

This is a story about how our appetites can sustain our passions. It's about people like you and me. People with dreams. People with strengths and weaknesses, people who don't quit in spite of the odds. It is, after all, what our country is about. It's about restoring a strong, pioneering work ethic in the wake of a broken model of greed and entitlement. Sustaining ourselves, our environment, our appetite and our passion to create something new, something better. And in the process, rediscovering that when something good occurs, it not only works for us, it works for others too. It's about sharing and giving back.

Sustainable appetite, sustainable passion

by Kathy Lindner



Ken & Kathy Lindner, Lindner Bison

Introduction

We are corporate America escapees. After years of being upsized, downsized, merged, relocated, replaced and laid off, we knew we had to find another way. By the time we reached our early 40s, it had become increasingly apparent there was less job security. And very possibly, there would be no social security funds available when we retired.

These thoughts were the meager beginning of rethinking what we were doing with our lives. We decided to see if it was possible to do what our hearts were telling us to do: leave our jobs in corporate America and live on the land.

Background

With a degree in music, Ken taught for a while, then became a computer technician to pay the bills. His career would take him into industries such as computers and medical device manufacturing, becoming vice president of quality for a robotics manufacturing company. He loved teaching and people loved working for him. Something was missing though. He always wanted to live on the land.

With less than a degree, I repeatedly found limited advancement opportunity. Starting as a clerk for the railroad, I became executive assistant for various corporations and in various industries traveling the world. More than once, I had tried starting my own business only to rejoin a company, usually in marketing and later, investor relations. Ambitious, creative and from four generations of cattle ranchers, I longed to one day ranch.

On a trip home to Montana, I was surprised to discover bison meat. I loved it. It was delicious and especially easy to digest, something I'd had problems with for years. After a heartfelt discussion, Ken and I decided that if we could combine our passions and find a way for the animals to pay for the land, then it just might give us a way to live the kind of active retirement life we envisioned.

After three years of research, four bison cows and calves were bought and placed on leased land with a rancher. Over the next several years, we continued to learn about bison production, marketing and selling meat, while growing our herd.

Marketing & Distribution

My forte is marketing. The food industry though, was different from anything I had experienced. Perhaps one of the smartest things we did in the early years was to see if there was a market for the meat. To confirm people liked it and wanted it. This happened fairly quickly. What we learned about marketing and distribution though, was a real surprise.

Pursuing traditional distribution channels resulted in blind alley after blind alley. Commercial trucks wouldn't pick up unless it was a 40,000 lb. load (entire truckload.) Distributors placed their fees so high, we would've been out of business before we started.

Large stores would stock it only if it was in square, custom container to stack neatly in a freezer. We designed such a container only to find the cost too exorbitant to continue.

A few smaller stores took the meat and sold it with limited success. Some of what we experienced: no promotion; spoiled meat that had been left at room temperature and thawed before it could be purchased; vastly overpricing the meat so few could afford it, and providing no guidance on how to cook it.

Small restaurants wanted only the prime steaks and often would overcook them. Most chefs wouldn't even look at us when we tried to broach the subject of cooking.

It was frustrating. Over and over, we tried different stores, different restaurants. The result was the same.

As we learned later, traditional stores, such as supermarkets, are actually in the 'real estate business.' Structured for and purchased by Big Food/Big Ag, shelf space costs up to \$20,000, that is to say, \$20,000 *per product*.

Clearly, we were naïve. If you weren't big enough, wealthy enough or know somebody, there was no way to market the meat. We couldn't figure out how any small family rancher could survive!

Search for meat processors and truckers

Our corporate America journey continued in parallel to our meat industry education. After relocating to the east coast, Ken was offered a job in southern California and back we came.

We were glad to be home and had decided this is where the ranch would be. To test the waters, we bought additional animals from a California bison producer, keeping them on his land. While Ken started his new job, I looked for small meat processors.

During this search, we learned of a serious shortage of small meat processors, driven out of business a decade earlier by new USDA regulations, created in response to the Jack-in-the Box scandal. Those who couldn't meet the new USDA demands went out of business, leaving a handful of small meat processors.

The remaining small processors were being monopolized by large commercial meat accounts. To discourage business from a small family producer like Lindner Bison, processors tripled their processing quotes to me.

Efforts turned to looking for small, refrigerated trucks willing to take a partial shipment. Repeatedly I was told we were too small. (Boy, I got tired of hearing that.) Finally through a friend, I contacted a truck driver. He agreed to bring one pallet of meat with another load he was hauling. There were conditions.

