

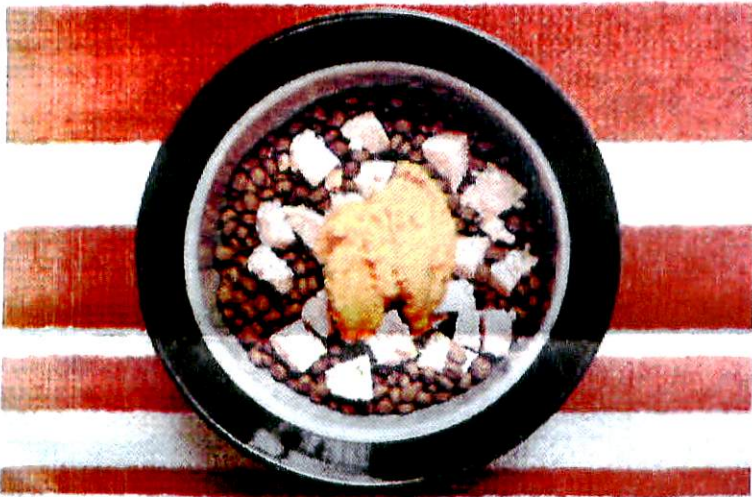
The Joy of Cooking for Dogs

Marketers See a Willingness to Prepare Fresh Food; Haddock and Cage-Free Turkey



LET THE 'HAPPY DANCE' BEGIN

Both dogs and their dog owners enjoy the anticipation that leads up to meal time, pet-food makers say. Laura Twichell, of Cincinnati, prepares to feed her black Labrador, Chili, above. She mixes fresh chicken-and-vegetable dog food with organic salmon-based kibble and canned pumpkin purée. 'It takes me 10 minutes to make it, and she eats it in two seconds,' Ms. Twichell says



— PET OWNERSHIP —

45.3 million

Number of U.S. households that own a cat

56.7 million

Number of U.S. households that own a dog

BY ELLEN BYRON

Feeding the dog with Freshpet dog food is kind of like baking with a cake mix.

Dog owners "know they're not quite cooking" when they mash the meat or mix it with kibble, says Scott Morris, co-founder of the Secaucus, N.J., company. "But they still feel emotionally rewarded for the effort."

That insight is driving a big shift in the way companies are designing food for the nation's millions of dogs and cats. After years of steadily rising pet-food sales, brands are launching premium-priced products requiring humans to refrigerate, freeze, dice, heat and/or mix-in additional ingredients like meat and vegetables.

More pet owners want to feed their dogs and cats fresh food like the stuff people eat. These pet "parents" want to do more than dump food from a can or a bag into a bowl. They want to

prepare a meal for their pet the way they would for a family member.

Companies are designing specifically for the "happy dance"—what the industry calls all the jumping, wagging, purring and pawing that hungry dogs and cats do when anticipating a meal. "That enjoyment is what the pet parent is looking for," says Evelia Davis, vice president of consumable merchandise for retailer PetSmart Inc.

A majority of pet owners now customize their pet's meals in some way, maybe adding bacon or some chopped vegetables, according to research from retailer Petco Animal Supplies Inc.

"We're seeing it as a shift," says John Sturm, vice president of food and treats. "Just putting the bowl on the ground and walking away isn't the humanized experience that pet parents are looking for."

Laura Twichell says the extra steps she takes to feed her black Labrador help stave off diges-

tive problems. Twice a day, Ms. Twichell, a stay-at-home mother in Cincinnati, slices a quarter-pound slab from a roll of refrigerated chicken-and-vegetable dog food. She mixes it with a half-cup of organic, salmon-based kibble, which she has soaked in water and then heated in the microwave, plus three tablespoons of canned pumpkin purée.

The concoction has been approved by her veterinarian, Ms. Twichell says. "It's a little more effort and money, but it's worth it in the end because she stays so healthy," she says.

Ms. Twichell uses the same knives and forks for her own meals and for Chili's food. It "doesn't smell bad or look bad, and it washes just like our food," she adds. She does keep the dog-food roll on its own shelf in the fridge.

"If you look at it quickly, Ms. Twichell says, "it looks like a package of pre-made cookie

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The Joy of Cooking for Dogs: Haddock and Cage-Free Turkey

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dough."

