

MONEY

Couple's retirement bison business grows with herd

Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt For USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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After retiring from a 30-year teaching career at Hortonville High School, Mike Van Dyn Hoven wanted to start a business. Having been raised on a dairy farm in Freedom, he knew how much work farming took, and in retirement, wanted something that would be easier to manage.

“I was interested in getting into farming but I knew I didn’t want to go into something as labor-intensive as dairy farming,” he said. “At Hortonville, I taught science and conservation. That led me to consider raising bison, an animal that is native to America and has been around for 10,000 years.”

He and his wife, Karen, spent three years gathering information and searching for land. Karen, who also grew up on a dairy farm, loved the idea.

“Bison are beautiful and majestic animals,” she said. “During the three years, we visited bison ranches throughout the state of Wisconsin, and through the Wisconsin Bison Producers Association, and were able to gain statistics on what would be needed for the animals.”

They settled on a 90-acre parcel in the town of Briarton near Pulaski, and Mike finalized a business plan and chose the name Seven Feather Bison Ranch, honoring the seven tribes of the Iroquois nation. From that point, because purchasing the land and starting a herd was costly, the biggest challenge was finding a balance between marketing and expenses.

“It is a very large investment and it takes years to get a substantial return,” Mike said. “We started out small and grew with the herd and learned how to handle it. It took a lot of time and effort to put up fencing and purchase the materials to make it work.”

They started with five bison and now have 50 herd with 19 calves. The couple divides duties, and Karen laughs when she says they are “both in charge.” But, as a former teacher, Mike is a

natural organizer and it falls on him to schedule the lengthy list of daily chores. That might include repairs and maintenance of the fence, rotating the bison to a new grazing area and making sure they have minerals like salt and selenium in their water corral.

Then there is the additional care needed for the chickens and ducks that are also raised on the farm. Karen collects the eggs and says the duck eggs are so popular she can't keep up with the demand. They are sold on the farm and at two Green Bay farmers markets — the Saturday market on Washington Street and the Thursday market on Military Avenue.

“We started selling at farmers markets about 20 years ago,” Mike said. “Another bison producer was getting out and asked if we wanted to get in, so we took the opportunity.”

The markets continue to generate the bulk of their sales. But Karen is quick to point out that the markets are serious business, and this business is not a hobby. That's why the pandemic had such a negative impact.

She said, “There was a panic among butchers because of the pandemic and we couldn't get into a butcher, and if you can't be out in public and people can't get to you, you aren't going to sell.”

Now it's a matter of catch-up. As quickly as they are able, bison meat is being processed and made into steaks, roasts, ground meat, summer sausage, jerky and sausage sticks. Every part of the bison is processed. That includes bones, liver, kidneys, tongue, heart and liver. There is a demand for all of it.

Although it sounds unappealing, Karen says people have recipes for heart and tongue and enjoy both. Mike says all parts are lean and nutritious — it is a better meat.

“It is higher in protein and iron, and because they are grass-fed, the fat content is low. It's healthy and naturally raised. That was important to me,” Mike said.

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The trend toward organic and local food has benefited them, and they are dedicated to participating in promotional efforts. They are members of the local New Leaf Market and the Wisconsin Bison Producers Association and volunteer when they can.

Part of that includes giving tours to Northeast Wisconsin Technical College agriculture students to show how the bison, ducks and chickens are raised. And, with only about 30

bison farms left in Wisconsin, they encourage students to consider raising bison.

“We also give small group tours,” Mike said. “We have a tour wagon where we can drive right into the middle of the herd in my truck. In the back of the property, we have an educational center where kids can learn and do a variety of activities.”

One thing visitors will learn is that a bison is not a buffalo; they are distinct animals. Mike describes the bison as very protective; yet, they are wild animals and need to be respected. They earned that respect in 2016 when the National Bison Legacy Act was signed into law making it the National Mammal of the United States.

Requests for tours can be made on their Facebook page .

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