

In The Pasture with Snake River Farm

How one Becker, MN Farm raises “Bison, Cattle and Damn Fine Horses” while putting land stewardship and animal care first

Story + Photography by Sarah Carroll

Nestled on 225 acres of open pasture, native prairie, and oak savanna in Becker, Minnesota lays the peaceful and stunning Snake River Farm. With unparalleled dedication to land stewardship and animal husbandry, Tom and Gail Barthel raise bison, cattle, hogs, rabbits, and poultry in a remarkable example of what thriving yet sustainable agriculture can be.

It's hard to overstate the beauty of Snake River Farm. Making your way up the drive and to Tom and Gail's barns and home- which Tom built himself- is like stepping into a different time, complete with grazing bison in the distance. Unlike the norm, Snake River Farm has no feedlots or handling pens, only pasture and barns that nod to the deep respect for a sustainable, traditional heritage of raising food that Tom and Gail espouse.

“To humanely raise and harvest our animals, to be good stewards of our land, to grow delicious healthy meat, to sell that meat at a fair price, to provide authentic country experiences to our customers.” Those are the farm goals

that Tom and Gail share with new customers who join the 500 families that they feed each year.

Humane care for animals is at the core of everything that Tom and Gail do. Each morning Tom makes sure all fencing is in good working order and carefully set up so hogs, bison, and cattle have access to fresh and plentiful pasture. Their beef and bison exclusively eat grass and hay, and hogs eat locally grown grain. The result? Happy, relaxed animals and mouthwatering customers, from whom Tom and Gail keep baskets of thank-you cards, notes, and holiday letters.

The choice to raise pastured hogs was a major decision for Tom years ago when he “retired” so he could return to his childhood roots and pursue his passion for farming full-time. Tom closely considered building a confinement hog operation on his land. But with his firm dedication to animal wellbeing and the sustainable, traditional heritage of farming, he chose to raise hogs on pasture instead. Now, his happy hogs laze and root around like teenagers in the sunshine. Tom wishes that more beginning farmers would consider raising pastured hogs to get a strong footing during turbulent early farm years, as hogs have become a highly profitable cornerstone of the farm.

The timeless tranquility of the farm belies how much hard work goes into running Snake River. Tom’s days start before sunrise, tending to his livestock, seeing to repairs, and communicating with customers. But amidst the long

days, Tom and Gail still make their farm a place of community- each winter, spring and summer they host customer days where they invite their customers to come out, see the animals up close, and enjoy wagon and bobsled rides through the farm.

Gail doesn't think of herself as a farmer- she jokes that Tom works and she plays. But she's a nurturer of Snake River Farm's steadfast commitment to humane animal care. Gail's love for all animals like a family pet has led to their practice of pasture harvest, where Tom personally slaughters beef and bison in the pasture. This harvest practice ensures that animals have a stress-free death and that their lives (including the last day) are under Tom and Gail's dutiful care. Gail has also brings her passion for horses to Snake River Farm, where she keeps a team mainly of mustangs and teaches horseback riding to local children.

Tom raises around 100 beef, a multicolored and friendly herd. Tom carefully teaches the herd to respond to his calls and he shepherds them to the day's fresh pasture for rotational grazing. The trust he builds with the cattle help Tom provide a stress-free life and death where the herd is calm and content during harvest for customers.

It might be safe to say that Tom's herd of bison have a special place in his heart and on the farm. Majestic and graceful, Tom's bison on gently sloping pasture makes you forget time and place on the ageless planes of the

Midwest. Tom is active in the bison farming education community and serves on the Board of the National Bison Association.

Tom often shares that an animal that has a stress-free death tastes better. Mix a relaxed lifecycle with Tom's exclusive use of pasture, hay, and natural feed for hog free from medications or antibiotics, and you've got an incomparable product. After the meat is locally processed in Foley, MN, customers pick up the meat in Foley or Tom drives it to central pickup locations for his customers.

The Snake River, a tributary of the Elk River which ultimately greets the mighty Mississippi, runs right through the farm, connecting Tom's practices of sustainable agriculture to the rest of the watershed.

While Tom has a thriving customer base, he hopes that folks looking to buy directly from a farmer will seek out new or beginning farms to support. What's certain is that Tom and Gail have proven how respect for animals, the land, and the heritage of farming above all else can yield a thriving farm, happy customers, and a bright future for the next generation of sustainable livestock farmers.

To learn more about Snake River Farm, visit their [facebook page](#).

To purchase from Snake River Farm and other pasture-based farmers near you, visit the [MN Grown Directory](#)