



More than 70 bison graze in the pastures at Edmonds Farm in Ottoman. To view more photos, visit RRecord.com.

Edmonds Farm: Where the buffalo roam

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 has revived interest in what was a staple that fed an Indian nation—the American buffalo.

Buffalo, also called bison, meets the standards of high protein/low carbohydrate diets and its 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 local residents 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 a goat. 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, bison 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



At full gallop, a bison can run up to 35 mph. 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.

that are similar to those of 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 used, 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 skin-

less chicken,” said Kim, “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.

Indeed, 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 costs.

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, overcooking 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 the farm, leave a message at 804-366-4730. Prices and order forms are available at edmondsfarm.com.



Kim, Don and Valerie Edmonds are at home where the buffalo roar