It felt like what you see on TV with a drug deal. I had to bring cash and meet him at 4 am in the desert outside of LA. There would be no manifest and no way to contact him. He would call us. We realized that if the truck disappeared with our meat, it would be our tough luck. We swallowed hard and agreed.

That morning in the dark, before Ken was up to go to work, I started the car. I couldn't help thinking about people who mysteriously disappeared in the desert. I checked to make sure I had my pepper spray and that my cell phone was on.

At the rendezvous point, an hour later, I found a huge semi idling with parking lights on. I parked, nervously got out of the car and approached the cab where the driver was waiting. He jumped down and I realized he was almost as nervous as I was. Turns out he was a very nice, salt of the earth kind of guy, just trying to feed his family. The cash was exchanged. I loaded our SUV, and arrived home just as Ken was leaving for work.

During this same time, an urgent need was growing for us to find land for our animals. The herd size and associated costs were increasing each year. Searching

in southern California, we quickly found that fires, drought, shortage of water, high prices and taxes conspired to keep local ranchland out of reach. We shifted our focus north and kept looking.

A turning point

"I've been laid off." While looking for land in our spare time, one afternoon I got a call from Ken. He'd been laid off and was packing up his office.

Ken remembers, "Even though we knew we were vulnerable to this kind of thing happening, especially as we got older, it was still a shock. After a sleepless night, I realized I had finally had enough. The next morning, I told Kathy I didn't want to go back. She immediately said, 'OK then, we'll find a way.'"

We had already been buying at local farmer's markets and months before had purchased additional animals from another California producer, paying a monthly fee to keep them on his land.

We now wondered if our grassfed bison meat could be sold at a farmer's market. We saw eggs, chicken and sometimes fish, but no red meat.

Several market managers were contacted and immediately embraced the idea. Their encouragement and enthusiasm was such a contrast to what our experience had been trying traditional distribution channels, we were encouraged.

Though we'd done our homework, we still weren't sure what to expect from customers. We clung to the notion that God wouldn't get us this far and then abandon us. (As we would learn later, we were to be the first to produce and sell 100% grassfed red meat of any kind in southern California farmers markets.) So we bought a small freezer, which ran off a battery pack and inverter Ken put together, tent, grabbed a folding table and a tablecloth, and carefully packed our meat into coolers.

The first day I'll never forget.

We got up early to load the truck. Out of shape, I found I could barely lift the 20-25 lb. coolers of meat. It was a shock. Later at the market, standing for five hours was difficult. I silently wondered how we could ever do this.



Note: Today I can lift 90 lbs. and I'm in my early 60s. No paying for a gym, no personal trainer. Ken is stronger too.

Our passion and our determination to bring a humanely raised, heritage meat to others has sustained both of us and continues to make us both more fit.

Me, at our first farmers market.

Financing California ranchland

Finally, we found land we thought we could afford. It had water, was a productive hay ranch, a decent size and at a higher altitude which meant more omega 3s in the grass. It was further than we hoped - a 10 hr. drive from LA, but in a part of the state where the bison had been native in the 1500s.



Future California 100% grassfed bison ranch.

Getting ready to buy it, we did more research and crunched more numbers. After several meetings and review of our application, the SBA, our bank and small business experts all told us we would have no problem getting a loan for our bison business. Our credit scores were terrific and we were excited.

Nine separate applications and nine banks later, there was no loan. We didn't know there were so many ways to say 'No.' It's not like we didn't know about business plans. We had created plenty of budgets and plans in corporate America. We knew the numbers made sense and the potential was there.

Our 3rd generation cattle/bison mentor had cautioned us years earlier that there would be those who would want to see us fail. "Don't expect help from anyone," he once told us. We now wondered if this was what he meant.

As if to prove him right, number 10 finance person agreed to meet with us. We showed him our plan. He said, yes he knew of others who tried the bison business and failed. He looked at us and said in an amused, condescending tone, "So what do they know that you don't know?" It was a statement rather than a question.

We were taken aback by his manner. We responded with the truth. "Perhaps you're asking the wrong question," I said. "The question is: 'What are we willing to do, that they aren't willing to do?'" We could tell it was a new thought for him, but of little consequence. We left. We were tired, angry and discouraged.

Ken recalls, "Shortly after this, we actually did give up. We received our 12th rejection and were completely out of options.

We both remember the day when we emailed our realtor to say we couldn't do it. After all these years, and all this effort, to be forced to give up because no bank would approve our ag loan. It was a huge blow to us. In stunned silence, we sent the email and waited for this new realization of failure to sink in.