Once mainstream shoppers didn't give the ingredients in pet food much thought, Petco's Mr. Sturm says. But it became a consumer concern after a string of pet-food recalls, including one in 2007 that involved chemically-tainted wheat gluten and affected more than 150 brands.

After that, many pet owners began cooking for their dogs and cats, or offering them a raw diet. Experts say it's hard to achieve a balanced homemade diet, though, and eventually the expense and time involved turned a lot of pet owners off—and opened the door to nutrient-rich packaged products that require just a little preparation.

In March, Nestlé S.A.-owned Purina introduced Just Right, an on-line customizable brand that asks owners questions about their dog, including breed, age, activity level and skin condition, and then helps tailor food to the dog's individual needs.

"We built this brand based on the belief that the best nutrition is personalized," says Brian Lester, Purina's director of marketing for innovation. A cat-food version is in development.

U.S. sales of pet food in 2013 totaled an estimated \$21 billion, up 24% since 2008, according to market research firm Packaged Facts. The industry's growth through the recession points to the close bond consumers feel with pets. In a survey last year, 83% of consumers said they consider their pets part of the family.

Over the next 18 months, Whole Foods Market Inc. says it plans to expand its selection of organic and animal welfare-rated pet food so the aisle looks more like one of its human-food aisles. "We want people to know that the pet food they buy in our store would be something that they would be just as happy buying for themselves," says Dwight Richmond, global grocery purchasing co-



The Honest Kitchen's dog food with cage-free turkey; Sojourner Farms' Sojos dry mix for raw meat; Merrick Pet Care's 'French Country Café'; Freshpet refrigerated dis

ordinator at Whole Foods.

Mr. Richmond—who prefers the term pet “partners,” not “owners”—cooks for his two Jack Russell Terriers, often making salmon or beef for both the dogs and for his wife and himself. The dogs' meals are mixed with kibble.

Freshpet says its refrigerated meat rolls are cooked in small batches at lower temperatures without preservatives. With flavors for dogs like “grain-free salmon and ocean whitefish with spinach, cranberries and blueberries,” Freshpet compares its products to “a meal you'd cook for your family, using simple ingredients you recognize.”

Three years ago, the company introduced bags of bite-sized food as a more-convenient alternative to its rolls, which require slicing. The expectation was the bags would quickly

grow to half of sales. “But they are still only 20%,” says Mr. Morris, the company co-founder.

The Honest Kitchen Inc. says its food is made with “human food grade ingredients” but is intended for dogs and cats.

Lucy Postins, chief executive and founder, at first worried people wouldn't want the hassle of mixing warm water with dehydrated food mix. “But they embraced it,” she says. “They love the fact that they share with their pet this moment of anticipation.”

Ms. Postins says she personally tastes all Honest Kitchen's products and ingredients and now is focused on adding variety—because many owners worry their dogs and cats will get bored with repetition.

In July, duck will join the lineup including cage-free turkey, free-range

chicken and line-caught haddock. Honest Kitchen plans to add dry mixes—including blends of buckwheat, millet and quinoa, and vegetables like chard, pumpkin and peas—to which consumers can add cooked or raw meat.

Several pet-food makers say natural ingredients make their recipes appealing to humans. “The gross-out factor is gone with us,” says Mark Sapir, vice president of marketing for Merrick Pet Care Inc.

The company's canned “French Country Café” dog food evokes “the romance of France” and “will have your dog begging for more in a heavy French accent,” the company says. “Thanksgiving Day Dinner” has turkey, sweet potatoes, carrots, green beans and Granny Smith apples.

“When you open the can, it's really a human mealtime experience,”

Mr. Sapir says.

Not every trendy fruit and vegetable translates well for the pet p

“A lot of these natural ingredients have a good cachet about them, aren't necessarily what a dog or cat would have any interest in eating,” says Nancy Rawson, a director of research at AFB International, in St. Charles, Mo., which produces various coatings to the pet-food industry.

Behavioral analysis of dogs and cats helps Dr. Rawson determine whether flavors need to be adjusted. By scrutinizing how dogs and cats sniff, poke and eat their food, she gauges their enthusiasm or objection.

Having worked to balance sweet-flavored pet-food ingredients like blueberries and peas, Dr. Rawson is bracing for the day when she'll have to tackle the bitter taste of kale, she says.