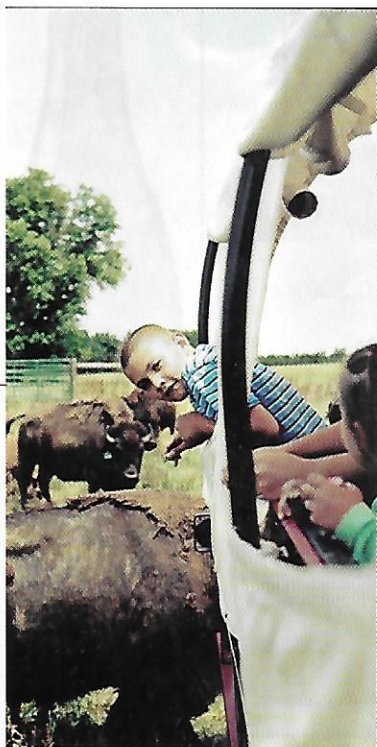
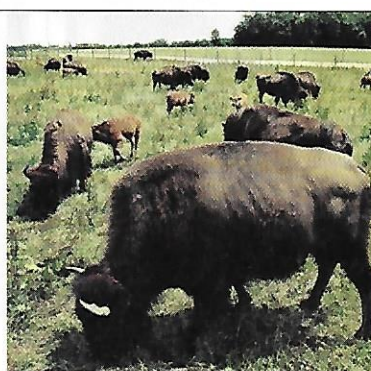
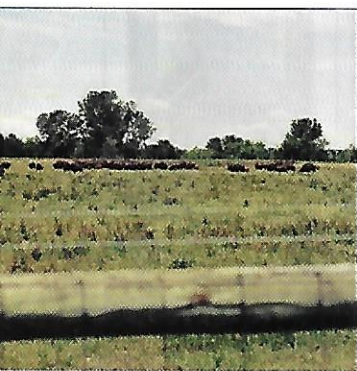
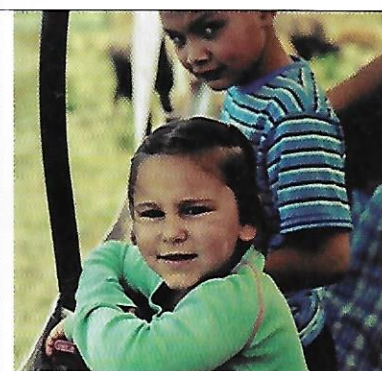


Farm tours in covered wagons supplement the sale of bison meat at Cook's Bison Ranch.



Agritourism is vital to the family-run operation. Enjoying a ride are some of Wayne Cook's grandchildren, Zech Garza (in stripes), Chloe Garza (in checked dress) and Lucy Cook (in green shirt).



The entire Cook's Bison Ranch herd includes about 300 head in Indiana and 700 in North Dakota. The local farm's pasture provides rich summertime grass for good eating.

## cook's bison ranch

Once an overhunted, endangered American icon, bison is one traditional North American food making a comeback through consumer demand. Cook's Bison Ranch is a leading Indiana producer of this lean meat.

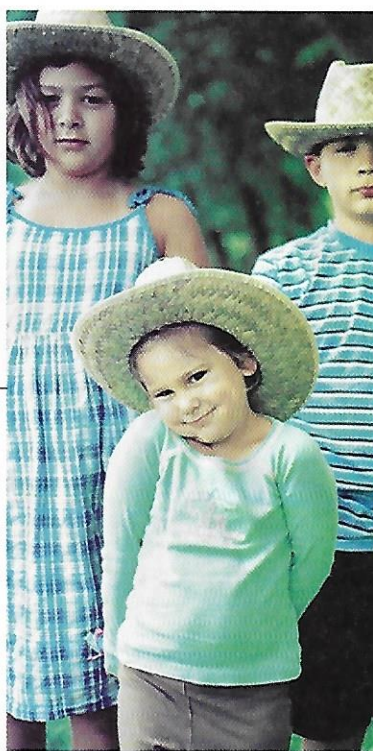


It's a blue-skied Indiana summer day as I climb aboard a flatbed trailer with a Conestoga-style covered top. A tractor tugs us along, bumping over a muddy gravel track and passing through a gate toward a small herd of 60 or so buffalo cows and calves. We stop in the middle of the pasture, and the herd closes in around us. Mothers are quick to put

themselves between their calves and us. Some of the bison, with their curved horns and thick humps, are close enough to touch. Though their soft eyes bring to mind gentle cattle, these animals aren't tame and can be aggressive.

