

*This is about how our appetites can sustain our passions. It's about people like you and me. People with dreams. People with strengths and weaknesses, people who don't quit in spite of the odds. It is, after all, what our country is about. Sustaining ourselves, our environment, our appetite and our passion to create something better. And in the process, rediscovering that when something good occurs, it not only works for us, it works for others too. It's about sharing and giving back.*

## Sustainable appetite, sustainable passion



Kathy & Ken Lindner, Lindner Bison

### Introduction

We are corporate escapees. After years of being upsized, downsized, merged, relocated, replaced and laid off, we knew we had to find another way. By the time we reached our early 40s, it had become increasingly apparent there was and would be, less job security. And very possibly, there may be less social security funds available when we retired.

These thoughts were the meager beginning of rethinking what we were doing with our lives. We decided to see if it was possible to do what our hearts were pulling us to do: find a way to leave our jobs in the city and live on the land.

### Background

With a degree in music, Ken taught for a while, then became a computer technician to pay the bills. His career would take him into industries such as computers and medical device manufacturing, becoming vice president of quality for a robotics manufacturing company. He loved teaching and people loved working for him. Something was missing though. He always wanted to live on the land.

With less than a degree, Kathy found limited advancement opportunity. Starting as a clerk for the railroad, she became executive assistant in various industries traveling the world. More than once she had her own business only to rejoin the corporate world, usually in marketing and later, investor relations. Ambitious, creative and from four generations of cattle ranchers, she longed to ranch.

On a trip home to Montana, Kathy was surprised to discover bison meat. She loved it. It was delicious and especially easy to digest, something she'd had problems with for years. After a heartfelt discussion, they decided that if they could combine their passions and find a way for the animals to pay for the land, then it just might give them a way to live the kind of active retirement life they envisioned.

After three years of research, four bison cows and calves were bought and placed on leased land with a rancher. Over the next several years, they continued to learn about bison production, marketing and selling meat, while growing their herd.

### Marketing & Distribution

Kathy's forte was marketing. The food industry though was different from anything she had experienced. "Perhaps one of the smartest things we did in the early years was to see if there was a market for the meat. To confirm people liked it and wanted it. That happened fairly quickly. What we learned about marketing and distribution though was a real surprise."

Pursuing traditional distribution channels resulted in blind alley after blind alley. Commercial trucks wouldn't pick up unless it was a 40,000 lb. load (entire truckload). Distributors placed their fees so high, we would've been out of business before we started.

Large stores would stock it only if it was in square, custom container to stack neatly in a freezer. (We designed such a container only to find the cost too exorbitant to continue.)

"A few smaller stores took the meat and sold it with limited success. Some of what we experienced: no promotion; spoiled meat that had been left at room temperature and thawed before it could be purchased; vastly overpricing the meat so few could afford it, and providing no guidance on how to cook it.

"Small restaurants wanted only the prime steaks and often would overcook them. Most chefs wouldn't even look at us when we tried to broach the subject of cooking," remembers Kathy.

"It was frustrating. Over and over, we tried different stores, different restaurants. The result was the same.

As we learned later, traditional stores (think supermarkets) are actually in the "real estate business." Structured for and bought by Big Food/Big Ag, costs are up to \$20,000/product just for shelf space.

"Clearly, we were naive.

If you weren't big enough, wealthy enough or know somebody, there was no way to market the meat. We couldn't figure out how any small family rancher could survive!"

### Search for meat processors and truckers

The Corporate America journey continued in parallel to their meat industry education. After relocating to the east coast, Ken was offered a job in southern California and back they came.

They were glad to be home and decided this was where their ranch would be. To test the waters, they bought additional animals from a California bison producer, keeping them on his land. While Ken started his new job, Kathy began looking for small meat processors.

During this search, they learned of a serious shortage of small meat processors, driven out of business by new USDA regulations 10 years earlier in response to the Jack-in-the Box scandal. Those who couldn't meet the new demands disappeared, leaving a handful.

The remaining small meat processors were monopolized by large commercial meat producers. To discourage business from a small family producer like Lindner Bison, processors tripled their processing quotes to her. Distribution quotes were similar, often requiring several tons of palletized meat, something they just couldn't do.

