

# Buffalo in your backyard: Bison meat healthy, local



[Alyssa Zaczek](mailto:azaczek@stcloudtimes.com), azaczek@stcloudtimes.com 4:16 p.m. CDT May 31, 2016



Rural Becker bison farmer Tom Barthel talks about his current herd of 26 bison Tuesday, May 24, 2016. Barthel raises them for meat. (Photo: Kimm Anderson, kanderson@stcloudtimes.com) Buy Photo

**BECKER** — To raise an extraordinary animal for extraordinary meat, you need an extraordinary farmer. Tom Barthel and his bison fit that bill.

On a pleasant afternoon on the cusp of summer, we turn onto the country road that leads to Snake River Farm near Becker and into a storybook. Arching green trees line the winding pathway, and the warm air is scented by the tall grasses dried in the sun. As we round the bend and park near the chicken coop, a little brood of hens come right up to greet us. It is everything a reformed city girl could hope for upon coming out to the farm, but the scenery is not the most incredible facet of this place. That honor is shared by Barthel, the owner of Snake River Farm, and his herd of buffalo.

Just half an hour from St. Cloud, Barthel and his wife Gail Wilkinson have been raising bison for over a decade. Although he had owned the 225-acre farm since 1970, Barthel continued his work

engineering medical devices — which included a stint as CEO of Clarus Medical Systems Inc. from 1996 to 2000 — while raising cattle, hogs and grain.

By 2004 he began considering a retirement from his corporate career, and it was around that time that bison made their debut at Snake River Farm. "Gail told me I couldn't have bison until I retired," says Barthel. "But she relented. I didn't fully retired until 2011 or so."

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Now, 45 years after Barthel first purchased the land, the bison meat business is booming. Barthel sells bison meat by the quarter, or ground bison per 1/10 of the animal, direct to the consumer. All of the animals raised at Snake River Farm are pasture raised, which means they are allowed a level of freedom beyond that of animals raised on more commercial farms. The herd of Plains bison, which will reach a peak size of about 40 in June, are restricted only by a barbed wire fence. But there has been no issue of escape with Barthel's mild-mannered beasts — "They've never made the papers," he says.

Barthel and Wilkinson both credit pasture raising and harvesting for their bison meat's superior taste. "We like happy animals," says Wilkinson. "We want to give them a good life and a good, clean death. When the animal is very anxious or scared to death, the meat tastes stressed."

The bison meat that Barthel sells is grass fed, which he says also contributes greatly to the taste. "Animals taste better if they're raised on a variety of forage. Grass, forbs, clovers and herbs all affect the taste of the meat."

And according to Barthel, the taste is strikingly similar to beef. "It's like the very best (beef) you've ever had, only better."



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A bison cow and calf graze together on Tom Barthel and Gail Wilkinson's Snake River Farm on Tuesday, May 24, 2016, in rural Becker. (Photo: Kimm Anderson, kanderson@stcloudtimes.com)

But bison meat is not only a flavorful alternative to other red meats, it is also a healthy choice. Dani Armbrust, a licensed registered dietitian in the CentraCare Heart and Vascular Center at St. Cloud Hospital, spoke to us regarding the health benefits of eating bison meat, which she describes as lean.

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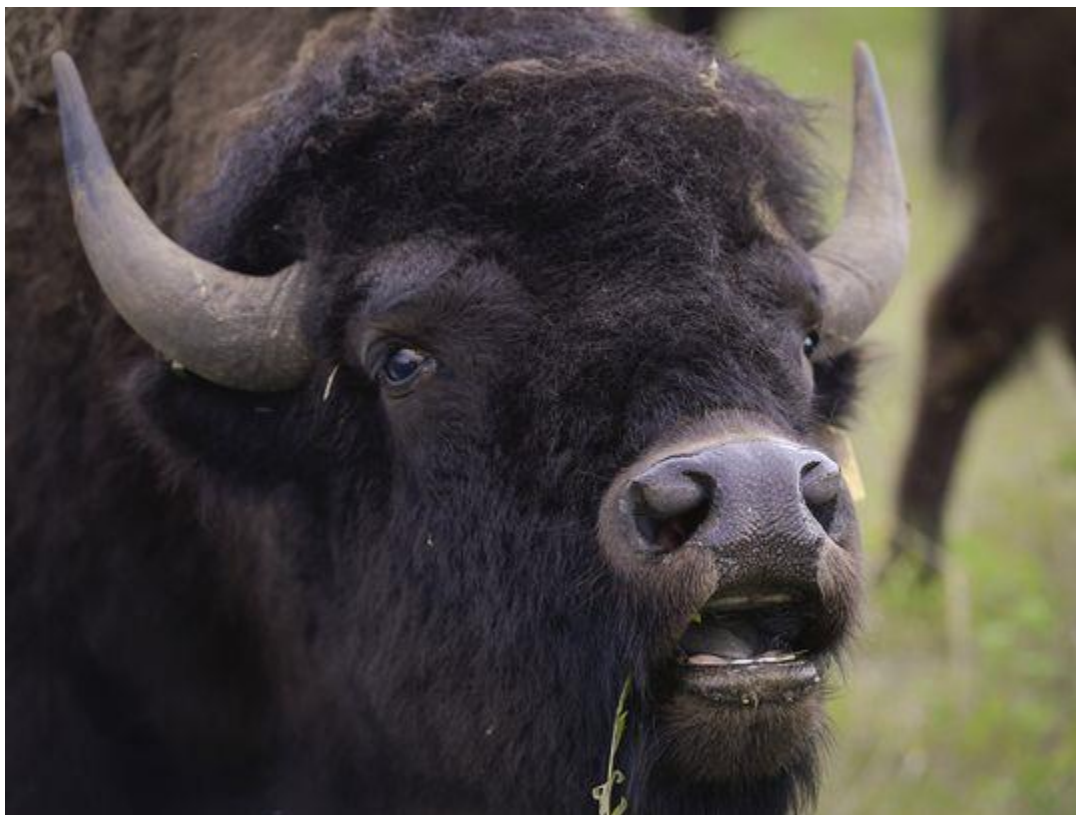
"Bison meat is lower in saturated fat (than other red meats)," says Armbrust. "It is a good compromise for someone who enjoys red meat but is trying to limit their intake of saturated fat to reduce the risk of heart disease, or to limit calories for purposes of weight loss."

