
NATIVE IOWA MEATS

Once-Wild, Game Now Thriving on Iowa Farms

BY SUE FUTRELL

“One hundred thousand [buffalo] thundered the plains in herds that took five days to pass—twenty miles wide and fifty miles long. The Indians lived from this beast as we now live from the cow, using every part for food, clothing and shelter.”

—Meridel Le Sueur, *North Star Country*;

Iowa offers more and more these days in the way of wonderful, local, artisan and sustainable foods. But what if you want to eat food that’s not just local, but native? As in, native species that have been in Iowa since before it was plowed and domesticated. As a lifelong Iowan, I’ve eaten my share of wild game, including turtle soup, rattlesnake, pheasant and venison. My grandmother Augustine once served squirrel for Sunday dinner, which shocked and delighted us kids. But for a true taste of what carnivores once depended on in this part of the world, native meat means bison and elk.

Eastern Iowa is right at the center of the tallgrass prairie region, which once stretched from northern Minnesota to southern Missouri, and from the Iowa’s western edge at the Missouri River across Illinois and into Indiana. Tall grass prairie is some-

times called the true prairie—a rich ecosystem of deep-rooted grasses, taller than a horse’s head. The tallgrass prairie is nearly all gone now, plowed under to give access to some of the deepest, most fertile soil in the world.

The prairie grasslands and woodlands between the Mississippi and the Missouri were once teeming with plant and animal life of all kinds. Deer foraged in the woodlands, and all manner of fowl and small mammals made their homes in the prairie. But of the large mammals, only two were true grassland species, born to thrive on the open expanses of bluestem and other grasses: bison, or American buffalo, and elk, sometimes called by its native American name, wapiti.

For native first nation tribes, elk and bison were not only an important source of food but also of spiritual and material sustenance woven deeply into the cultures. The arrival of the railroads and the relentless progress of cultivation and agriculture put a dent in both the herds and their habitat, and they were hunted for both meat and prized hides. But more than any other change, the end of wild elk and bison in eastern Iowa parallels the end of grass. The prairie was plowed under at an astounding rate; today



Photo by Richard Rosen

over 99.9% of it is gone, and Iowa has the dubious status of being the state with the most altered landscape of any in the U.S.

By 1900, buffalo, elk, wolves, cougars, bears, passenger pigeons, bobcats, turkeys and many other animals were all gone from Iowa, and prairie remained only along fencerows and schoolyards.

Bison, or American Buffalo, once numbered 30-40 million, roaming the Midwest and western plains in herds of millions that sometimes took days to pass by. By the 1880s they were mostly gone, and by the early 1900s efforts were underway to preserve and reestablish small remaining herds. 100 years later, by 2000, there were an estimated 300,000 bison in the U.S. and Canada.

If you drive into rural Johnson County, just outside of Solon, to Jordan Creek Bison, you won't see a woolly herd of buffalo stretching to the horizon, but Bill and Ann Leefers are doing their part to bring the buffalo back. They started with six animals in 1997, and now graze a herd of around 80. They sell individually packaged cuts to a number of area restaurants as well as to individuals.

The Iowa Bison Association currently lists 41 members, including Jordan Creek, many of whom raise the animals for meat as well as breeding. There is also a herd at home on the range at the Neil Smith National Wildlife Refuge, just off I-80 near Prairie City. Both the herd and the prairie are part of a long-term restoration effort, a place to go for a hint of what the land here might have looked like centuries ago—You may have to squint to get past the silos and power lines on the horizon, but it's possible to imagine them gone.

Elk also once ranged throughout the prairie region. As the grasslands disappeared, they retreated to the higher mountain ground where they are seen more often now. One of the last reports of free roaming wild elk in Iowa was in 1871.

That is, until November 18, 2006, when the Des Moines Register reported that a bull elk, with antlers as tall as full-grown corn, had been spotted "striding majestically through farm fields" near Marshalltown in Jasper and Marshall counties. It may have been an escapee from a captive herd, although none had been reported missing, and it will be lucky to escape becoming a trophy head on a hunter's wall.

According to Dr. David Schmitt, acting state veterinarian with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Iowa currently has 54 captive elk herds, representing roughly 2,725 elk.

One longtime eastern Iowa producer is Wildlife Lakes Elk Farm, just west of the Mississippi River near Burlington. Like many who raise unconventional breeds like elk, Wildlife Lakes owners Henry and Barb Bohlen run a diverse operation—they started out ten years ago raising Canada Geese, and participate in a Trumpeter Swan breeding program. They raise elk for breeding, antlers and meat, and their products, which include dried

COOKING WITH BISON AND ELK

Cooking these healthful, delicious meats at home is not greatly different than cooking beef or other red meat, but takes some extra attention until you are familiar with it. Here are a few tips and recipes to get you started.