Efforts turned to looking for refrigerated trucks that would take a partial shipment. Repeatedly she was told they were too small. "Boy I got tired of hearing that." Finally through a friend, Kathy found a trucker willing to bring one pallet of meat. "It felt like what you see on TV with a drug deal. I had to bring cash and meet him at 4 am in the desert outside of LA. We were told there would be no manifest and no way to contact him. He would call us. If the truck didn't show up, it would be our tough luck. We swallowed hard and agreed."

That morning in the dark, while Ken was sleeping, she started the car, thinking thoughts about people who mysteriously disappeared. She checked to make sure she had her pepper spray and that her cell phone was on. At the rendezvous point, she found a huge semi idling with parking lights on. She got out of the car and approached the cab. "He seemed almost as nervous as I was," she said. "He was a very nice, salt of the earth kind of guy, just trying to feed his family." The cash was exchanged, she loaded their SUV, and arrived home just as Ken was leaving for work.

During this same time, an urgent need was growing for Ken and Kathy to find land for their animals. The herd size and associated costs were increasing each year. Searching in southern California, they quickly found that fires, drought, shortage of water and high prices conspired to keep ranchland out of reach.

They shifted their focus north and kept looking.

### The turning point

"I've been laid off." While looking for land in their spare time, one afternoon Kathy got a call from Ken. He'd been laid off and was packing up his office.

Ken remembers, "Even though we knew we were vulnerable to this kind of thing happening, especially as we got older, it was still a shock. After a sleepless night, I realized I finally had enough. The next morning I told Kathy I didn't want to go back. She immediately said, "OK then, we'll find a way."

They had already been buying at local farmer's markets and months before had purchased additional animals from another California producer, paying monthly fee to keep them on his land.

They now wondered if their grassfed bison meat could be sold at the local market. They saw eggs, chicken and sometimes fish, but no red meat.

Several market managers were contacted and immediately embraced the idea.

"Their encouragement and enthusiasm was such a contrast to what our experience had been trying traditional distribution channels," said Ken.

"Even though we'd done our homework, we still weren't sure what to expect. We clung to the notion that God wouldn't get us this far and then abandon us. So we packed the meat into coolers, bought a small freezer, tent, grabbed a folding table and a tablecloth, and began."

"That first day I'll never forget," said Kathy.

"We got up early to load the truck. I found I could barely lift the 20-25 lb. coolers of meat. It was a shock. Later at the market, standing for five hours was difficult. I wondered how we would ever do this.



"Today I can lift 90 lbs. and I'm in my late 50s.

No paying for a gym, no personal trainer - just a passion and determination to bring a humanely raised, heritage meat to others has sustained me and continues to make me more fit."

The first farmer's market.

### Financing California ranchland

Finally, they found land they could afford. It had water, was a productive hay ranch, a decent size and at a higher altitude which meant more omega 3s in the grass. It was further than they hoped - a 10 hr. drive from LA, but in a part of the state where they animals had naturally lived in the 1500s.



Future California 100% grassfed bison ranch.

"Getting ready to buy it, we did more research and crunched more numbers. After several meetings and review of our application, the SBA, our bank and small business experts all told us we would have no problem getting a loan for our bison business. Our credit scores were terrific and we were excited.

Nine separate applications and nine banks later, there was no loan. "We didn't know there were so many ways to say no," said Kathy. "It's not like we didn't know about business plans. We had created plenty of budgets and plans. We knew the numbers made sense and the potential was there.

"Our 3rd generation cattle/bison mentor had cautioned us years earlier that there would be those who would want to see us fail. Not to expect help from anyone. We now wondered if this was what he meant."

As if to prove him right, number 10 finance person agreed to meet with us. We showed him our plan. He said, yes he knew of others who tried the bison business and failed. He looked at us and said in an almost amused tone, "So what do they know that you don't know?"

We were taken aback but responded with the truth. He was asking the wrong question. "The question is: 'What are we willing to do, that they weren't willing to do?' We could tell it was a new thought for him, but of little consequence. We left. We were tired, angry and discouraged.

Ken recalls, "Shortly after this, we actually did give up. We received our 12th rejection and were completely out of options.

"We both remember the day when we emailed our realtor to say we couldn't do it. After all these years, and all this effort, only to be forced to give up just because no bank would approve our ag loan. It was a huge blow. We sent the email and waited for this new realization to sink in.

