



A HIRED BBQ COOK worked the outdoor grill preparing beef and bison burgers for the many guest attending the afternoon conference at Snake River Farms.

Day Two Of Bison Conference Held At Snake River Farms

Bill Morgan, Staff Writer | 133 | June 23rd, 2016 @ 2:11 pm

The 2016 National Bison Association (NBA) was held this week with most of the conference in Elk River and one day's events at Snake River Farms in Becker.

Hundreds of guests and families from all across the United States descended upon the Becker farm Tuesday afternoon where Tom Barthel and his wife, Gail Wilkinson, have been raising bison (and other animals) for over a decade.

Tom acquired the 225-acre parcel 46 years ago in 1970. At the time, Barthel was an engineer for a medical device company while he raised cattle, hogs and grain. Twelve years ago he debuted bison to the farm.

“All our bison and beef comes from grass-fed animals,” said Tom. “It’s what we’ll be serving for lunch.”

The three-day conference — which changes their locations each year — provided new and old bison ranchers lots of creative and substantial ideas for farming their lands and livestock.

The dozens of conference-goers Tuesday were greeted by some of Tom and Gail's family members as well as a plethora of farmhands, all donning blue denim shirts with the Snake River Farms emblem embroidered on it.

The theme of this year's conference was, “Bison: America's Soil Builders” and gave farmers and ranchers insight into better managing their pastures.

As the guests drove up the long, dry dirt driveway, they were greeted visually by an arched sign identifying the farm to visitors. Clusters of roosters and hens clucked and crowed and the tiny piglets covered behind mama in the pig sty. Politely, the guests were invited to tour the family-owned museum above one of their barns, learn more about their horses or take a ride, get a lesson on sawing wood in the mill or watch a blacksmith heat up, bend and pound raw iron into delightful treasures.

Many of the guests arrived at the farm via chartered bus, while some rolled in by car. They appeared to be grateful being off the road and stretching their legs. They had just spent the morning listening to Gabe Brown of Bismarck, ND as he spoke about current soil health and focussed in the regeneration of resources. Brown had spoke on his belief that healthy soil leads to healthy air, clean water, healthy plants, animals and people.

After Brown's presentation that morning, everyone was treated to a talk on technical and financial assistance in regards to the NRCS conservation programs. The speakers for that talk were of local descent — Mary Monte of Elk River and Tom Gervais of Cromwell, MN.

As some of the guests toured the farm and its many educational components, Tom and two other farmhands took the helm of three trailers and piloted large groups of people on a guided tour of the farm's vastness and a peek at their bison herd.

Others who missed the first or second excursion to the deep confines of the farm, stood in line to grab a lunch plate to feast on salads, side dishes and taste the deliciousness of Barthe's recently-carved-up beef and bison burgers — effectively butchered by Wisconsin butcher Andre Abraham the day before and served to conference-goers in a side-by-side comparison.

At around 2 p.m., NBA Assistant Director Jim Matheson gave a talk to the well-fed attendees and by 4 p.m. the guests were hustled to the buses and cars back to the Elk River area to visit a tradeshow at the Rockwoods Banquet Center in Otsego and later on, celebrate the three-day event with a dinner and benefit auction to close out the day.

Wednesday, the conference patrons heard one more speech given by Dr. Randy Shirbroun of Worthington, who talked about mycoplasma disease in cattle.

The Barthe family farm sells bison, beef, lamb and hogs direct to the consumer, by the 1/4 and 1/2 sizes. All their animals are pastured in natural settings, meaning they are allowed a level of freedom beyond that of animals raised on more commercial farms. The bison, beef and lambs are grass fed only.

“Animals taste better if they're raised on a variety of forage,” says Tom. “Grass, forbs, clovers and herbs all affect the taste of the meat.”

Their bison and beef herds are at about 50 animals, their lamb flock less than 20 and they raise about 100 hogs each year with no unnecessary medications or antibiotics.

The Snake River Farm is a unique landscape of native prairie, oak savanna, wooded lowlands, wet meadows and tamarack swamp.

Their meat is harvested and then processed in a state inspected facility. They also tame mustang horses they've adopted from the BLM as yearlings and they train all their horses to ride, to drive and for farm work.

The farm features miles of trails, a one-room schoolhouse, farm museum and lots of wildlife. They welcome visits and tours — especially educational groups, but by appointment only — as this is a working family farm.

The farm is located at 18251 62nd St., Becker and their phone number is: 763-263-2721.

HUNDREDS OF CONFERENCE GUESTS descended upon the Snake River Farms in Becker for the second day of a three day conference focussed on Bison rearing. In the foreground, three ranchers discuss their processes while the throngs in the background stood in line or found shelter under a canopy while they enjoyed grass-fed beef and bison sliders.



TOM BARTHEL (front, wearing cowboy hat) got set to bring a group of guests on a trailer tour of the Snake River Farms farm Tuesday afternoon.



A BLACKSMITH gave a demonstration of his skills to the hundreds of guests who attended day two of the NBA bison conference in Becker.

