

As seen in

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Bison is roaming back onto restaurant menus

By Martha Thomas

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Chef Peter Smith first encountered Gunpowder Bison last November, when he and chef Bryan Voltaggio were paired up on the entree course for FreshFarm Markets' annual benefit, the Farmland Feast. Smith prepared sassafras-smoked bison rib-eye crusted in coffee, which shared a plate with Voltaggio's braised bison short rib with celeriac puree and dehydrated figs.

"The stuff was amazing," said Smith, who was inspired to experiment with bison recipes and has created various interpretations at his downtown restaurant, PS 7's, in recent weeks.

Likewise, Voltaggio says he "fell in love" with bison meat. He included the short ribs on his fall tasting menu at Volt, his Frederick restaurant, and plans to add some type of bison -- most likely the short ribs -- to the regular menu this spring. "I worked at a steakhouse for years," says Voltaggio, who opened the District's Charlie Palmer Steak in 2003, "and bison never caught my eye. Now I'm finding myself intrigued by it."

Both chefs say their interest in bison has as much to do with its local origins as with the meat itself. "The fact that the farm is so close is definitely a driving factor," says Smith.

That's just as Gunpowder Bison & Trading would have it.

Gunpowder is a relatively small operation. Headquartered on 70 acres just north of Baltimore, in Monkton, with an additional 120 acres nearby, it has a herd of only 200 at any given time. But in an era of restaurant menus that enumerate not only every ingredient in a dish but also where that ingredient was grown, the six-year-old farm's marketing strategy is helping to position its product as the ultimate locavore protein.

The Gunpowder name appears on some of Baltimore's most prestigious menus, including at Cindy Wolf's Charleston, Woodberry Kitchen, Feast @ 4 East and Salt. "The local angle is so personal," says Gunpowder sales director Nathan Stambaugh. "When I go into a kitchen and talk to a chef, they like that I'm the same guy who was on the farm that morning."

The company is now dipping into the Washington market, with recent accounts established at the Chevy Chase Supermarket and PS 7's. Gunpowder will also appear at the White House farmers market when it opens in April, its fourth FreshFarm partnership.

Gunpowder is by no means the only bison operation around; the National Bison Association reports herds in every state except Rhode Island. New Frontier Bison, on 1,800 acres in Madison County, Va., produces 10 times Gunpowder's volume of meat and sells to several local restaurants, including Granville Moore's, the Occidental, the Reef and Vinoteca, as well as shipping to such famed establishments as the Four Seasons in New York and the French Laundry in Napa Valley, says farmer Billy Salmon. And Cibola Farms in Culpeper, Va., sells bison from its 300-acre farm on its Web site as well as at 10 local farmers markets, including FreshFarm's market at Dupont Circle.

Native to North America and raised on grass -- without antibiotics, hormones or excessive human handling -- bison represents the antithesis of industrial agriculture. A male can grow to 2,500 pounds, says Gunpowder co-owner Trey Lewis (though the weight at slaughter is more like 1,200 to 1,400 pounds), and the animals are anything but docile: "You can't walk up to one and smack it on the butt." Bison live outdoors year-round, and the biggest infrastructure investment farmers need to make is in extra-sturdy six-foot-high fencing, reinforced with electric wire.

Says Dave Carter, executive director of the National Bison Association, the animal "doesn't lend itself to large-scale farming techniques, and we're very happy about that."

Before European settlers began arriving here, an estimated 30 million to 40 million bison roamed the plains, according to the association, but that figure had dropped to under 1,000 by the late 1800s. The beast survived thanks to efforts by such conservation advocates as Teddy Roosevelt and the Bronx Zoo, which started a breeding program in the early 1900s to help repopulate the western plains.



Gunpowder Bison Proprietors
Trey & Angela Lewis

In the 1980s and '90s, Carter says, farmers became increasingly interested in bison -- lower in fat, cholesterol and calories than beef, chicken and turkey -- as a healthful alternative to beef, and "herds started to grow." Today there are about half a million bison in the United States and Canada, with about 75,000 processed under USDA and state inspection last year. That's a fraction of the size of the beef industry, which slaughters about twice that number of animals every day. "The only way to save bison," Carter points out, "is to eat it."