On this day, the buffalo (more specifically North American bison) are shedding their trademark shaggy

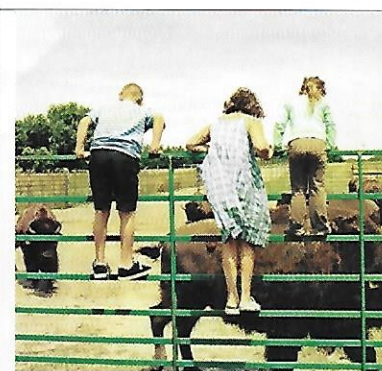




Chloe and Zech, children of Suzy Garza, look over little cousin Lucy, daughter of Peter Cook.



One challenge to increasing bison's popularity on the plate is its lack of fat content. Though many consumers want to eat leaner meats, the difference in texture when compared to fattier beef can be tough to get past.

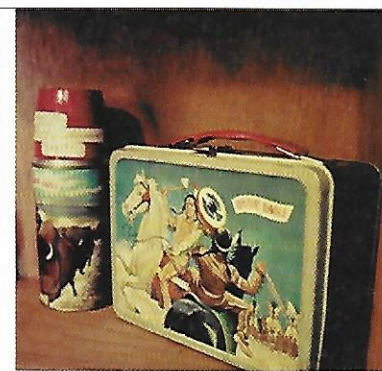


brown coats. The adults look like the animals captured in pictures from the old Wild West, while the calves resemble light brown domestic bovines. After a few months of grazing on the lush, green pasture grass at Cook's Bison Ranch near Wolcottville, the young ones, too, will look like their massive parents with short legs, thick barrel chests and broad foreheads.

Wayne Cook, patriarch of the family business, grew up on this land, the same farm his mother and father bought in 1939. The elder Cooks paid \$5,000 for 87 acres with a barn and a farmhouse, which Cook still lives in today, greatly expanded into a gracious home. "My grandpa told my dad, he said 'you paid too much,'" Cook says. "You could imagine what it would cost now." In those days, the Cook family grew popcorn and slowly added land. Today, with nearly 1,100 acres, the main crops are soybeans, corn, hay and bison. Cook's, situated northwest of Fort Wayne, isn't the only bison ranch in Indiana, but with more than 300 head, it is the largest. The National Bison Association lists 12 member/producers in the state, but other sources list as many as 38 Hoosier bison farms and ranches.

The Cook herd also counts another 700 bison cows and calves at its site in North Dakota. "I always say that we have people and no animals, and they have animals and no people," Cook says of the northern outpost. To keep costs under control, most calves are bred in North Dakota and then brought to Indiana to feast on the farm's rich summertime grass. Anything else the bison eat, such as small amounts of corn and silage, is also grown on the farm. "We call it feed-

An enduring symbol of the West during the late 1800s, the bison population in this country is seeing a resurgence due in part to efforts of the U.S. National Parks system.



ing 'from gate to plate,'" says Jason Moore, Wayne Cook's son-in-law. "We're big on traceability," he says, noting that some bison producers feed their animals whatever cheap silage and feed is available. At Cook's, everything is grown on site.

**While it's common** to drive along a rural Indiana road and see barns, paddocks, silos and cornfields, it is a bit surprising to see herds of stocky, imposing bison. It's a far cry from the treeless, yellow plains of Western Oklahoma and Kansas where massive herds of North American bison thundered along 200 years ago. While these animals were once endangered, they have enjoyed a successful comeback thanks, in part, to programs in the U.S. National Parks system.

Wayne's son, Peter, became interested in breeding bison as an investment in 1998 after a trip to Yellowstone National Park. He researched options and partnered with his father



who was by then semiretired from his propane business. They bought their first stock that same year. Billionaire Ted Turner entered the breeding game a year or two later, and suddenly breeding and selling bison for meat seemed more profitable.

Nearly everyone in the Cook family is involved in running the farm including Peter's sisters, Suzy Garza and Annette Moore. Annette oversees Buffalo Pete's Grill, a buffalo burger food stand at the American Countryside Farmers Market in Elkhart. Her husband, Jason Moore, handles marketing and sales, working with restaurants and chefs around the state in "food service development." While their buffalo burgers are popular in pubs and casual restaurants, Jason is working to introduce the ultralean meat to fine dining chefs in Indiana. He's currently experimenting on higher-end cuts of buffalo with Chef David Tallent of Restaurant Tallent in Bloomington, a business that Jason calls a "beta site."

