



Photos by Tiffany Kessler

Kristopher Kelley manages Woodland Farm in Goshen, where a herd of American buffalo are part of the sustainable enterprise. As part of Goshen Farm, the KY Bison Co. successfully developed a market by working with chefs and others in the marketplace.



## AMERICAN BISON

### Massive creatures roam fields of Oldham County

GOSHEN, Ky. – Ice has hardened the remains of a week-old snowfall that still lays heavy on the pastures of historic Woodland Farm. In the field, enormous wooly beasts, some with calves at their side, meander about chewing on last summer’s hay and snorting quick, hot blasts of steam into the freezing air.

“It never gets too cold for bison. They love this type of weather,” says farm manager Kristopher Kelley. “In the summer they don’t like it when it gets really hot, but during the cold weather they do fine. In fact there are farmers further north that don’t provide water for their bison all winter long – they say as long as there’s 2 to 3 inches of snow on the ground they are totally fine. They are built to survive.”

Survive, as tough as this Jurassic-like animal may be, it was only 120 years ago that the North American buffalo population went from a thriving species to only 300 left in the wild. Overhunting by humans had left the creature on the brink of extinction. While humans were the cause, they were also the solution. With gov-

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# Woodland Farm is home to herd of American buffalo

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ernment protection, an uprising in conservation efforts, responsible bison farming, and lots of time, the National Bison Association estimates that there are now around 500,000 head in North America.

The 2012 USDA census report showed there were 2,500 bison farms in the U.S.; less than 10 are located in the Bluegrass State. One of these unique places is Woodland Farm in Oldham County – a 1,000-acre historic property purchased in the mid-1990s by Louisville entrepreneurs and philanthropists Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson.

Keeping the 150-year-old farm in working order, the couple decided to pursue more natural and sustainable methods when it came to agriculture and livestock. Among the many animals and gardening projects that make up the always lively Woodland Farm, it seems the large herd of American buffalo tend to steal the spotlight.

Kelley has managed the farm for five years and oversees the 300 head of bison. The herd consists of a mix of both Wood and Plains, the two types of North American buffalo (and most usually it takes a well-trained eye to tell the

difference in the two). Besides recently consolidating the herd, Kelley is incredibly passionate about a new endeavor he began last year–transitioning the bison to strictly grass fed.

“We have used rotational grazing for years, but eliminating grain is totally new for us. Bison are ruminants, which means they are designed to get all the nutrients they need from grass. Compared to cattle, bison take longer to grow out (900-1100 pounds from heifers to bulls). So even when we gave them access to grain, hay and grass it took 20 – 24 months.”

Kelley and his team have already analyzed early figures since the switch.

“They were coming in slightly lighter. We ran some numbers and it’s already showing that for us it was not a profitable endeavor to give them that grain to try to push their weight a little more. We’ve got nice pastures; they’re doing a great rotation. They are going to gain weight anyway in a much more cost efficient manner. Grass is the cheapest and most natural thing you can give them.”

Cost efficient? Yes. But it wasn’t just economics that drove Kelley to make the change—it was a shift in market demand.

“People are asking for grass fed now.

Bison is a high-end meat anyway, so you’re selling to a market that would most likely want grass fed. We have more demand than we do supply.”

Though higher in cost (averages at the time this was written - ground beef \$3.88 per pound, ground bison \$8.20 per pound), research has shown that bison is one of the healthiest meats available. The National Bison Association lists a study conducted at North Dakota State University showing bison (per serving) has lower fat, calories and cholesterol and is higher in protein and iron than skinless chicken or turkey.

Labeled a Kentucky Proud product, the Kentucky Bison Co. at Woodland Farm has done an excellent job of creating a market and then increasing the demand for their product. Twenty years ago when the folks at Woodland Farms first introduced bison meat back into the

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# AMERICAN BISON: Market demand for buffalo is strong

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area, Kelley says the salesmen actually had a hard time giving away samples.

"We had to do a big push on marketing. Initially it took a lot of time and money," recalls Kelley. "We spent a lot of time with local chefs, showing them the health benefits of bison and the different ways it can be used in cooking. We had a lot of success with that. Now if bison is on the menu in Louisville, it's generally ours."

Besides selling directly to a number of restaurants in Louisville and Nashville, bison meat from Woodland Farm is available in several markets in and around Louisville as well as in their farm store, which is open on Thursdays.

## COMPARING BISON AND CATTLE FARMING

Most traditional livestock farmers are interested in knowing more about the differences between raising cows and bison. Though very similar in many ways, Kelley believes that ultimately bison are an easier animal to care for when compared to cattle:

"Bison don't bloat, ever. They will self-regulate even on the lush field of alfalfa," he explains.

**'Now if bison is on the menu in Louisville, it's generally ours.'**

Kristopher Kelley  
Farm Manager

alfalfa," he explains.

The calves are significantly smaller, generally only 40-60 pounds.

"Not only would they not allow you to help them with calving, but they don't need help," he said

In a 15-year time frame at Woodland Farm, Kelley believes there's only been three bison that had serious problems calving.

"You definitely lose calves, but the odds of one getting stuck are super low."

There is no need to bottle-feed a calf unless the very rare occurrence of twins (which has happened once on the farm).

Though standoffish, Kelley says that bison can be super aggressive if they feel threatened, not always a negative trait.

"We find coyotes just mashed into the

ground. They'll circle up on anything that's a threat. Very protective, nothing is going to get in there and hurt a calf."

Another story Kelley recalls gives a better understanding to the animals' sheer strength and power.

"We always have a dominant bull and then some younger bulls to help push the dominant bull to breed quickly and to teach the young ones. This situation works great generally, but a younger bull will sometimes challenge the dominant bull, if he gets too close in size, or overly confident. This has only happened two or three times, but in those instances, the losing bull, weighing anywhere from 1,700 to 2,000 pounds, has been tossed over a 5 foot high fence. They are super strong."

## SOUND ADVICE

So, what advice would Kelley give to someone interested in starting a bison farm?

"I also have a biodiesel business. And when I first started that I did not go and see a bunch of other biodiesel facilities. Huge mistake. It's exactly the same with farming. You need to go see other folks' operations—see what you like and don't like about them. Farming is a special industry, in my opinion, because there are so many mouths to feed you're generally not competing with each other. As a result, farmers are generally very willing to share information. I would definitely go and see farms, that's the best thing you can do."

The Woodland Farm store is open every Thursday from 8 a.m. – 4 p.m. (EDT) and is located on Woodland Farm, 4716 Green Haven Ln., Goshen, KY 40026. For more information, call 502-222-7051 or visit [www.woodland-farm.com/kybison](http://www.woodland-farm.com/kybison). Farm tours are available the first Thursday of each month, from April – December.

By Tiffany Kessler  
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