

US BISON RANCHERS

STRUGGLE TO MEET CONSUMER DEMAND



Ed Eichten on his ranch in Minnesota.

Associated Press
December 29, 2010

MINNEAPOLIS—The deep snow blanketing the Midwest prairie didn't bother the bison on Ed Eichten's ranch one bit. The hardy animals evolved to survive—even thrive—year-round on the open range, and with their big heads, they can plow right through drifts 5-feet tall or more.

The majestic beasts are a hot commodity these days, as consumer demand for healthy meat has sent prices soaring. But although bison are what one rancher calls "a self-care animal," most farmers are struggling to increase their herds and keep up with demand.

Bison grow slower than other livestock, and a heifer can't have her first calf until she's 3, said Dave Carter, executive director of the National Bison Association in Westminster, Colo. Beef cows can have calves at 2. Also, many producers are finding heifers more valuable for breeding than eating, which means fewer bison going to market—at least temporarily, he said.

The tight supply comes after bison farmers spent much of the past decade aggressively courting consumers by touting the health benefits of the low-fat, low-cholesterol meat. Bison caught on, and even in the economic slump, prices haven't discouraged consumers. "Now our challenge is keeping up with that demand," Carter said.

Eichten's family has about 250 head near Center City, about 40 miles north of Minneapolis. He sells meat at farmers markets, over the Internet and through the family's retail store and restaurant. Eichten's Hidden Acres also supplies local restaurants and co-op grocers.

Aaron Nytroe, meat and seafood manager at The Wedge co-op grocery in Minneapolis, said he can't get enough bison meat. He sells out deliveries from Eichten's most weeks, and with demand "growing exponentially," he said he might even look at finding a second supplier to keep up.

Bison fans say the meat doesn't taste gamy—it has a rich, beefy flavor but is a little sweeter. Since it's so lean, chefs say preparing it properly requires slower cooking over lower heat than beef. They say steaks shouldn't be cooked past medium or medium rare. Those who prefer meat well done might want to try a bison pot roast. While retail prices vary, ground bison has been selling for about \$7 a pound, compared with a little over \$5 a year ago, Carter said.

But it's still a niche product. About 92,000 head of bison were processed last year in North America, according to the association. That's less than one day's beef production in the U.S. alone. "It will take us five-plus years to ramp up and keep a consistent supply," said Gail Griffin, who's been raising bison for 20 years and is the executive director of the Minnesota Buffalo Association and immediate past president of the national group. "But there's every indication, for sure this year and indications over the last three actually, that people are shifting to larger herds or creating new herds."



South Dakota, Montana, North Dakota, Nebraska and Colorado are the top bison states, but the animals are raised in all 50, Carter said, including a herd on the Big Island of Hawaii and one on Long Island in New York. The U.S. Department of Agriculture counted about 4,500 ranches and farms with nearly 200,000 bison in the U.S. in its 2007 Census of Agriculture. The total North American herd, which includes animals in state and national parks, is estimated at 450,000, compared with fewer than 1,000 a little over a century ago.

CNN founder Ted Turner is the world's largest bison rancher with about 55,000 head. He co-founded the Ted's Montana Grill chain in 2002 to help popularize the meat, and it now sells about 1.5 million pounds of bison a year, about 40 percent of its annual sales of about \$100 million, chief executive and co-founder George McKerrow Jr. said.

The chain's bison burgers typically run \$12 to \$15, or \$3 more than the same burgers made from beef. When the Atlanta-based company raised prices by \$1 earlier this year, customers kept forking it out. "Right now the consumer loves the product enough to pay for it," McKerrow said. But, he added, steak prices have hit a ceiling at \$30 for a bison filet.

Eichten, who has been raising bison for 22 years, said he doesn't see demand falling off as it does with many food fads. People "want that fresh, locally grown product and they're willing to pay a premium for it," he said.

He and other producers say bison can be easier to raise than cattle, but there are some unique challenges. It's tough to keep them fenced, Eichten said. And, he never walks through his herd; he always uses a vehicle. "The animal is pretty wild," he said. "You have to watch your butt around them. . . . I've clocked them at 40 miles an hour. They can rock and roll.