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Dan Koman checks in on Sierra, one of the 60 bison at his Wooden Nickel Buffalo Farm in Washington Township. Koman and his wife, Michelle, are former dairy farmers who launched Wooden Nickel in 1993.

Bullish on bison

Taste for alternative meat makes comeback

By JIM MARTIN
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Call them buffalo or call them bison. They both refer to the same hulking, shaggy natives of the American Plains.

By either name, they're waging a comeback on tables across the nation.

Make that another comeback.






North American herds that once numbered in the millions were hunted to near extinction. And by the beginning of the 20th century, North America was home to fewer than 1,000 buffalo, according to the National Bison Association.

Thanks to conservation measures, the bison population came roaring back decades ago. By the late 1990s, a new generation had discovered bison meat raised by farmers and ranchers.

As the popularity of bison grew, so did the prices. Champion bulls sold for as much as \$100,000 at the 1998 National Western Stock Show, while run-of-the-mill bison were selling for more than \$1,000,

How bison compares nutritionally

Per 100-gram (3.5-ounce) serving of cooked meat. Highest numbers bolded.

	Fat g	Protein g	Calories	Cholesterol mg	Iron mg	Vitamin B-12 mg
 Bison	2.42	28.44	143	82	3.42	2.86
 Beef						
Choice	18.54	27.21	283	87	2.72	2.50
Select	8.09	29.89	201	86	2.99	2.64
 Pork	9.66	29.27	212	86	1.1	0.75
 Chicken (skinless)	7.41	28.93	190	89	1.21	0.33
 Sockeye salmon	10.97	27.31	216	87	0.55	5.80

NOTE: "Choice" beef is the most common fine-quality consumer beef. "Select" beef is a slightly lower grade of beef with leaner cuts.

Bison: Taste for alternative meat makes comeback

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according to a recent report in the Denver Post.

In 1993, in the early days of the resurgent interest, Dan and Michelle Koman, former Washington Township dairy farmers, launched Wooden Nickel Buffalo Farm.

Dan Koman, whose farm and buffalo herd are a familiar sight from the northbound lanes of Interstate 79 just north of the Edinboro exit, said he never really got to take advantage of those surging prices.

"We were trying to build our herd," Koman said. "We didn't have the animals to sell when it peaked."

Neither the high prices nor the runaway enthusiasm would last. For several years during the past decade it appeared that the novelty of bison had worn off.

"It became a glut of animals," Koman said. Live weight prices fell from \$1.30 a pound to 30 or 40 cents.

The Komans count themselves as fortunate. Their farm, which sold to a handful of wholesale accounts and supplied frozen bison meat to customers in their small store on Koman road, continued to grow even as the popularity of bison meat leveled off nationally.

The Komans, who operate the largest bison farm in the region, never found themselves with meat they couldn't sell. But with the economy moving in low gear over the past couple of years, the impact on business has been apparent.

"Last year I noticed a significant drop in our retail buying quantity," Dan Koman said.

Fewer customers were buying, but the customers who remained seemed to be buying more than ever. It was the casual buyers — folks who might buy a couple of steaks or a pound of burger on a whim — who seemed to lose their appetite as the economy slumped.

By many measures, the economy continues to limp, particularly in this region, where unemployment remains at 10 percent in both Erie and Crawford counties.

But one thing has changed. As we near the midpoint of 2010, Koman and the National Bison Association agree that the nation's taste for bison — sometimes described as sweeter, leaner and a lower-calorie replacement for beef — appears to be making a dramatic comeback.

The industry group reports that the U.S. bison business is the strongest it's been in a decade and meat prices are at an all-time high.

"Our markets are starting to



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Wooden Nickel Buffalo Farm owner Dan Koman holds a frozen package of smoked polish sausage made from bison at his farm near Edinboro.

BY THE NUMBERS

■ **220,000:** Bison in the United States.

■ **4,449:** Private United States ranches and farms that raise bison.

■ **30 million to 70 million:** Size of North American bison herd before 1600.

■ **70,000:** Bison slaughtered annually in the United States.

SOURCE: National Bison Association

rise," said Koman, who has about 60 buffalo in his herd. "Interest is growing, and I'm scrambling."

Rodney Fritz, who has been raising bison on his Mercer County farm, said prices have gone up as he's downsized his herd. Fritz, who had as many as 50 buffalo, is down to about a dozen.

But growth is a relative thing, and folks in the bison business know it. For all of its low-fat, bursting-with-protein virtues, bison remains a tiny niche market.

The National Bison Association reports that about 74,000 head of bison were processed in 2009. That compares with 125,000 or so cattle that are processed on an average day in the United States.

Koman said he recognizes that at prices that range from \$7 a pound for ground meat to \$30 for the best cut of steak, bison isn't for everyone.

Fritz, however, said he sees a lot of upside left in the business.

"I see it coming on big time," he said.

"Hey, it's the lowest-cholesterol meat out there, and people are starting to see it."

Some people need some convincing, said Koman, who sells bison in frozen form and in meals served at his restaurant next door on Koman Road.

"Not everyone is willing to try a new thing," he said. "People are so stuck in a rut."

Koman knows that it costs more, but he also thinks it's worth more because of its nutritional benefits.

"People only think about the bottom line," he said. "Their priorities get messed up."

Bison producers everywhere — an estimated 4,500 of them in the United States — agree they'd like more people to try their product.

But there's a growing debate about how they should be raised.

Koman said a growing number of western producers are raising them in feedlots and feeding them corn.

That's not how it should be, he said. Buffalo are wild animals. They're not cattle, and Koman said he doesn't interact with them.

Stop feeding them grass and letting them wander and eventually, he said, buffalo won't be buffalo any more.

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