

Hop to It: Star B Ranch

Learn about Star B Ranch, where they're growing and raising two uncommonly seen things in Southern California: hop vines and bison.

BY CANDICE WOO

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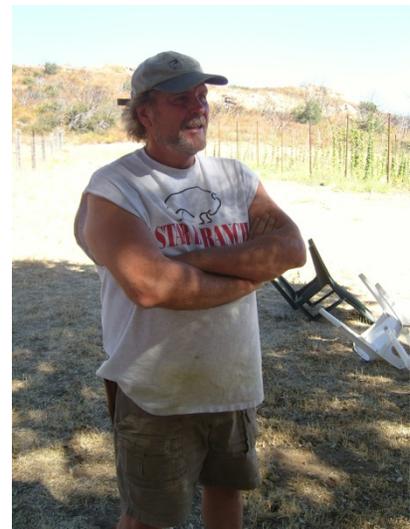


PHOTO BY BY CANDICE WOO
Buffalo at Star B Ranch

A Labor Day weekend road trip with friends took us an hour northeast of San Diego, just a few miles outside of Ramona to [Star B Ranch](#), where they're growing and raising two uncommonly-seen things in Southern California - hop vines and bison. Ken Childs, owner of Star B, gave us a personal tour of his twelve hundred acre property, eleven hundred acres of which were scorched during the devastating Witch Creek fire of 2007 (seeing smoke in the distance during our visit was a scary reminder that it's fire season again).

Ken and his wife Denice first settled on the ranch over twenty years ago, building a buffalo meat distribution business on the west coast and raising their own animals to show at livestock competitions or be sold as breeding stock to help preserve the American Bison species. Because of San Diego's lack of a USDA-certified meat processing center, the ranch can only sell their locally grassfed meat "on the hoof", meaning the entire animal.

Two years ago, Ken and his son-in-law Eric March, decided to plant hop vines just a short distance from where their bison graze on pasture, beyond an electric fence. Eric hopes to gain the experience and knowledge necessary to



operate a licensed brewery at the ranch, but the two men have also reached out to the area's beer community, from home to production brewers, looking to add some local flavor to their brews.

During their hop harvest, which started in August, brewers are invited out to the ranch to pick their own hops, where they're currently harvesting Nugget hops; they've also planted Cascade and Willamette varieties. Though they're not certified organic, the vines are grown sustainably without the use of chemical sprays.

The ranch charges \$10-\$20 per pound of hops, which should take you about an hour to harvest and you're advised to bring water, sunscreen and a hat as temperatures have been soaring up into the nineties.

The vines, as they wind their way up strings that line the tall rows of the hop field, are incredibly beautiful to look at but they smell amazing too – that familiar resin-y scent that wafts from our favorite IPA's. The hop flowers, or cones, provide beer with fragrance and flavor from the lupulin glands found at the base of each flower's petals. Break open a cone to get to the powdery yellow lupulin, which contains the acids and oils that impart bitterness and aroma.

If you're keen to pick your own, get there soon. Star B's hops will only be available for harvest for the next week or so. Call Eric March at 760-789-8155 or e-mail him at brewbeast@gmail.com to make an appointment. **Home Brew Mart** in Linda Vista is selling their dried hops and local breweries including Karl Strauss and San Diego Brewing Company are using fresh hops for special cask beers. In the future, Star B Ranch hopes to lease rows of hops to area breweries and invest in a hop-picking machine and hop pelletizer to further streamline the process and encourage brewers, on both big and small systems, to go more local.