Instead, unexpectedly and seemingly from nowhere, private investors contacted them. Ken and Kathy reviewed their finances knowing that private money costs more than the banks. Additional funds would need to come from their home's equity for capital improvements to the land.

After a few days, they decided to take the biggest risk of their lives: Land for the ranch was acquired.

### The return of a California heritage animal

Knowing there was no turning back, arrangements were quickly made to prepare the land for receipt of their bison. Sturdy game fencing went up, a well was drilled for stock water and a pump house constructed. Ken built a chute for unloading. Finally, a trucking company was contacted to move their bison in three separate trips.



Ready to load.



Ken remembers. "We had so much in our savings. I knew it would be gone in 2 or 3 months, and if this didn't work, well, I didn't want to think about that.

After all, not only was our personal welfare on the line, but the maintenance of the ranch and animals depended on us too."

The first trip was lined up. There was spring rain and mud everywhere, but after a half day, the first group was loaded.

The livestock hauler arrived and the animals were transferred again into the larger truck.



Final transfer to livestock truck.

By 3pm, the long drive back to California began.

Toward dusk, about 4 hours into the 20 hr. trip, the realization hit us as we followed the livestock truck with our bison.

This was the dream we had worked for the last 8 years. It was finally happening.



Our future on that truck!

Our own animals were on their way to our own ranch. This was the start of our new life out of corporate America. "I think I cried most of the way home," said Kathy. "It was a joyous trip, we'll cherish it always."

Once there, it took some coaxing to get the animals off the truck, but off they came. More tears as we watched them, belly deep in green grass and alfalfa on our very own land.

And land where they had been native 500 years before. They were home at last. And, along with them, so finally, were we.



The first to arrive at Heritage Ranch.



Belly deep in green grass.

For the next several nights, we slept on the floor of the pump house to make sure the bison settled into their new home. Then, with a neighbor to keep an eye on things, we drove back to southern California to secure and build our grassfed bison meat business.

### **Sustainable appetite**

"When most people think of sustainable food, they think of food production methods used," said Ken.

He continued, "People now have a deeper understanding about how truly sustainable food is

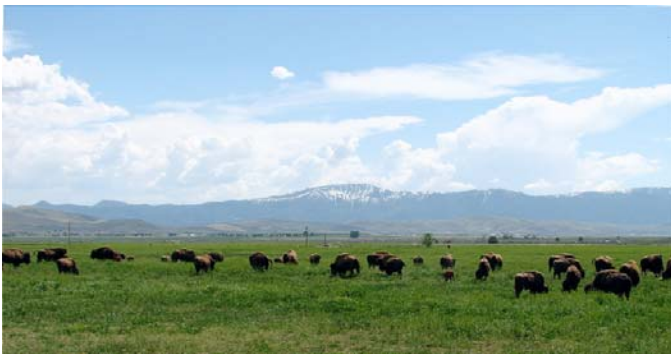
when produced without the use of chemical inputs - from diesel fuel to fertilizer to hormones to antibiotics.



Large, commercial feedlot.

Being a large scale food producer often means using large volumes of such chemicals. The typical stocks (raw material) for these chemicals are neither recyclable nor environmentally friendly, and therefore unsustainable.

Lindner Bison believes in the exact opposite.



Lindner Bison on spring grass.

"We use very little fuel and no chemicals on the ranch. Our animal husbandry methods are humane and actually improve our pastures.

"Water and sun are used to create grass that our animals convert to protein. With the exception of electrical power, which we now must buy, our operation is sustainable and nearly self-contained.

"Our dream is to provide much of the future power needed using solar generation. Then our operation will be even more sustainable than it is now."

But producing the product sustainably is only the beginning.

Sustainability of consumption is equally important.

Native Americans revered bison. They understood the gifts of the bison which allowed their people to survive. To honor the animal harvested, nothing was wasted.

Because everything was used, fewer harvests were necessary, allowing the herd to thrive and grow.

Lindner Bison strives to this same standard and to succeed, we need customer support.

Every cut, from steaks to soup bones to organ meats must be used, otherwise sustainability can not be maintained. This is why we offer many cuts that stores no longer carry and provide recipes to teach customers how to apply sustainability to their food dollar choices.