Instead, unexpectedly our realtor called with an alternate plan. He had the name of a small investor who might be interested. If we could get him and the owners to carry part of it, perhaps the deal wasn't lost. To make a long story short, a potential deal was pieced together. The deal meant we would need to provide 20% down, the small investor would put up 50%, the owners would carry 20%, and the realtor would invest 10%.

The terms: interest rate to all investors was significantly higher than any bank, and the entire loan would have to be refinanced within one year. We had planned to put down 5%, as was typical at the time for a bank loan of this type. This would have leave us with needed capital from our savings for non-negotiable improvements such as fencing and a stock water system. The 20% down requirement meant our savings would be gone and a second mortgage on our home would be needed for the improvements.

The suggested deal represented a tremendous risk. If we couldn't pay it back or refinance within the year, we would lose the ranch, our savings and our herd, and we would still owe the second mortgage on our home. After a few sleepless nights and agonizing, we both agreed. We took the biggest risk of our lives. Land for the ranch was acquired.

The return of a California heritage animal

Knowing there was no turning back, arrangements were quickly made to prepare the land for receipt of our bison. Sturdy game fencing went up, a well was drilled for stock water and a pump house constructed. Ken built a chute for unloading. Finally, a trucking company was contacted to move our bison in three separate trips.



Ready to load.



Two unexpected calves born two days before loading.

Ken remembers, "We only had so much in our savings. I knew it would be gone in 2 or 3 months, and if this didn't work, well, I didn't want to think about that."

We both knew too that our personal welfare on the line now. The maintenance of the ranch and animals would totally depend on our efforts. There was no margin for error.

The first trip was lined up. Spring showers created mud everywhere, but after a half day, the first group was loaded. The livestock hauler arrived, positioned his trailer and the animals were transferred again into the larger truck.



Final transfer to livestock truck.

By 3pm, the long drive back to California began. The truck would go first, and we would follow.

Around dusk, about 4 hours into the 22 hr. long trip, the realization hit us as we followed the livestock truck with our first load of bison inside.

This was the dream we had worked for and envisioned for the past 8 years. It was finally and actually happening.



Our future on that truck!

Various generations of our own animals were on their way to our very own ranch. This was the start of our new life out of corporate America.

I think I cried most of the way home. And Ken got choked up a few times too, when we would stop to check on the two unplanned calves inside the trailer. It was a joyous trip which both of us cherish to this day.

We took turns driving, so we could get some sleep. The driver had slept before coming, so he kept a pretty steady pace. The bison would have no food or water, so it was important to get there as soon as possible.

Once there, it took some coaxing to get the animals off the truck, but off they came. More tears as we watched them, belly deep in green grass and alfalfa on our very own land.

And land where they had been native 500 years before. They were home at last. And so, it seemed were we.



The first to arrive at Heritage Ranch.



Belly deep in green grass.

For the next several nights, Ken and I slept on the floor of the pump house using a new, untried air mattress, which refused to hold air. It somehow didn't matter. We wanted to make sure the bison settled into their new home.

Then, with a neighbor to keep an eye on things, we drove back to southern California to secure and build our grassfed bison meat business.

Sustainable appetite

Ken believes that when most people think of a sustainable food system, they focus on food production methods used. Many now have a deeper understanding about how truly sustainable food is produced without the use of chemical inputs - from diesel fuel, to fertilizer, to hormones, to antibiotics.



Large, commercial feedlot.

Being a large-scale food producer often means using large volumes of such chemicals.

The typical stocks (raw material) for these chemicals are neither recyclable nor environmentally friendly, and therefore unsustainable.

Lindner Bison believes in and practices the exact opposite.



Lindner Bison on spring grass.

We use very little fuel and no chemicals on the ranch. Our animal husbandry methods are ethical, humane and actually improve the land.

Water and sun are used to create grass, which our bison convert to protein. With the exception of electrical power, which we now must buy, our operation is sustainable and nearly self-contained.

Our goal is to be able to provide future power needed using solar generation and/or wind. Then our operation will be even more sustainable than it is now.

But producing the product sustainably is only the beginning. Ken knew we needed to expand that focus to include an awareness of consumption.

I finally asked him to put it in writing, which he did:

"People need to know that consumption is equally important to sustainability. Native Americans knew this and revered bison. They understood the bison's gifts, which allowed their people to survive. To honor the animal harvested, nothing was wasted. And when everything was used, fewer harvests were necessary. This allows the herd to thrive and grow."

Lindner Bison strives to this same standard. And in order for us to meet this standard, we need customer support.

