

# Banking on **Bison**

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Hunter farmers  
putting new meat  
on the menu >



Ever since 3500 bison stampeded across the silver screen in that epic scene from *Dances With Wolves*, Sarah-Jane Dunford has been in love with the majestic North American native.

Now, several decades later, the Hunter Valley woman has plans to take her Hollywood-inspired passion from the paddock to the plate.

Sarah-Jane and her husband Luke are setting up an American bison farm with the intention of breeding and raising the herd to be sold for their meat.

The couple took delivery of their first four bison late last year - three young females and one very magnificent looking bull.

And after what they hope was a successful first breeding season in February, the Dunfords are crossing their fingers that the herd's numbers will swell further once November comes around.

While there are already a number of bison dotted around paddocks across the Hunter for use with rodeo and horse cutting activities, if all goes to plan the Dunfords will join less than a dozen graziers Australia-wide who are farming bison for meat.

For the first-time farmers, it is both an exciting and challenging prospect.

Sarah-Jane is a workplace safety specialist and Luke works for a landscaping company and while his family have a farming background, it is very much a case of learning as they go with their bison venture, which at this point they will work to establish while also continuing to hold down their regular jobs.

"We did a massive tree change. I'm from Sydney, Luke's from Vacy, he tried living in Sydney and couldn't stand it so we moved up here," Sarah-Jane said.

"We thought we'd buy a farm when we retired, we didn't think we'd buy a farm this early on and then being the size for a hobby farm we thought what do we do, do we do cows? I don't want to do cows, I want to do something more interesting.

"I have always loved bison since I watched *Dances with Wolves* ... I used to, when I was younger, go into the Lone Star and they had the head of a bison on the wall and I'd just stare at it lovingly.

"I didn't think you could get them in Australia (for farming) and then I found out that you could ... it took me about a year to talk Luke into the idea of it.



"Then we went over to America to the international bison conference and signed up as members, looked at other farmers doing it and I think Luke got a lot more confident that we can do this and then came back and bought some.

"We bought the farm two years ago. We went over to America in June of last year and we got our first herd in December.

"It's only 85 acres, it was always going to be a hobby but I thought bison, it's a more valuable animal so you get more return on the size of the land that you've got.

"We've got one male and three females, we think they got pregnant in February but that's yet to be determined, but I'd like in the next 10 years hopefully to have between 50 and 80, depending on how many the land can handle."

The American bison (more commonly known as buffalo in the US and Canada) is native to North America, where millions of the mammals once roamed across the countryside.

It was hunted almost to extinction in the late 19th century, but conservation efforts in the US have seen numbers returned to around 500,000 today.

In Australia there are estimated to be around 500 bison on farms and in zoos, with less than a dozen farmers raising bison for their meat.

While bison meat is fast growing in popularity in America, with former President Barack Obama

declaring the North American bison as the official National Mammal of the United States in 2016, its inclusion on Australian menus is still quite rare – a status Sarah-Jane hopes to one day change.

"In Australia you can't import them and you can't import their meat so there's only about 500 head of them in Australia at the moment. The majority of farmers that do have them use them for rodeo work and cutting horses," she said.

"There are a couple of farmers, two I know of, that will sell their bison meat from the farm gate, but there's no commercial scale meat producers.

"When we went to the bison conference we had bison meat for breakfast, lunch and dinner and it was the most amazing meat we've ever eaten in our lives.

"It's leaner than kangaroo, it's leaner than salmon, less fat than most other meats but it doesn't taste gamey. So it tastes like a really tasty steak that's maybe a little bit sweeter.

"It's one of the healthiest meats that you can get.

"There's a small bison association in Australia, the American Bison Association of Australia it's called and part of their job is to really educate people with bison.

"Hopefully eventually the government will get more educated and not as scared about importing bison because I think it's such a fantastic meat and there's so much potential for an industry there." >





Of course farming an animal that can grow to about 3.5m from head to rump and weigh up to 1000kg is not without its challenges.

"The cost of infrastructure is probably the biggest challenge, having the six foot high fencing because they can jump from standing to two metres and they can run at 65km/h," Sarah-Jane said.

"The fencing and the infrastructure with that is quite a big upfront cost in getting the stockyard built.

"Then purchasing the bison is five or six times more than the cost of a cow. But then they get such a higher yield price per kilo for meat.

"The bison are pretty much self-sufficient, I wave at them as I drive off and then we come home and we get really excited and go over and give them treats and that's about it.

"The biggest amount of work is really the infrastructure so Luke's been really working hard with getting the fencing done on his days off but other than that they just kind of do their own thing."

Sarah-Jane said she has been surprised about how well the bison have settled into their Hunter Valley farm and how "mellow" they are – although it's important to never forget just how dangerous and unpredictable an animal of that size can be.

"The most surprising thing is how mellow they are ... I thought they'd be trying to kill us every day," she said.

"Because my profession's safety and when researching a lot you hear of all the stories about in Yellowstone (US) where people get gorged from having

selfies and stuff like that and how dangerous they are, all the farmers saying 'never be complacent, they're dangerous'.

"So I thought it would be like having a bunch of tigers, but it's deceiving how mellow they are and I think I've always got to keep that in the back of my mind, I've still got to have that fear and that respect of them."

But while she may fear and respect them, it's clear Sarah-Jane also loves her little herd – despite the fact she knows that one day they will make the transition from the paddock to the plate.

"I really care for these animals," she said.

"There's Tatanka, which is American Indian for bison, so he's the bull and we call him Tank, then there's Montana, Wendy One-Horn and Mini B, because she's the smallest.

"Everybody says to me are you sure you should really have named them, are you going to be able to eat them? And I said look, I do love them and I do love going to the fence with my carrots and they all run towards me but I can't have all these just as pets.

"I think coming from Sydney as well, never been farming or anything, I am attached but I've always got in the back of my mind the amount of investment we've put into getting them, they can't be pets ... so I keep thinking I do love them, but my goodness you'd be tasty." 🍖

*You can follow the Dunfords' journey online via their Facebook page Hunter Valley Paddock to Plate.*