"Years ago when we first started", remembers Kathy. "customers were fixed on a specific cut of meat, based on what was available in their supermarket.

"For many, if they couldn't have a \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank), they didn't want anything else. Some people also expected an unlimited supply of each and every cut at any given time. Finally we would say, 'we're not Wal-Mart' and that seemed to resonate. It's been a learning process for all of us."

"We thought it was such a shame", said Ken. "The individual cuts are all so incredible, we didn't want them to miss out."

They also remembered a hard lesson learned by the bison industry earlier. In response to demand by chefs, large players in the industry focused on selling only steaks and only to restaurants. They didn't market the rest of the animal. As a result, there was so much remaining meat in inventory that they hadn't developed a market for, many went bankrupt."

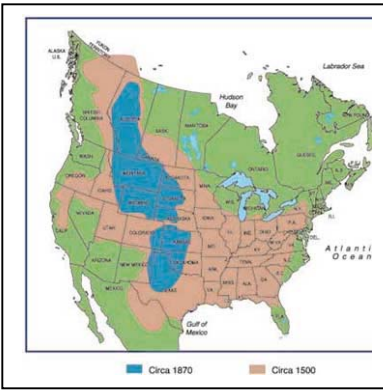
"Our approach is entirely different. One customer at a time, we reconnect with people. When we're out of one thing, we suggest another. With each selection, we teach what to expect and how to cook it. We especially love to explain that they don't need to spend a lot of money to enjoy this meat. It's just not necessary."

"And customer response is great! Not only are most people willing to try other cuts, they welcome the opportunity. Now when we're out of something, we hear, "Ok, so what else haven't I tried yet that's good?" (Guess what - - it's ALL good!)

"Then they're off on a new adventure, knowing that their purchase is sustainable, their appetite is sustainable. Their passion, like ours, is sustainable.

"And as a special bonus, they're helping to bring a heritage animal back home to the state of California. A truly sustainable cycle renews itself like this.

Each one of us can make a positive difference through thoughtful food choices.



Bison were native to California in the 1500s.  
Source: National Bison Association

"It's the reconnect factor," says Kathy. To us, this "reconnect" is a big deal. It takes time and it takes effort. Without this effort, there's no reconnect.

Over the last 40 years, Big Ag/Big

Food has successfully created a disconnect between consumers and how food is produced in this country. It doesn't have to be like that.

Through Farmers Markets, a direct link is possible from consumer to producer. A missing and valuable connection is provided to both.

"People tell us they care how their food is produced. We care about their purchase beyond just the sale. It's a sense of community that not only provides a reconnect, but a foundation for an ongoing relationship based on caring."

"Equally important to us is that the animal is honored by using every part," continues Ken.

"This is what we mean by a sustainable appetite. Everything is used in a positive way. We think it's important that people know how to successfully use all the cuts, organs, bones and even kidney fat.

And we continue to develop products from the hides, hair and skulls. Like the Native Americans before us, Lindner Bison strives to waste nothing.

Our customers' appetite and support is vital in order to achieve this level of sustainability."

**Sustainable passion**

Today, the seed herd is around 100 and those first four cows are still with them, 16 years old now, producing calves every year.

While it may sound like a dream come true, like most worthwhile pioneering dreams, it is only the beginning of hard work, sacrifice, and steering through uncharted waters. Faith, nerve and passion are a requirement.

Meat is sold to a few sustainable chefs and through Farmer's Markets. In an effort to leverage increased demand on their time, energy and pocketbook, they are now looking at coops and/or meat CSAs as a possibility. But the farmers markets made the difference for them.

"It's the only place where we could compete on a level playing field with other small producers. Here we can sell our meat outside established, traditional

distribution channels, which are designed for large, well-financed Big Food/Big Ag.

"We learned that Farmers Markets are specifically designed for small family farmers who don't have access to traditional distribution channels. Without Farmer's Markets, many small producers would have no way to survive. The wonderful products we provide would disappear."

"And we are passionate for our customers! Our customer's positive response and support is why we're still here. It's how we pay our bills."

Needed now is more fencing for rotational grazing, extending irrigation for more hay; expanding the product line and meat processing on site. Needed too is money for those things.

"We're still on the 'pay as you go' plan," say Ken and Kathy, who still haven't been able to leave the city to live on their own land.

