the last five years, said executive director Dave Carter. And, thanks to restaurants

introducing bison and the availability from more suppliers, the popularity of the “other red meat” has prompted the association to predict 2010 will be the year of the bison.

Bison ranches are flourishing in the cattle-rich states of Texas, Colorado, Nebraska and the Dakotas. At Wrigley Field in Chicago, the burgers, sausages, chili and meatball sandwiches are made with lean bison meat from Wyoming.

But you don't have to go as far as Chicago to get a buffalo burger.

Don and Kim Edmonds have been raising bison in Lancaster for 11 years. Their herd of some 70 cows and bulls, with another 25 calves on the way, is raised organically—without the use of growth hormones, pesticides and herbicides. The herd graze naturally in green

pastures, renewing and stimulating new grass growth while also producing lean and healthy meat. Grazing is supplemented with chemical-free hay grown on their farm.

Edmonds Farm consists of some 200 acres in Ottoman. They also raise hogs, chickens, Muscovy Ducks, horses and goats. A variety of cats and dogs includes Thor, a favorite dog of 15-month old daughter, Valerie.

Valerie points to a bison and says, “Thor,” a name she affixes to all the farm animals, her mother explained.

Thor, the bison, was purchased as a calf and the family's first investment in a herd. The large bull is clearly in charge and acts more like one of the family pets than a wild animal. While the rest of the herd watch, Thor takes off at a full

gallop alongside the pasture fence to outrun the farm truck. He springs off all four hooves at once becoming airborne and easily running at a 30 mph clip.

When Don parks and approaches the fence on foot, the herd moves toward him. Thor is the first to the fence and pushes the others aside with his massive head. He “speaks” in loud sounds that are similar to a lion. While buffalo are wild and will never be tame like cattle, the big bull is clearly Don's favorite.

“He'll never go to market. He'll live out his life here,” which could be as long as 30 years, Don said.

When bison are ready for market at 18 months, they weigh about 1,200 pounds. Edmonds Farm bison are processed in Pennsylvania or North Carolina where every portion of the bison is



Above and below: Barbie, an Appaloosa, and her foal Caoimhe. Photos courtesy of Edmonds Farm



Valerie and Sausage the piglet. Photo courtesy of Edmonds Farm



Don having fun with one of the pigs. Photo courtesy of Edmonds Farm



A beautiful rainbow over Edmonds Farm. Photo courtesy of Edmonds Farm

43» cultivated, he noted.

To make his point, Don pulled a clump of kinky hair from the big bull's cape, the furry part over the hump, and explained how the pastures are combed for hair and used to make yarn.

"The meat is lower in fat, calories and cholesterol than beef, pork, or skinless chicken," said Kim Edmonds. "And higher in omega fats, which are the good kind."

Kim, who supplements the farm income by working at Chesapeake Bank, noted the connection of growth hormones added to cattle and the early development of primary school girls raised on beef and dairy products.

A former commissioner of the Food

and Drug Administration claims the use of antibiotics in meat is leading to antibiotic resistant bacteria that infect humans. Donald Kennedy, professor emeritus of environmental science at Stanford, said tens of thousands of Americans die each year from infections because bacteria has become resistant to powerful antibiotics and that treatment is adding as much as \$26 billion a year to America's health care system.

The U.S. FDA inspects the bison meat, allowing zero antibiotics or hormones. Don speculated that the FDA does not allow drugs to be used in bison to keep them natural and on the wild game status, which is the way he and

the bison industry prefer to keep it, he said.

Don and Kim sell their meat over the internet and locally at farmers' markets.

"We're working to get into restaurants," in the area and in Richmond, Don said. "The hardest part of the industry is getting people to try it. People think it's going to be gamey, but it's not. It's lean like venison, without the gamey taste. It's sweeter than beef and much more tender when not overcooked."

He said restaurants don't always know how to cook bison, over cooking it and turning customers away from the product. The key is learning the differences from beef. While the fat in beef

acts as a buffer to a hot grill, bison's leaner content requires less grilling and less intense heat.

The bright red meat doesn't turn gray-brown as quickly as beef so it retains the color of 'very rare' even when it's cooked to medium-rare, which he said is the ideal way to serve the meat. Don advises not to cook it to medium or well-done because it becomes tough and chewy.

Basic grilling rules apply: season liberally, cook at lower heat, and let it rest before cutting.

To purchase meat or make an appointment to visit this working farm call 804-366-4730. Prices and order forms are available at [edmondsfarm.com](http://edmondsfarm.com).



Billy the goat. photo courtesy of Edmonds Farm



A bull weighs up to a ton, can measure more than 12 feet long, and stand up to six feet tall at their massive hump which serves as a storehouse for energy-rich fat. Photo by Audrey Thomasson



Billy and the girls. Photo courtesy of Edmonds Farm



Thor and Valerie checking out the goats. Photo courtesy of Edmonds Farm



Cooking with Bison meat: Skirt Steak Stir Fry (left) and Bison Chili (right). Photos courtesy of Edmonds Farm

### Look for Edmonds Farm at the following Virginia Farmers' Markets:

- ▶ **Irvington Farmers' Market:** The first Saturday of every month.
- ▶ **South of The James, in Richmond:** The first Saturday of every month.
- ▶ **Old Beach Famers' Market, in Virginia Beach:** The second Saturday of every month.
- ▶ **Yorktown:** The fourth Saturday of every month.