Working with lean meats can be challenging, but Tallent likes buffalo as an alternative to "super-duper lean" game meats such as venison and elk. The restaurant owner prefers to break down his own whole rib eyes or sirloins, and Cook's has been able to give him a steady supply — something many smaller producers find difficult.

Tallent says buffalo has been popular with customers who want an alternative to fattier red meats. Cardiologists and nutritionists across the country have long been recommending bison as a low-fat red meat option. It boasts 2.42 grams of fat per 3.5-ounce serving compared to 18.54 grams for that same serving of USDA Choice beef. According to the National Bison Association, buffalo has less fat per serving than lean white meats, too, including chicken and some fish. However, this lack of fat, along with a slightly sweeter flavor, has made bison slow to catch on with an American public used to the taste and texture that fat gives regular beef. Chefs, too, find it a bit more difficult to cook well. "It's taking the extra time to learn how to cook it properly that makes a difference," Tallent says.

Bison steaks and premium cuts are butchered similarly to how regular beef cattle cuts are, but the animals' much larger chuck (the cut from the shoulder and neck) yields more ground meat for burgers. Some producers will add up to 20 percent additional fat into their ground meat, making a burger with nearly 17 grams of fat, more similar to a regular ground beef patty. But generally any extra fat comes from the type of animal that is butchered. For example, older bulls or cows have a higher fat cover than young ones. Cook's butchers its animals at no more than 1,100 pounds to ensure consistency and a 95 percent lean burger. "For us, it just didn't make any sense to push a healthy, low-fat product and then stick fat into it," Jason says. The obstacle is educating consumers on how to properly cook the lean, rich meat so it still tastes good.

**Availability is a second** hurdle. For many years, only health food stores and specialty markets carried it, but it's becoming more of a mainstream offering, priced similarly to natural, organic beef. In Indianapolis, Cook's products are sold at L.E. Kincaids and Sons, Georgetown Market and Winding Way Farms, and through wholesaler Dugdale Beef Company. Restaurants on the

bison bandwagon include Scotty's Brewhouse, the Slippery Noodle Inn, Deano's Wine Bar and Restaurant and The Glass Chimney in Carmel.

Restaurant chefs like Tallent believe that bison will catch on when it's easier to find on a regular basis. "I don't want buffalo from out West. I want something from here," he says, an opinion corresponding with his position as cofounder of Slow Food Bloomington. "Once I put it on the menu, people like it." However, even with the meat's recent popularity, most bison ranchers don't want to create factory farms or mass feeding equivalents of domestic cattle production. Cook's Bison Ranch, like the National Bison Association, opposes cloning, growth hormones and unnecessary antibiotics. (Bison stress more easily than cattle do; sick or injured animals are treated as needed.) Moore says there's room to meet demand and maintain high quality.

**It's mid-June** and more than 1,000 people have turned out for the annual open house and bison festival at Cook's Bison Ranch. Held every year on the Saturday before Father's Day, the event is a popular destination for folks enjoying Native American dancers, church singing groups, tours, a petting zoo and, naturally, buffalo burgers. A radio station is doing on-site promotional break-ins next to a woman spinning yarn from buffalo wool. A gift shop at the farm sells Native American artifacts, buffalo jerky, brats, frozen meat and even pillows made from hides. By-products are a popular side business; a whole tanned hide will set you back \$700-\$800 with a year-long wait.

Like many smaller producers, the folks at Cook's look for supplemental revenue streams, especially when it comes to their unusual crop. About 20 percent of Cook's current bison-related business is by-products, tours and group activities, managed by Peter's wife Erica. Jason says they expect to expand agritourism business to nearly half of their revenue in the next five years along with continued growth of the overall bison business. During the past three years, they've seen an annual growth of 30-50 percent in bison-related commerce. "We anticipate doubling our business this year alone," Jason says, primarily as a result of improved marketing and packaging on their buffalo meat plus just "beating the bushes" for new accounts.

With 10 children between Peter, Suzy and Annette, the Cooks aren't lacking help around the farm in the summer. They've hired Keith Harrison, who has three decades of experience in food distribution and sales, to serve as outside general manager, a smart move for a family business. Jason plans to continue developing new markets for buffalo meat with distributors who will help them expand into Illinois and Ohio. The strategy is to introduce diners and chefs to buffalo through a burger, then move them on to a more expensive cut of steak.

In the meantime, Wayne and his family have fallen in love with bison and the farm that's making an American icon uniquely Hoosier. "This is our livelihood, and we take a lot of pride in it," Jason says. ●

*For more information about Cook's Bison Ranch, log on [cooks-bisonranch.com](http://cooks-bisonranch.com).*