Jen Haugen, media spokesperson for the Greater Minnesota Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and a licensed registered dietitian of 15 years, praised the nutrients found in bison meat.

"Because (grass-fed bison) are grazing all day, their meat tends to be leaner, and may contain more nutrients found in the grass. Bison meat is also a good source of iron and zinc, which are important to our blood health and preventing anemia."

A wide variety of customers are buying bison meat due in part to its taste and health benefits, but also because of the high quality of the meat produced by grass-feeding the animals. Barthel estimates that about 30 percent of his customers are local families who home-school their children. "They are people who put a lot of value in what they feed their children, because they put a lot of value in what they teach their children," says Barthel. In fact, bison may be a far more popular choice than some might assume. According to Barthel, 15 percent of his customers choose bison over beef when given the choice.

Minnesota is home to over 100 bison farms, many of which are in Central Minnesota. Though Barthel's client list is currently full, he urges consumers to seek out online resources like the Minnesota Buffalo Association and the National Bison Association to find local bison farmers that sell direct to consumer.



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Bill, the 3-year-old bull on Tom Barthel and Gail Wilkinson's Snake River Farm, sniffs the air as he and a herd of 26 animals graze in a pasture on the rural Becker farm. (Photo: Kimm Anderson, [kanderson@stcloudtimes.com](mailto:kanderson@stcloudtimes.com))

And if you do plan on adding bison meat to your dinner table, Barthel has some tips. "Start with ground meat. Don't overcook it. Use a meat thermometer. And don't worry about the taste — it has a fantastic taste. No one is offended by the taste of bison."

As for bison preparations and recipes, Barthel likes to keep it simple. "What I like is a burger, no bread, and a big onion diced up and cooked. That, to me, is a wonderful dinner." His humble

approach to cooking the meat he receives from his herd mirrors the reverence he has for the animals themselves.

"They're magnificent animals. Bison have a poise, and a dignity, and to some extent a disdain for us," Barthel says. When it is suggested that he appreciates a bison's personality, he laughs, and his normally stoic expression breaks into a beaming smile. "Yes," he says, "their personality. We don't like to admit it, but animals have personality. You just have to get to know them individually."

## Easy bison burgers

This easy bison burger is inspired by farmer Tom Barthel's preferred method of cooking and eating bison — a simple burger with onions — with the option of cheese. To avoid overcooking the meat, Barthel and his wife recommend cooking the meat to 15 to 20 degrees below your preferred internal temperature and then removing it from the grill, allowing the innermost meat to come up to temperature without charring the outside.

*Note: The FDA recommends that all ground red meats be cooked to an internal temperature of 160 degrees Fahrenheit for safe consumption. Use a meat thermometer during cooking.*

Yield: Four ¼ pound burgers

### INGREDIENTS

1 pound ground bison meat, 80-90 percent lean preferred

4 golden potato buns

Sunflower oil

Fine sea salt

Ground black pepper

1 large onion, chopped

### OPTIONAL

4 slices of good-quality mild cheddar cheese

### INSTRUCTIONS

Preheat an outdoor grill for high heat (475-500° F) and lightly oil the grate.

Add a small amount of oil to a skillet and coat the bottom of the pan. Heat the skillet over medium heat on the stove top until the oil begins to shimmer.

Add chopped onions and stir to coat. Spread the onions evenly across pan and cook, stirring regularly, until onions are tender and nicely browned but not burnt. Remove from heat and set aside.

Break the bison meat into small, even sized chunks by hand. Form four patties and place onto a baking sheet. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until chilled, about 15 minutes.

Remove the patties from the refrigerator. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Place patties on grill and cook for five minutes. Flip, and cook for another five minutes.

For cheeseburgers: Add one slice of cheese to each burger and cook until cheese has melted, or about two minutes.

In the final minutes of cooking, split open the potato buns and lightly grill the cut sides, about one minute.

Once the buns are lightly toasted and the cheese (if using) is melted, remove patties and buns from grill and assemble, topping patties with onions before the addition of the top bun.

#### ADD-ONS

Many people prefer the “au naturel” style of bison burger — just a nicely toasted bun with an excellent burger patty as the star. The above recipe is perfect for bison burger purists, but for those who like to accessorize their patties, here are some accoutrements ideal for the rich yet lean, slightly sweet flavor of bison meat:

Slices of good-quality Applewood smoked bacon, cooked.

A dollop of your favorite barbecue sauce.

Dijon mustard, slathered on a toasted bun.

Mashed avocado (or do it up fiesta style with guacamole).

Add a layer of greens like spinach, arugula, or even alfalfa sprouts for added nutrition.

For the truly fancy: a little melted Brie, bacon, and sliced pear is très chic!

*Source: Based on [thebisongirl.blogspot.com](http://thebisongirl.blogspot.com) and [allrecipes.com](http://allrecipes.com) recipes.*