

The Annual Auction was a Solid Success

Over 170 bison went through the ring at your Legends of the Fall auction in Albany. Like most of you I just enjoy and partake of the auction. A group of our members, led by Dave Griffin our Auction Committee Chairman and Gail Griffin our Executive Director put a great deal of work and effort into that two day event. Remember to thank them either the next time you see them or at next year's auction.

You may recall that I have written a couple of stories about hauling bison home from past auctions. Last year I wrote about the 700 pound heifer who managed to move from the back pen to the front pen of my trailer. (I have witnesses.) The year before I wrote about my attempt to gain fame for hauling the highest number of bison (14) in a 16 foot trailer.

I think Bud, Dave and a few others were looking forward to more excitement this year but I'm smarter now.

As I loaded my purchases after the auction Dave came up to me and asked about my load. I told him I finally have it figured it out. I put one in the front compartment, close and chain the gate. Then another in the second compartment, close and chain that gate.

The drive home was low stress both in the trailer and in the cab.

Some Thoughts about the Price of Buffalo.

The sale prices at the MNBA Auction were lower this year. Here at the Snake River Farm we sell bison meat. Each year we sell more animals than our cow herd can produce. I am a buyer at the auction, never a seller. I need young stock to raise for slaughter. Most of you who bring bison to the sale are breeding stock growers. That creates some natural tension between higher and lower prices. Higher prices would seem to benefit breeding stock sellers and lower prices might seem to benefit meat sellers. But that is true only in the short run. In the long run the real basis for value in the bison industry comes from the people who consume the meat. What are they willing to pay?

Like many questions in life the answer probably starts with some form of, "that depends". Nevertheless, I think there is enough evidence to say that prices may have been getting a little too high. For the health and growth of the bison industry consumers must be able to find bison meat when they want it and they must be able to afford it. We sell quarters direct to families. That of course is just a small segment of the market. To keep in touch with the broader market I check the supply and the price of ground bison in local grocery stores. In the past three years I have seen the price of ground bison marked from \$9 to \$12 per pound. I did not get the impression that those \$12 packages were moving very fast. There have also been times when the meat has been absent from store shelves. Sometimes for months. Those factors cannot be helpful for growth of bison consumption in the long run.

A stable supply at a price consistent with the premium quality of bison meat is best.

Some Thoughts about the Value of Bison Meat.

From our small farm we sell both grass-fed bison and grass-fed beef. We sell pastured hogs also but that is a different story. To give you a sense of our small scale, we have sold between 15 and 25 bison each of the last five years and between 50 and 70 beef each year. All of our sales are under the "custom exempt" status consistent with Minnesota law. Among many other requirements that means we generally sell bovines by the quarter.

Prices change but currently we charge \$3 and \$5 per hanging weight pound for beef and bison respectively. I have kept roughly that same price ratio over the years.

We have just one customer list and our customers are free to switch from beef to bison as they wish. They all get the same newsletters and the same promotional material.

Over the years some customers have moved from bison to beef and some have moved from beef to bison. A fair number buy both beef and bison.

That tells me that the price ratio is somewhere near right.

Why do customers pay more for bison in our parallel situation? They can get the no-antibiotic, no-hormone, better nutrition, easier digestion advantages with our grass-fed beef yet they chose to pay considerably more for bison.

Taste seems to be the major difference. Taste is a function of several factors. Our beef and bison have the same diets. They graze the same pastures, meadows and woodlands. If there grazing choices differ, that difference is so subtle that I do not see it.

Stress can make a taste difference but I think I keep both herds at a very low level of stress.

How an animal is harvested can make a difference but I pasture harvest all my animals to eliminate that stress.

When all the factors are equalized bison meat just tastes better.

We have tested taste in a number of settings. No matter how delicious a grass-fed beef steak or hamburger is bison meat tastes even better. Even if beef can be raised to replicate most or all of the health and digestive benefits of bison it still cannot be made to have the taste of bison.

Bison meat is superior to and should sell at a premium to beef. That is a factor we can build on.

Best Regards, Tom Barthel

Secretary and Director at Large