



SHUFFLE OFF TO BUFFALO

with the Featherstone Bison Farm

By Lorraine Payette

Who wouldn't want a home where the buffalo roam, a place where freedom and open skies are a part of every day? For most it's just a dream, but for Harald and Nancy Mix of the Featherstone Bison Farm, it has become a wonderful reality.

"Growing up as a young boy in Germany with Icelandic Horses and reading Karl May – a writer who romanticized the Old West, Cowboys and Indians, and the pioneer settlement of North America – the dream was to own some land," said Harald. "It turned out that we were able to become stewards of some beautiful farm and forest land and a few Bison followed almost naturally."

Thus began the noble experiment in bison farming in Gananoque – and a chance to bring a healthy, flavourful and sustainable red meat alternative to the local food markets.

"I wanted to connect with the Old West native cultural importance of the Bison, after the white man almost managed

to eradicate the species," said Mix. "We moved to the farm in 1993 and the first 6 heifers arrived in 1997, seven more heifers followed in 1998 and a breeding bull in 1999."

Sounds idyllic enough, but there's always a catch, and with bison, there can be many.

"It is more interesting and challenging to work with bison," he said. "Bison have retained their natural instincts – they don't want to be too confined and have a much engrained 'flight or fight' reaction when surprised or threatened. They need to be treated calmly and with the utmost respect. They are very powerful and fast runners, so fences need to be well maintained and all of their needs for water, grass and minerals met."

Most people think of bison as an endangered species in Canada, but this is not the case. According to the Canadian Bison Association (CBA), bison farming has not only created a sustainable agricultural market for meat, but has

helped this species to thrive and start coming back into its own.

"Today, bison ranching plays an important role in the preservation of the last remains of native grassland habitat on the prairies by providing an economically viable alternative to cultivation," says their website. "Besides preserving the islands of natural grassland that have survived agricultural settlement, bison ranching encourages the return of farmland to grassland. Over the past three decades, hundreds of Canadian grain and oil seed farmers have entered the bison industry and for most, the decision to raise bison involves taking large tracts of land out of mono-crop cultivation and seeding a permanent cover of grass. Each year a bison cow and her calf require an average of four to sixteen hectares of grazing land depending on the weather and range conditions in any particular neighbourhood. With a population approaching 200,000 breeding bison cows in Canada, the nation's bison industry can take credit for the return of



Photos Submitted by Harald and Nancy Mix

Left pg: A border collie has a serious job keeping the herd of bison under control.

Clockwise: Bison – heritage animals are the wave of the future; Well adapted to harsh Canadian winters, bison feed happily on hay placed in their pasture.; Warm weather brings the shedding of heavy winter coats while calves start appearing alongside their parents

an amazingly vast expanse of formerly farmed land to pasture land.”

Bison are the largest land animals native to North America, and although they dominated the continent until the coming of the Europeans, their numbers dwindled rapidly, from herds of approximately 60 million animals until in 1899 there were believed to be less than 1,000 bison left due to overhunting and planned species eradication.

Fortunately, some ranchers and conservations stopped the extinction of this noble species by keeping small herds in national parks and on private lands. By the 1980s, some ranchers were able to start supplying outside markets with bison products and this new livestock industry was able to become a serious business in the 1990s when the public discovered it had a taste for this native heritage food.

“In 2005, it was estimated that there were over 500,000 bison on farms and ranches in North America,” says CBA. “In Canada it is estimated that there are almost 2,000 bison producers who own over 250,000

bison. Because of consumer demand and the initiatives of farmers and ranchers, the population of this almost extinct animal continues to grow – a conservation success story.”

“Consumers who like to have a connection with the producer, and like to know how their food is grown, as well as stores featuring local products, such as Wendy’s Market near Morton and Coutts Country Market, Rideau Ferry, provide a market for our locally produced bison meat,” said Mix. “I have also been involved with various farmers’ markets.”

Bison meat is described as flavourful and tender, similar to a fine beef with a slightly richer, sweeter taste. It is dense and filling, satisfying the stomach more while consuming less. A red meat alternative, it is naturally lean and nutritious, and is gaining popularity with those who have tried it.

Cooking bison takes some care, but if treated carefully as you would any lean meat, it can be easily prepared in any home kitchen.

“Due to its low fat content, bison meat cooks very quickly,” says CBA. “It is extremely important to cook bison meat slowly at a lower temperature and serve it less well done than beef. Bison meat tastes best served at medium rare 145°F (62°C) or rare 135°F (57°C).”

“Restaurants and health conscious consumers are very interested in an organically grown, grass fed meat,” said Mix. Bison fulfills this niche in the marketplace as well as providing a rewarding occupation for him.

“This is a one-man-operation,” he said. “I have been downsizing over the last few years, and currently have 30 head.” **LH**

Featherstone Bison Farm is located at 201 Taylor Road East, Gananoque, Ontario. Harald and Nancy Mix may be contacted at 613-382-1633 for more information. For more about bison in general, please go to <http://canadianbison.ca/consumer/default.aspx>.