Every cut, from steaks to roasts, soup bones to organ meats must be used, otherwise sustainability cannot be achieved and maintained. This is why we offer many cuts that stores don't carry and provide recipes to teach customers how to apply sustainability to their food dollar choices.

Years ago when we first started, customers were fixed on a specific cut of meat, based on the narrow choices available from their local supermarket.

For many, if they couldn't have a _____ (fill in the blank), they didn't want anything else. Others expected an unlimited supply of each and every cut at any given time.

Finally we would say, 'we're not Wal-Mart' and that seemed to immediately resonate. It's been a learning process for all of us.

"I thought it was such a shame", Ken adds. "The individual cuts are all so incredible, we didn't want them to miss out."

We also both remember a hard lesson learned by the bison industry earlier. In response to demand by chefs, large producers of bison focused on selling only steaks and only to restaurants and food service. They didn't market the rest of the animal. As a result, there was so much remaining meat in inventory that they hadn't developed a market for, many went bankrupt.

Our approach is entirely different. One customer at a time, we reconnect with people. When we're out of one thing, we suggest another. With each selection, we teach what to expect and how to cook it. We especially love to explain that we don't need to spend a lot of money to enjoy this meat. It's just not necessary.

The reconnect with customers and their heartfelt response is wonderful. Not only are most people willing to try other cuts, they welcome the opportunity. Now when we're out of something, we hear, "Ok, so what else haven't I tried yet that's good?" (Guess what - - it's ALL good!)

Then we're off on a new adventure, knowing that their purchase is sustainable, their appetite is sustainable. Their passion, like ours, is sustainable. And as a special bonus, they're helping to bring a heritage animal back home to the state of California. A truly sustainable cycle renews itself like this.

Each of us can make a positive difference through thoughtful food choices.



Bison were native to California in the 1500s.
Source: National Bison Association

It's the reconnect factor. To us, this 'reconnect' is a big deal. It takes time and it takes effort. Without this effort, there's no reconnect.

Over the last 40 years, Big Ag/Big Food has successfully

created a disconnect between consumers and how food is produced in this country. But it doesn't have to be like that.

Through Farmers Markets, a direct link is possible from consumer to producer. A missing and valuable reconnect is provided to both.

People tell us they care how their food is produced. We care about their purchase beyond just the sale. It's a sense of community that not only provides a reconnect, but a vital foundation for an ongoing relationship with the land, animals and each other, based on caring.

"Equally important to us is that the animal is honored by using every part," Ken maintains.

This is what we mean by a sustainable appetite. Everything is used in a positive way. We think it's important that people know how to successfully use all the cuts, organs, bones and even kidney fat.

And we continue to develop products from the hides, hair and skulls. Like the Native Americans before us, Lindner Bison strives to waste nothing.

Our customers' support is vital in order for us to achieve this level of sustainability.

Sustainable passion

Today, the seed herd is around 100 and those first four cows are still with us, 16 years old now, producing calves every year.

While it may sound like a dream come true, like most worthwhile pioneering dreams, it is only the beginning of hard work, sacrifice, and steering through uncharted waters. Faith, nerve and passion are a requirement.

Meat is sold to a few sustainable chefs and through Farmer's Markets. In an effort to leverage increased demand on our time, energy and pocketbook, we are now looking at coops and/or meat CSAs as a possibility. But the farmers markets continue to make the difference for us.

It's the only place where we could compete on a level playing field with other small producers. Here we can sell our meat outside the established, traditional distribution channels, which are designed for large, well-financed Big Food/Big Ag.

We learned that Farmers Markets are specifically designed for small family farmers who don't have access to traditional distribution channels. Without Farmer's Markets, many small producers would have no way to survive. The wonderful products they provide would disappear.

And we are especially and absolutely passionate for our customers! Our customers' positive response and support is why we're still here. This reconnect with them it what makes it possible for us to pay our bills.

Needed now is more fencing for rotational grazing, extending irrigation for more hay; expanding the product line and increased meat processing on site. Needed too is money for those things.

We're still on the 'pay as you go' plan, as we call it.

With the unexpected housing market downturn, we weren't able to sell our southern California home to put a house on our ranch.

We drive 10 hrs. one way about every 11 days to work on the ranch, then come back and sell meat to pay the bills.

Some tell us they can't believe that we actually do what we do. Sometimes we can't believe it either. But we know that it must be done. And it must be done by those with passion. If Americans with passion can't do it, won't do it, and don't do it, who will do it?

