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Wild bison breeding catches on in Switzerland

A herd of bison makes for an unusual sight on the green pastures around the small village of Collex-Bossy, in the canton of Geneva. Visitors do double takes when they first see the burly, hump-backed creatures grazing in the fields not far from Geneva's airport, against the snow-capped backdrop of the Jura mountains and the Alps. But the bison have become an ingrained, if unconventional, part of the village's agricultural scene.

While still far from being a mainstream item in supermarkets, bison meat has earned a local reputation as a tasty, low-fat alternative to beef, and a small but growing number of breeders across Switzerland are now raising the wild animals, originally native to the North American prairies. They are following in the footsteps of Collex-Bossy farmer Laurent Girardet, 53, who launched a pioneering initiative more than 20 years ago. In 1990, Girardet decided to import ten bison from Alberta, Canada with the goal of raising them for meat, a first at the time for Switzerland. Now he has more than 130 of them, supplying two local butchers and several gourmet restaurants that take all he can provide.

"I always had a passion for things from North America," Girardet says, explaining his motivation to launch the venture. "At the beginning it was difficult - there was no legislation and everywhere I turned there were hurdles."

In the cosy kitchen of his sprawling farmhouse with its panoramic view of the Mont Blanc and neighbouring Alps, he recalls how he turned his back on a typical Swiss dairy-farming career. At the age of 18 he took advantage of a youth programme to work for six months as a farm hand in Alberta, south of Edmonton. There, he experienced the wide-open Canadian prairie, a stark contrast to the geography of his native Switzerland, with its small family farms. In subsequent visits to Canada and the northern United States, where the raising of wild bison was beginning to flourish, he learned about the business first-hand. He then had the idea of trying it in Switzerland. His fellow farmers thought he was crazy when he decided to sell the family's dairy herd to pursue the project. As it turned out, managing the bison, which weigh up to 600 kilograms, was the least of his problems.

The actual rearing of the animals is "nothing" in comparison with looking after a herd of dairy cows, Girardet says. On a day-to-day basis, the bison are lower maintenance. In summer, his herd feeds on grass on leased land near his home, where he also maintains stables for boarding horses. In winter, the bison munch hay, which is grown locally and distributed in the fields twice a week, but the bison remain undomesticated and are dangerous enough to require certain precautions: Sturdy fencing is needed for the areas where they graze and the kind of direct human contact made with

cows is impossible. Moving them from one pasture to another by truck is also a tricky operation. The mature males are kept in separate pastures from the females and juveniles for most of the year.

A roundup of the entire herd takes place annually, the one time when managing the bison becomes a labour-intensive business. While two people can readily handle a similar-sized herd of cows, 15 are needed to corral the bison, he says. But then the rest of the year is more relaxed. Young bison are born every May and reared until the age of two and a half when they go to the slaughterhouse. The operation has been such a success that Girardet decided to branch out into breeding elk — he has ten of the wild animals.

Girardet found ready acceptance for bison meat in the Geneva area, even though it is priced 20 to 30 per cent higher than beef. He started off by supplying one butcher and by hosting local events to allow people to sample the delicacy. Local chefs quickly saw an opportunity. Bison burger features among the more popular dishes on the menu at the Auberge Communale in Collex-Bossy. Filet of bison is among the gourmet offerings of the Domaine de Chateavieux, one of just two restaurants in canton Geneva rated two stars by the Michelin guide to Switzerland. The appetite for the wild meat is also picking up elsewhere in the country. The Swiss Bison Association counts 12 breeders with operations in several cantons.

Exact figures for the number of bison in Switzerland are hard to come by, although estimates range up to 500, including 200 reproducing females. The federal government does not keep national statistics on the number of such animals because this is the responsibility of the cantons. Bison fall into a category of wild animals raised for meat in Switzerland that includes red deer, fallow deer, wild boar, elk and ostrich, among others. A federal regulation on the protection of wild animals requires farmers raising such animals to be authorised by the canton.

BISON OR BUFFALO?

Bison are popularly referred to as buffalo, although breeders of the wild animal prefer using the name bison, which is regarded as the correct scientific name. In addition to the North American bison, there is a European bison, also known as the wisent. Weighing up to a ton with a lifespan of between 20 and 25 years, the bison is the largest terrestrial animal in North America.

Bison raised by ranchers are usually smaller, as they are sent to slaughter at two and a half years. Bison meat is prized for its relatively low fat and calory content, as well as a cholesterol level that is lower than beef.