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Jerky, bison are back in fashion

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I've been searching lately for the truly traditional foods of Native Americans who lived on the plains before Euro-Americans came to stay. Frybread is wildly popular at many pow-wows, but it was born of relatively recent government distributions to reservations, so it's not actually "traditional" (Food Detective, Sept. 26).

Wandering through 7-Eleven, I spotted a genuinely indigenous American food: jerky.

Jerky is derived from ch'arki, meaning "to burn," in Quechua, a Native-American language. Jerky is neither burned nor even cooked; it's sliced, trimmed, dried and frequently smoked, accelerating the dehydration process and adding flavor.

No longer merely an impulse purchase in convenience stores and truck stops, jerky has become hot. David Koretz, CEO of Brooklyn's SlantShack Jerky, told us his "handcrafted, artisanal jerky is served on several NYC charcuterie platters." Expect to see more of it in Chicago sometime next year.

At 4th Avenue Meat Market in Red Lodge, Mont., I purchased bacon jerky. Though it packed porky deliciousness, it required chilling, confounding a main motivation for jerking meat: preservation without refrigeration. I also purchased buffalo jerky, which was indeed food traditionally enjoyed by the Crow and others living in this region of southeastern Montana.

What's called buffalo — more properly, American bison — was once what was for dinner all across native North America.

In recent years bison has seen a resurgence in popularity. Nutrient-dense, it has less fat than beef, pork, or even chicken. Moreover, the National Bison Association strongly advocates in support of grass feeding and against artificial growth hormones and sub-therapeutic antibiotics, making bison a comparatively "clean" meat.

At our local Jewel in River Forest, we found many different cuts of bison, testament to this meat's growing popularity. Grilled up as bison burgers, it had a rich, deep flavor, and though low-fat, it stayed remarkably moist. You might consider grilling bison during these final days of the barbecue season.

And if you're feeling ahead of the curve, you can slice and dry strips of bison to make jerky for the months ahead.

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