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Copy: Judy and Peter Haase, Buffalo Horn Ranch
and associated

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Ranches all over Alberta have pick-up trucks that are similar. Dented here and there, bench seats shedding mud and seeds and slivers of hay stems and their flat beds jammed, scraped rough with buckets, or wire, or feed. Outside the thermostat is cranking viciously upwards, and there's heat shimmer across huge pastures slanting down to the Little Red Deer River meandering alongside, ripple smooth. The truck heaves through the final wired gate, which gets cranked carefully tight and tall again. and we bounce down to a far corner before the ignition key clicks off.

Silence settles, or near to it. The occasional whisper of wind, the faraway drone of an industrious bee.

A feed bucket gets rattled. And we wait. In a very far corner the brown shapes raise heads, then in a slither they come like smoke. Their speed and stealth is breath-taking and this mixed herd (the calves are a much lighter brown and lack the 'hump' of mature animals) are suddenly all around, grunting, snuffling, rolling in favourite dustholes. These bulls (which can weigh upwards of 2,000 lbs) are breathtaking for sheer size and power, mere feet away from the open flatbed where the camera is on a joyous motor-wind of photographs. I make sure the lens, which to these still very undomesticated animals resembles a predatory eye, never points quite directly at their field of vision.

Here are the sun-hazed grasslands of Judy and Peter Haase, owners of Buffalo Horn Ranch near Eagle Hill, kind of equidistant from Olds and Sundre. Judy's parents bought the property in the 60s, ranched traditionally then handed it over in 1994 to the next generation.

"It was," remarks Peter (then a professional photographer) gesturing towards his wife, "all her fault." They both laugh like drains, spearing just-picked lettuce by the back door that's in the drop-dead delicious salad we're munching. "We were

both looking for something to do on the farm, something alternative,” Judy insists, absent mindedly stirring sun-hot raspberries with an upside-down spoon.

Her husband is a natural speaker, teacher; quietly enthusiastic and letting listeners enjoyably soak up what they feel inclined to. In the 1800s, he gestures, there were 60 million buffalo on the plains although, he adds hastily, scientifically they are not really buffalo (as in, say, water buffalo) at all but bison (a distinction now being emphasized by producers on their marketing and labeling). Swift near extinction began with the incoming white man simply hunting for meat (there are Fort Edmonton records noting workers consuming 10-12lbs *daily*), later for sport (primarily for hides and the tongue, considered a delicacy), then accelerating ferociously to feed incoming railroad construction crews before, finally, the very deliberate policy of destroying the native Indians food source as a method of forced repatriation onto reservations.

By the 1870s these animals, Peter continues, were totally extinct in Canada, and a mere 600 in the United States. The latter divided into perhaps a small herd of 20 in Yellowstone Park (the world’s first national park), and the remainder garnered by six ranchers-with-vision located anywhere from Montana, Manitoba, Texas right to Kansas. In 1907, the Canadian government purchased a herd which were introduced to the area known to Albertans as Buffalo National Park (other accounts include beautiful storytelling by Canadian author Grant McEwan, in *Buffalo, Sacred and Sacrificed*).

SIDEBAR>>Another area Albertans can access information on bison (buffalo) is at miraculous interpretative centre, Head-Smashed-In-Buffalo-Jump. Before horses came into the lives of plains Indians, hunts concentrated on running herds over cliffs and rock faces (often referred to jumps, or jumping pounds), now priceless archeological and historical sites. In fact, Peter remarks as an aside, with the advent of horses the plains tribes had already begun to affect bison genetics, concentrating as they did on the prime young cows (what would be your best breeding stock) during their hunting forays, for the most tender meat.

Today there are approximately 500,000 animals in North America, half of those in Canada, and half of that proportion in Alberta, spread over roughly 700 ranches – with a final estimated 20,000 in parks and preserves. These days Judy and Peter, quietly proud, have the largest registered plains bison breeding operation in Canada (as opposed to cross-bred wood and plains stock), a decision easily made early on, to concentrate on a pure breeding line (although there are many pure unregistered bison herds in Canada).