"With the unexpected housing market downturn, we weren't able to sell our southern California home to put a house on our ranch. We drive 10 hrs. one way about every 11 days to work on the ranch, then come back and sell meat to pay the bills.

"Some tell us they can't believe that we actually do we do what we do. Sometimes we can't believe it either, but then, who else will do it? Only those with passion. This is our passion." So what exactly is passion then.

"We believe truly sustainable passion happens when we commit to become part of the solution instead of part of the problem. It's about not waiting for someone else to do it for us. It's about knowing when to put down our dinner fork and roll up our sleeves. You just know it's time. It feels good and it feels right."

"And if we can do it, so can others who care about how food is produced in this country," say the Lindners.

**Wanted: New California grassfed bison producers**

One of the things Lindner Bison has designed is a unique apprenticeship program for those who want to do what they do.



It starts at the Farmer's Market level.

"Early on, we realized that if we didn't have a market for the meat, there's no reason to raise the animals. We want to pass on that vital connection to beginning grassfed bison producers.

We are often approached by those who tell us they would love to come work on our ranch. (Actually, we would love to be there too!)

What many may not realize, is that it's that single understandable desire that may have helped to create the earlier disconnect in the first place. The growth and success of many large corporations depended on small farmers and ranchers staying removed from the consumer. Indeed some farmers and ranchers prefer it that way.

We don't know how it is in other states for beginning small livestock producers, but in our case, we found little to no help for getting started. When we finally took another look, we realized that much of the state is dedicated to agriculture, dairy and land development

This awareness made it even more important to us to provide a reconnect between producer and consumer.

"We geared our apprenticeship program to help create an opportunity that we didn't have. And perhaps especially for those who want to leave Corporate America the way we did. We know it's possible for those willing to work for it.

"First we teach about the various cuts. Apprentices can qualify for a bonus program which includes a true stock program: Actual animal ownership and Lindner Bison 'Producer' status.

"With our aging rancher/farmer population and Big Ag/Big Food (and land developers) waiting in the wings, a large, new crop of small, beginning ranchers/farmers is needed - and needed *now*.

We think there may even be merit to not having an ag background, as long as there is a demonstrated interest and willingness to work hard and learn. There may be some traditional 4th, 5th plus generation ranchers/farmers who respectfully disagree, but we believe this new group may bring new blood, new thinking with passionate sustainable underpinnings."

Kathy continued, "Farmers Markets are very gratifying. Our customers have become our friends. The feedback and appreciation for the small producer's hard work is immediate. For those who yearn for work that is meaningful, this is a way to make it possible without investing a large amount of capital up front.

It's a sweat equity plan and pretty much the way we started.

We need and welcome new small family farmers and ranchers with a shared passion for sustainability."

### Pioneering heroes, Heritage species

Much of the credit for Lindner Bison's sustainable passion comes from embracing the teachings of such pioneers as Jo Robinson, [www.eatwild.com](http://www.eatwild.com); Joel Salatin, [www.polyfacefarms.com](http://www.polyfacefarms.com); Michael Pollan [www.michaelpollan.com](http://www.michaelpollan.com) and Carlos Petrini, founder of Slow Food, [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com); [www.slowfoodusa.org](http://www.slowfoodusa.org).

In 2007, Plains Bison were inducted into the Slow Food Arc of Taste, drawing attention to the species as a heritage animal and encouraging production.

"We're grateful to Carlos Petrini and the Slow Food organization who taught us that the one way to insure the survival of a species is to create a demand for the meat and embracing customers as co-producers.

In our case, bison are a heritage animal, not only for the state of California, but nearly every state in the country. These animals date back to the Ice Age. They are healthy, hardy survivors.

They have more than earned the right to be here. They need our support and deserve our support.

For our American ancestors and for us, the more we learn about grassfed bison, the more we learn how their very presence represents sustainability.

They are our American heritage, our privilege.

They can be everyone's sustainable passion."



Lindner Bison bull, early spring

And what a wonderful passion to build on!

Grassfed bison meat is delicious, good for the earth, good for the animal, good for us. With our customers' sustainable appetite, the circle of sustainability is complete.

And finally, for those who embrace the idea of sustainable appetites and sustainable passions — no matter what the species choice — there's plenty of room for all of us.

It's about sharing and giving back.

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