

## **Worrying about Drought and Thinking about the Taste of Bison**

Spring and another growing season are almost here. I suppose that like me, many of you are anxious about rainfall. We started feeding hay last August. It will be good to see the spring green-up.

Our Snake River Farm is in the Anoka Sand Plain. That name means what it says. Uplands are course sand and naturally droughty. Row crops are risky here without irrigation. Long ago, when I grew corn, I did irrigate. It was expensive and a lot of work.

Now that the farm is all pasture, things are simpler and less risky. We have a combination of uplands, rough transition land and lowland. We can manage reasonably well through a moderate drought. The land that was once open field now is divided pasture with a high percentage of deep rooted plants. Mostly native grasses and as many legumes as I can grow. Those plants do pretty well when the shallower rooted grasses dry up and go dormant.

Of course if a drought persists for years as it did on the mid 1980 s, our normally high water table drops. Then the lowlands dry out too.

Since I have never identified any advantages to worrying, I guess we'll just be as prepared as we can be and then manage whatever comes along.

I ended a previous article by stating that, "When all the factors are equalized bison meat just tastes better."

I have been thinking about that. If you sell directly to consumers like we do you are frequently asked, "What does bison taste like?"

How do you answer that question? It is a tough question to answer. Part of the problem may be that there are few words in the English language to describe taste. Another part of the problem is that the question of taste is too narrow.

The commonly used descriptions for the taste of bison are weak. Descriptions frequently begin by expressing what bison is not. That it is not "gamey" tasting.

Bison meat is often described as "sweeter" flavored or "fuller" flavored compared to beef. I am not certain what "sweeter" and "fuller" mean in this context. Is sweeter better? My normal answer is weak also. I tend to tell people it is like the best beef you have ever had but more flavorful.

But flavor is different than taste. Flavor is more than taste.

Folks trained in Food Science may have a better understanding of this issue. We non experts have been taught that humans have sensors for four or five tastes. The four are sweet, salty, bitter and sour. Those four really limit the description of meat. The fifth and less well know taste is umami. That is a Japanese word that means savory. The umami taste is closely identified with meat, cheese, fish, mushrooms and other flavorful foods. The word umami in the right context might help to describe the taste of bison. Unfortunately the word umami, although found in English dictionaries is seldom used in normal conversation. Thus, few Americans would understand it.

Umami is not a new word. Umami was identified and named by a Japanese Professor named Ikeda in 1908. Ikeda's research led to the development of the flavor enhancer Monosodium Glutamate (MSG) in 1909. MSG and related compounds are very effective at enhancing the taste and apparent nutritive value of otherwise bland foods. With these additives food processors can make a bland piece of beef, pork or poultry into a tasty sandwich that can then be passed through a fast food window.

MSG is also common in many classes of processed foods. Some people try to avoid MSG as an unhealthy additive. But MSG and its related glutamate compounds are hard to avoid.

Frankly, I do not know enough to be for or against MSG. Nevertheless, my wife Gail and I always prefer simple foods with short ingredient lists.

By the way, these glutamate compounds are not related in a dietary way to the gluten found in wheat. Wheat gluten gets a lot of attention as a big problem for people with certain digestive disorders.

The five tastes are detected by sensors in our tongues. As I mentioned above, flavor is more than taste. Flavor also involves smell, temperature, spiciness and even texture.

Texture, or mouth feel, is frequently part of the answer given when people ask how bison tastes. It is often said that bison tastes lighter or less greasy than beef. Bison is less greasy when compared to feedlot beef. We raise our bison and beef on grass only. I do not detect that mouth feel difference between comparably lean beef and bison.

I realize that I am probably not making the “What does bison taste like,” question any easier to answer.

Perhaps there is no easy answer. Normally, I get the prospective bison eater into a longer and more complete conversation. If they remain interested we usually conclude with discussion of ways they can try bison. Fortunately the proof is in the eating. We sell only by the ¼ so sampling is a challenge but there are ways. I also supply them with some of the excellent promotional information that is available from the MNBA.

There are of course other factors that are important to consumers besides taste. Significant factors such as nutritional benefits, health benefits and of course the perceptions of bison as an American icon, as good for the environment and as “natural”.

I may write a few words on those topics in a future newsletter. We’ll see about that.

Be sure that the MNBA Annual Conference is on your calendar for April 12-14, in Albany, hosted by the Meyers.

Best Regards, Tom Barthel

Secretary and Director at Large