The bison industry got a boost when media mogul and environmentalist Ted Turner launched Ted's Montana Grill in 2002. The chain's 54 restaurants (including four in Northern Virginia) are supplied by Turner's 14 ranches, most in Nebraska and Montana, where he raises about 55,000 head. "When Ted's opened, it spurred demand immediately," says Rob Ferguson, co-owner of Cibola Farms.

Even so, Ferguson doesn't see his bison operation growing. The wild animals need about an acre of grazing land apiece, and Virginia land prices -- even in this down market -- prohibit expansion. Because of their slim margins, Ferguson and his business partner, Mike Sipes, don't market to chefs but sell exclusively at farmers markets and on the Internet. "Restaurants expect to pay half of retail," which at Cibola can be from \$6 per pound for ground meat up to \$32 per pound for tenderloin, Ferguson points out. "Why would I do that when I have this great retail customer base?"

Nathan Stambaugh says Gunpowder's restaurant clients, who pay somewhat more than half of retail, ensure a market for the prime cuts. Cindy Wolf, for example, "takes every tenderloin available" for Charleston, he says. And Peter Smith has been buying tails for his Tail Tots, an appetizer made with ground tail meat that's breaded and fried.

The volume of tails and tenderloin available on any given week, however, depends on how much ground meat Gunpowder can sell. Of the 400 pounds of salable meat from a 1,200-pound bison, Stambaugh says, tenderloin makes up about 1 percent, while 75 percent ends up being ground. The farm puts the surplus to good use in pre-made burgers and chili, and sells a raw diet dog food and bison jerky. Nevertheless, says Stambaugh, "we love it when a restaurant decides to put a burger on the menu."

Though the bison burger at the Reef in Adams Morgan is "wildly popular," according to owner Brian Harrison, chef Connor Ireland's favorite bison recipe is chili, which calls for the tongue and skirt steak. The restaurant also regularly runs a braised bison short rib special. Harrison, whose maternal grandmother was Lakota Indian, has been serving bison since the Reef opened in 2002. The product he buys from New Frontier fits with his philosophy: "The best meat comes from native animals on native soil."

At the Reserve, a gastropub that opened in Baltimore's Federal Hill neighborhood last July, the Gunpowder bison strip steak has gotten positive reviews, including one from the Baltimore Sun's restaurant critic, Elizabeth Large, who has expressed a distaste for the animal. "Every time I have bison in a restaurant, I'm disappointed," she blogged, though the Reserve was "the exception that proves the rule."

Large's criticism is common: Bison has a reputation of being dry and tough, much like lean, grass-fed beef. Bryan Voltaggio recommends adding fat -- olive oil, or fat rendered from the bison itself -- to keep the meat moist. Cindy Wolf's advice is simple: "Don't overcook it. If you like your meat well done, don't buy bison."

Peter Smith might have the best solution for ensuring that bison doesn't become dry from overcooking: Serve it raw. His current repertoire includes a paper-thin, deep red carpaccio, drizzled with arugula and carrot oils and sprinkled with smoked sea salt. The raw meat is arranged like petals around a mound of seared bison tartare, the raw meat mixed with sweet mustard seed "caviar" and pickled hot peppers.

Overcooking aside, most chefs will tell you that you can do anything with bison you can do with beef, so it makes sense that restaurants committed to sustainable agriculture are putting dishes made with local bison on the menu. The animal is, after all, native to the United States, unlike most other meats sold commercially. But as popular as the meat could become, says Dave Carter of the bison association, "we don't want to reach the level of beef. We don't want to be a commodity."

Gunpowder Bison shares that philosophy. "We'll probably get more land and buy more bison as demand grows," says Lewis, "but I couldn't see getting too big. We like to keep our customers within a 100-mile radius."