SIDEBAR>>

- **Bison live approximately 20-30 years.**
- **In captivity bulls begin sexual maturity between 2-3 years and breeders tend to expect best virility anywhere up to 10 years of age.**

Interestingly, in the wild, a bull only begins breeding around the age of 8, when weight and dominance establish his street cred within a herd framework.

- **The rut begins, fairly noisily (“they can growl and roar like lions”), in August and lasts for about a month.**
- **The gestation period is around 263-265 days; calves are born beginning late April onwards.**
- **They are superbly adapted to Alberta’s severe weather conditions. In winter (their metabolism clocks down markedly, for starters) they’ll eat snow in preference to drinking river or creek water. In storms and blizzards their massive thick extra coating over their faces and hump ensures warmth as they, in fact, keep walking *into* the driving snow.**
- **In earlier times they would migrate to the great plains for summer grazing, returning to aspen covered foothills for the winter seasons.**
- **They’re extremely herd-bound, meaning they’ll stay close to each other and operate as a unit, preferring not to spread out as, for example, cattle do when grazing.**
- **Mothers are highly protective of their babies, in turn who learn to stay close to their parent for ultimate protection.**

As with the cattle industry, bison producers have encountered a similarly rough ride with recent droughts, BSE - and the related closures of American markets. The public health regulations’ insistence on now only slaughtering animals under 30 months of age (UTM) means many ranchers even today burdened with decisions to make on their unmarketable older animals.

Bison ranchers, though, have increasingly huge public awareness favouring up the desirability of their product for consumers (and which, cannily, their associations are upping the ante in promoting). Bison rate as low cholesterol, low in fat and calories, and high in protein, zinc, selenium and essential nutrients (as well as Omega 3 and 6 essential fatty acids). A wild animal that demands a low stress environment and handling and very definite free grazing preferences (native fescues and prairie wool grasses top of the list), bison ranchers from necessity have luckily had to defer from artificial growth hormones, non-therapeutic antibiotics, steroids and chemical feed additives routinely used in other mass produced meats (and animal by-product feeds; the Haases feed a 100 % vegetarian diet, which is a protocol insisted on by both the Canadian and U.S. Bison Associations).

Health lifestyle issues have changed public perception big time, women particularly influencing the marketplace, and also those with children, or others afflicted by allergy and health issues. Later, the Haases’ own customer feedback had them concentrating the Buffalo Horn Ranch’s products into high-grade butchering (in their case, Yvo and Bettina Schmucki of YB Quality Meats) to

prepare sausages and summer barbecue specialities, or winter favourites of slow-cooked roast packages.

"We hear," Judy's face lights up, recalling her customers' feedback and comments, "your sausages are heaven," or "these are the best steaks I've eaten in my life," right down to (her eyebrows raise in amazement), "my kids don't want to go to neighbours' barbecues anymore now they've tasted the difference."

I ask the Haases if they want to particularly say something about their bison, or their lifestyle, a kind of mission statement, and when they do it's a definite surprise. "For each lettuce that comes from California," finishes Peter, "for each calorie you consume, each one of those has cost another 56 calories in petroleum and transport costs. Buying local, and supporting local farmers is so important." These two, their ranch, are walking the talk every single footfall of the trail.

RESOURCES:

- **National Bison Association (for North American producers)**
www.bisoncentral.com
- **Bison Producers of Alberta Association (**excellent recipes listed)**
- **Canadian Bison Association**
www.canadianbison.ca or [tel@306-522-4766](tel:306-522-4766)
- **Peter and Judy Haase/Buffalo Horn Ranch**
www.buffalohornranch.ca or [tel@403-556-2567](tel:403-556-2567)
- **For comprehensive information about producers, chefs and participating restaurants of the slow food movement, click onto either** www.slowfood.com or www.slowfoodcalgary.ca