Without people like Ken and I who are passionate and willing to work hard, the options for our American farm land may be very simple: (1) continued use and control by Big Ag/Big Food; (2) acquisition for development and control by realtors and the housing industry; and, that in place, (3) food produced offshore and imported.

So what exactly is sustainable passion then?

We believe truly sustainable passion happens when we commit to becoming part of the solution, instead of complaining about the problem. It's about not waiting for someone else to do it for us. It's about knowing when to put down our dinner fork and roll up our sleeves. That time is now here.

There's no question that this kind of sustainable passion requires hard work. Perhaps even, 'a ridiculous amount of hard work,' as a 30-year old young man once commented. But if we can do it in our early 60s, so can those who care about how food is produced in this country.

Wanted: New California grassfed bison producers
One of the things Lindner Bison has created is a unique apprenticeship program for those who want to do what we do.



It starts at the Farmer's Market level.

Early on, we realized that if we didn't have a market for the meat, there's no reason to raise the animals, since they're just too big to keep as pets. We want to pass on this vital connection to beginning grassfed bison producers.

We are often approached by those who tell us they would love to come work on our ranch. Actually, we would love to be there too.

What many may not realize, is that it's perhaps this single understandable focus to be on a ranch, without developing a meat market, which may have helped to create the earlier disconnect in the first place. The growth and success of many large corporations depend on small farmers and ranchers staying on their ranch, removed from the consumer. Indeed some farmers and ranchers still prefer it that way, perhaps providing fodder for the continued control of Big Ag. Still others are open to inviting respectful customers to visit.

We don't know how it is in other states for beginning small livestock producers, but in our case, we found little to no help getting started in California. When we finally took another look, we realized that much of California is dedicated to Big Agriculture, dairy and land development. This awareness made it even more important for us to provide a reconnect between producer and consumer in the state.

Our apprenticeship program is geared to help create an opportunity that we didn't have. Perhaps especially for those who want to leave corporate America the way we did, but don't know how. We know it's possible for those who willing to work for it.

First, we teach about the various cuts. Apprentices can qualify for a bonus program which includes a true stock option plan: Actual animal ownership and Lindner Bison 'Producer' status.

With our aging rancher/farmer population and Big Ag/Big Food, and land developers, waiting in the wings, a large, new crop of small, beginning ranchers/farmers is needed, and needed *now*.

We think there may even be merit to not having an ag background, as long as there is a demonstrated interest and willingness to work hard and learn. There may be some traditional 4th, 5th plus generation ranchers/farmers who respectfully disagree, but we believe this new group may bring new blood and new thinking with passionate sustainable underpinnings.

Farmers Markets can be especially gratifying. Our customers have become our friends. The feedback and appreciation for our hard work is immediate. For those who yearn for work that is meaningful, absentee ownership may make it possible without investing a large amount of capital up front. But being able to sell the meat is key.

It's a sweat equity plan and pretty much the way we started.

We need and encourage new small family ranchers with a shared passion for sustainability to start now.

Pioneering heroes, Heritage species

Much of the foundation for Lindner Bison's sustainable passion comes from embracing the teachings of such incredible pioneers as Jo Robinson, www.eatwild.com; Joel Salatin, www.polyfacefarms.com; Michael Pollan www.michaelpollan.com and Carlos Petrini, founder of Slow Food, www.slowfood.com; www.slowfoodusa.org.

Following our own 1999 "grassfed awakening," in 2000, we bought Jo's "Why Grassfed is Best" book and read Michael Pollan's "Power Steer" article in the New York Times, still available online.

In 2001, we gratefully visited Joel Salatin's Polyface Farms in Virginia to visit with Joel and learn more.

And in 2007, Plains Bison were inducted into the Slow Food Arc of Taste, drawing attention to the species as a heritage animal and encouraging production.

We're grateful to Carlos Petrini and the Slow Food organization, who teach that the one way to insure the survival of a species is to create a demand for the meat.

In our case, bison are a heritage animal, not only for the state of California, but nearly every state in the country.

Bison date back to the Ice Age.

They are healthy, hardy survivors. They have more than earned the right to be here. They need our support and deserve our support.

For our American ancestors and for us, the more we learn about grassfed bison, the more we learn how their very presence represents sustainability.

They are our American heritage, our privilege, our passion.

They can be everyone's sustainable passion.



Lindner Bison bull, early spring

And what a wonderful passion to build on!

Grassfed bison meat is delicious, good for the earth, good for the animal, good for us. With our customers' sustainable appetite, the circle of sustainability is complete.

It's about bringing a heritage animal home.

And in the process of doing that single, wonderful thing, joyfully discovering that you're bringing yourself and others home too.