

The Star B Ranch Looks to a New Horizon

The scope includes agritourism, hops, beer and, of course, bison.

Posted by [Nicole Reino](#) , March 25, 2011 at 03:23 PM

When Ken Childs and his family arrived on his father-in-law's 1,200-acre property off Highway 78 in the late 1970s, they weren't sure what to do with the land. It was once a working horse ranch, but they didn't want to breed and raise horses. Development was discussed, but they had too much respect and love for the land to put mobile homes on it.

Ken's father-in-law, Herbert Boeckmann, told the family of a report he did in school about bison and how, ever since then, he had an appreciation for the animal.

Although Ken and his wife, Denice, didn't know anything about ranching, much less bison, they knew how to manage a business. With that skill set and a knack for learning the rest on the job, they started Star B Ranch, which quickly became one of the largest producers and distributors of bison meat in the western U.S., serving more than 600 customers, including Sysco and U.S. Food Services.

Now, more than 30 years later, Ken and his family have to decide what they want the Star B Ranch to become next. They sold the bison production and distribution business back in 2003 and have been in a holding pattern ever since.

"But we've kind of, in the back of our heads, always thought the best thing we could do is open to the public," Ken said.

What exactly does he mean by that?

"An agritourism concept where we could share the history and the education of the animals," he said.

"We had the business plan in place for the agritourism business several years ago, and then the economy started tanking, so we put things on hold."

Now that the economy is beginning to turn around, their wheels are starting to turn again.

Let There Be Hops

About six years ago, Ken's daughter, Amie March, and her husband, Eric March, came up with the idea to plant hops, which is the bittering agent found in beer. Eric planted six varieties on the property. At the time, he didn't know anything about hops other than what the skeptics said: Hops won't grow south of 35 degrees latitude because the length of daylight is too short.

Eric proved them wrong. Three varieties—Cascade, Nugget and Willamette—did well, so he decided to exclusively grow those. Three years ago, Eric harvested them for the first time.

Last year, he harvested 120 pounds of Cascade.

"This year, they'll likely be so aggressive that we'll have trouble controlling the growth," Eric said. "In the third and fourth years is when you really get into the maximum producing capacities."

What does he plan on doing with all these hops?

Sell them, of course. Home and professional brewers as well as herbalists (hops are a natural sleep aid) purchase dried and fresh hops. [San Diego Brewing Company](#) has purchased hops from Star B Ranch.

During the harvest season, which is in mid-August, Star B Ranch will offer a pick-your-own program, where the public can go to the ranch, and pick and purchase fresh hops.

Two years ago, hops were selling for \$19-\$20 per pound due to a shortage nationwide. This year, hops are going for around \$8-\$9 per pound.

"It's a volatile market, and I try to keep up with what the average market price is," Eric said. "Plus, we're not certified organic yet, so I don't charge the organic price."

Although the hops aren't certified organic, the Star B Ranch is growing its hops according to organic standards, which means they're free of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers.

A Possible Brewery

In line with the agritourism concept, the family's dream is to open a brewery on the Star B Ranch property.

"We want to specialize in high-quality beers, fun packaging, seasonal packaging," Ken said. "We want to be able to tell our story."

Eric installed state-of-the-art home brewing equipment at the ranch, and he's been brewing his own beers, using the hops grown on the property ([click here for Eric's black IPA recipe](#)).

He even did a collaboration brew with Sierra Nevada and the San Diego Brewing Company.

If Ken and Eric opened their own brewery, they'd be the first to do it in Ramona. And that comes with its challenges.

"We're zoned for a vineyard and a winery, but we're not zoned for a brewery," Ken said. "It's simply the way the zoning ordinance is written. It may sound simple, but to go to the county and say, 'We've got to change this sentence,' is tricky."

Eric said the wording would have to be changed to allow the "fermentation of grain" in a rural area, such as where the Star B Ranch is located. Currently, the county of San Diego requires breweries to be in commercial or industrial areas.

But the family, who's still doing research and putting together a proposal, is hopeful the county will work with them.

"We're environmentally friendly, we try to do things right, we're good stewards of the land, and we want to support the local economy," Ken said.

What About the Bison?

Although growing hops and the possibility of a opening a brewery are ripe in the family's mind, the bison do not take a backseat.

There are currently 35 bison on their property. They're used strictly for breeding and selling "on the hoof," meaning the whole animal. No slaughtering or processing takes place on the Ramona property.

Today, the Star B Ranch is partnered with NorthStar Bison, producers in Wisconsin that raise, slaughter, process and package grass-fed bison. That meat, which is Wisconsin State Inspected, is packaged under the Star B Ranch label and then distributed to a handful of markets and restaurants in Southern California. To name a few: [Don's Market](#) in Santa Ysabel, as well as Miner's Diner, Wrong Branch Cafe and Buffalo Bills in Julian, and [Jeremy's on the Hill](#) in Wynola.

The family also shows the animals at such events as the Wild West Buffalo Stampede in Utah, which is put on by the Western Bison Association.

In a few years, the family hopes to share the animals' storied, Native American history right from the Ramona property. The family would also like to share their story of becoming ranchers—and now hops farmers. With any luck, they'll also be able to serve up a beer or two.

To learn more about the Star B Ranch, call 760-789-8155.