

Grass-fed Awakening

by Kathy Lindner

I'm excited.

I'm not just a little excited

- I'm very excited.

For the last 6 years, my husband Ken, and I have researched bison production. We are absentee owners of a small bison herd and I've been buying and selling our meat to learn the business and establish a customer base. Our plan is to have an active retirement raising and selling bison meat, so we ask (and continue to ask) a lot of questions from a lot of people -- meat processors, bison producers with small and large herds, from several states - Minnesota, California, Texas, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Nebraska, New York, Montana, Colorado. We learned, then, we learned how much more we needed to learn. Then, our friends and relatives were subjected to a review of what we had learned.

Basically, 5 points emerged as guidelines toward not only enjoying bison meat, but becoming successful in the bison business:

- must be grain or corn finished for consistent flavor (or for flavor beef-lovers prefer)
- 15% fat must be added to ground product to please chefs & customers
- field kill preferred when possible
- USDA inspection for broader retail acceptance
- the only mistake you can make with bison meat is to overcook it

During our research, we heard a few producers say grass fed and grass finished was the better way. We listened, and pretty well dismissed it, since it seemed there were so few doing this.

Time passed. As we continued our research, I listened more closely to "burger talk." And as I listened, I became aware of a growing feeling of confusion. At first I attributed it to the influence of living in health-conscious California for 20+ years. The feeling wouldn't go away: I found I was hearing more and more that fat needed to be added to the naturally lean bison trim to make an acceptable burger; that 'customers want this.' Since I had customers that didn't want it, and I was a customer and I didn't want it, I started reviewing my other research notes. There I saw where the USDA

had been invited to come in and "help" move bison surplus product that I and others wouldn't buy. It marked a turning point. Armed with this new perspective, I became willing to look more closely at other guidelines I hadn't questioned. Focusing on finishing, I decided to take a closer look by asking different kinds of questions as well as the reasons why producers chose what they chose.

We contacted GPBA for names of producers who grass finished their bison. Slow but sure, we encountered a different kind of producer with a different kind of passion. I developed a rapport with one woman who grass fed with free choice grain. We ordered her meat and cooked a chuck roast. Delicious. And the price was the same or better than the grain finished.

During this same time, someone suggested certified organic grassfed bison would be a better product. (My silent reaction: Yeah, right . . . it was so hard to find grass fed bison and I still hadn't finished my burger taste tests and fat analysis.) Convinced I would come up empty, I asked around anyway. Nothing. No one returned my calls. Oh well, what's the big deal with certified organic anyway, I thought. A month or so later, a bison producer of 20 years called to say he had certified organic grass fed bison, USDA inspected and harvested by field kill. I ordered samples of burger and cooked it as soon as it arrived.

How can I describe the awakening that followed? To say this meat surpasses any I've had is an understatement. And you don't know me, but those who do will tell you - I'm not easy to please. The flavor was absolutely out of this world. The color was terrific; there was no odor, no smell, no water, not even a drip left in the pan. It was so different than anything we'd had. And in talking to others, it was consistent with their experience with this particular producer. It was also consistent with what he told us to expect from the meat.

I immediately called and asked what kind of grass he feeds his animals. He went down the list of grasses, then ended by saying that he's not doing anything special. He said simply, "It's not hard to have this kind of flavor. It doesn't have to be hard. People just don't know - they can do what I'm doing."

In all fairness to the grain finishers out there, we have come to understand and deeply respect that every producer has his/her own set of variables based on individual economics and what part of the country he/she lives in. We're still learning the ins and outs of this. Many producers supplement and finish on grain to produce a consistent flavor for their customers. Other producers don't have the luxury of grass finishing because of the acreage required; still other producers' geographic location yields 'washy' grasses.

From the standpoint of my own personal grass-fed awakening then, I can only offer this comment: For those who do have the acreage and are so inclined, if someone told me I could create a clearly superior product so wonderful tasting, and meeting criteria usually reserved for 5 star restaurants, I would be checking to see if there was any way possible I could duplicate it with my own animals.

These days, it seems most agree there's plenty of room for both grass and grain finished product in the marketplace. As producers and sellers of bison meat, my husband and I pride ourselves in being open and participating in the ongoing evaluation, education, nutritional representation, and evolving market development of bison. Whether grass or grain fed, one of our goals is to offer the best possible bison meat product for the best possible price . . . and then stepping back and listening to what the customer has to say - which is as it should be.

In closing, all this particular grass fed bison producer asked was if I would write an article and tell people about my experience. This is it and I'm happy to do it. If you would like more information, please feel free to contact me at 1-866-247-8753 or by email: klindner@lindnerbison.com.

Sincerely,
Kathy Lindner, Lindner Bison

Featured in 1999 Great Plains Bison Association newsletter and 2000, Smoke Signals, Canadian Bison Association newsletter

2008 update: Written at a time when there was strong debate and division in the industry concerning the benefits of grassfed v. grainfed bison. While there is still division, we are encouraged by a growing number of 100% grassfed bison producers who have emerged over the last decade.

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