According to Beth Dooley and Lucia Watson, bison meat can be substituted for beef in any recipe by cutting back on the cooking time; roasting at lower temperatures, and making patties thicker than you would beef, all to accommodate the tendency for bison to cook more quickly. The Elk Marketing Council says that elk is a fine-textured, tender meat and is extremely low in fat.

JORDAN CREEK BISON RANCH MEATBALLS IN TOMATO AND RED PEPPER SAUCE

From Iowa City's Devotay restaurant

- 1 yellow onion, minced
- 2 tablespoons garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- ½ cup Rioja (or other dry red wine)
- 2 pounds ground bison
- 4 eggs, beaten
- 2 tablespoons fresh sage, chopped
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire
- 2 dashes Tabasco
- 1 cup bread crumbs, or as needed
- Salt and fresh cracked black pepper, to taste

Preheat the oven to 400°.

Sauté the onion and garlic in the oil until tender. Deglaze with the Rioja, reduce until nearly dry, and set aside. In a large bowl, mix the bison with the eggs, sage, parsley, Worcestershire and Tabasco. Mix by hand or with a wooden spoon until thoroughly incorporated. Add the onion-garlic mixture and incorporate. Add the breadcrumbs and adjust texture according to your taste. More crumbs will result in a firmer but drier meatball, less will result in a moister but softer meatball.

Add the salt and pepper, then take a small piece of the mix and fry it quickly in a sauté pan on the stovetop. Taste, and adjust the seasonings accordingly.

With an ice cream scoop or by hand, portion into balls, roughly 1 to 1 ½ inches in diameter. Then roll them between the palms of your hands to make them more perfectly round.

Bake on a cookie sheet at 400°f for 10-12 minutes, or until cooked through. Serve immediately, plain, or with your favorite tomato sauce.

Yields roughly 4 dozen meatballs, depending on size.

“Elk Sticks” as well as various cuts, are sold in a number of restaurants as well as convenience stores in southeast Iowa.

The natural diet for both elk and bison is mostly grass, and in the wild they exist in a symbiotic relationship with their food—grazing, wallows, and droppings all help to keep the grassland in balance. Most domestic elk and bison are still raised this way, on grass and without added hormones. Buffalo meat is leaner than most beef, lower in fat and cholesterol and higher in protein. Bill Leefers and other bison farmers refer to it as “the other red meat.” Elk meat is also high in protein and lower in fat than most beef, pork or chicken. In part because they are grass-fed, both have a rich, full flavor that has been described as clean, sweet, and not gamey.

A number of restaurants in Eastern and Central Iowa offer elk and bison on their menus at least occasionally. They include Devotay, Motley Cow and Atlas Grill in Iowa City, Lincoln Café in Mt. Vernon, and The Drake Restaurant in Burlington. The Drake and Devotay both feature bison and Wildlife Lakes elk as part of their regular menu, if you want to try them both!

Resources

For information on where to buy elk and buffalo meat in eastern Iowa, see:

Bill Leefers of Jordan Creek Bison
1837 Jordan Creek Road
P.O. Box 517
Solon, Iowa 52333
319.644.3535; leefers@prodigy.net

Steve Bode of the Iowa Bison Association
1409 240th Street
Algona, Iowa 50511
515.295.4962 ; www.IowaBison.org

Henry & Barb Bohlen of Wildlife Lakes Elk Farm
13852 Washington Rd
West Burlington, Iowa 52655
319.752.4659; www.WildlifeLakes.com

Iowa Elk Breeders Association (IEBA)
2727 Adair-Union St.
Creston, Iowa 50801-7514
641.782.2903 ; www.Wapiti.net/ieba

And for an absolutely delightful, deep, thoughtful look at the landscape and ecology that is native to this place, see *Prairie: A Natural History*, by Candace Savage, Greystone Books, 2004.

BROILED ELK STEAKS WITH GREEN PEPPERCORN-COGNAC SAUCE

Serves 4

4 elk steaks, 1-inch thick
3 garlic cloves, or to taste
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

Wash the steaks and pat dry with a clean paper towel. Carefully trim away all visible fat. Combine the garlic and olive oil. Pour over steaks and marinate, refrigerated, for two to four hours. Season the steaks with salt and freshly ground pepper. Broil, about 2–3 inches from the element, five minutes per side or to desired doneness. Serve with the following green peppercorn and cognac sauce:

4 tablespoons butter, unsalted
¼ cup whole green peppercorns
Salt and pepper to taste
1 tablespoon cognac

In a small saucepan, melt the butter and whisk in the Cognac (use caution—fumes may ignite). Heat to a simmer, stirring constantly. Season to taste and serve immediately.

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