



No Dilemma for These Omnivores

A meat-free diet may be the right choice for your canine friend

BY ARNA COHEN

As their admirers know all too well, dogs are less than discerning about what they ingest. Left to their own devices, many would be content trying to subsist on a steady diet of just-worn socks and garbage can spoils.

Fortunately for them, more discriminating mammals are available to help with meal planning. But the task has become increasingly challenging. Many products intended for canine nourishment depend on ingredients derived from factory farms that inflict suffering on other species. And the massive pet food recalls of 2007—spurred by melamine-tainted wheat gluten from China that sickened and killed the cats and dogs of unwitting consumers—left animal lovers across the nation wary of the supply chain. Subsequent recalls in the ensuing years have further eroded public trust.

In the wake of the scares, The HSUS responded swiftly, working with key legislators on a successful push for tighter controls; the Food and Drug Administration Amendments Act of 2007 included requirements to develop ingredient, processing, and labeling standards for pet food and to create an early-warning system for contaminated products.

While the FDA continues its work toward meeting this legislative mandate, The HSUS is now advancing the cause of pet nutrition a step further, with the introduction of a nutritionally balanced meat-free kibble for adult dogs. Made by Erro with certified organic grains and vegetables, Humane Choice is processed and tested at the site of the family-owned company in Uruguay. Ingredients are grown in the region and produced without the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, growth regulators, or genetically modified organisms.

“They’ve not strayed too far into the realm of industrialized agriculture,” says HSUS senior policy adviser Bernard Unti, who visited the facility, a modern operation in the midst of a pastoral landscape where farmers still employ more sustainable practices. “That’s one of the things that distinguishes them.”

Control of the manufacturing from start to finish minimizes the chance for the kind of contamination that has plagued other companies, which often outsource ingredients. Since most rely on the same pool of large-scale suppliers, contamination of one type of ingredient can affect multiple brands at once, says Betsy McFarland, senior director of The HSUS’s Companion Animals section. “Buying

the food from one place that we've personally visited—and having the ingredients come from local suppliers—affords us some confidence in our product,” she says.

While many people are seeking alternatives to foods that may harm their pets, some have an added motive: avoidance of foods that harm other animals and the environment. Most products on the mainstream market include ingredients from polluting factory farms that subject animals to intensive confinement, deprive them of basic needs such as fresh air and sunlight, and pump them with hormones and antibiotics to promote unnaturally fast growth.

The growing demand for more humane options is reflected in the success of V-Dog, a meatless food that, according to company owner Dave Middlesworth, has risen in sales by about 20 percent a year since its 2006 launch.

“We do a lot of tabling at veggie fairs, and we’re starting to table at green festivals in major cities,” says Middlesworth. “Many of these people are not vegetarians or vegans, but they want to start thinking about being greener and more eco-friendly. We’ve found a welcome reception at these events with people saying, ‘I’m not a vegan, but if it’s better for my dog, I’ll convert my dog.’”

In making such choices, pet owners are also bucking long-held beliefs that a meat-based regimen is the only option for maintaining a dog’s health—and finding that their dogs are actually thriving. A plant-based diet certainly hasn’t hurt Dave Whitten’s adopted dog, Dancer. “She doesn’t seem much different than when I got her—she’s not slowing down at all,” says the Laurel, Md., resident. “She does vertical leaps in the air—four, five, six times in a row. She wows people at the dog park. They can’t believe she’s 8. She’s got great skin and coat; lively, bright eyes. I don’t see any down side to it.”

Plant-based food can even help dogs with allergies or intolerance of animal proteins that can cause skin irritation and gastrointestinal problems. “Some of those dogs are quite miserable, licking and chewing at their paws incessantly,” says Armaiti May, a holistic vet in Los Angeles, Calif. “When you switch them to a diet they’re not allergic to, their skin clears up and they’re a lot healthier.”

Though some veterinarians prefer to recommend traditional meat-based meals, veterinary nutritionists have confirmed that a properly balanced vegetarian diet is equally healthy. “[Dogs] are remarkably adaptable to a wide range of ingredients, texture, and form in terms of what they will eat,” wrote a panel of experts in a 2006 report by the National Research Council, *Your Dog’s Nutritional Needs: A Science-Based Guide for Pet Owners*. “Though many dogs may prefer animal-based protein, they can thrive on a vegetarian diet.”

As omnivores, dogs in the wild don’t limit themselves to animal protein, regularly consuming plants, roots, berries, and grasses when prey isn’t readily available. Canine metabolism falls “somewhere between the cat, which we consider the definitive carnivore, if you will—[the] obligate carnivore—and something like the rat, which is the quintessential omnivore,” says Andrea Fascetti, a professor of nutrition at the University of California Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. Like carnivores, they can’t

manufacture vitamin D through their skin, Fascetti says, but dogs do have the omnivore’s ability to make their own taurine—an essential amino acid.

While plants and meat both provide protein, a critical balance of cereals, vegetables, and supplemental vitamins must be achieved to supply essential nutrients at the right levels. That’s why anyone interested in cooking up a homemade diet should work closely with a nutritionist. And those converting their pets to a new commercial mix should consult their veterinarians first, says Fascetti. “There’s a risk with any diet,” she says. “The vet knows the animal best and what problems different breeds and sizes are prone to. ... A vet can help make good choices and [decide] what follow-up might be important as a result of those choices.”

For many, the proof is in the kibble pudding. A vegetarian for 18 years, Pam Bacon of Washington, D.C., has long felt conflicted about feeding an animal-derived diet to her dog, Daysy, but believed it was the only healthy option for the 6-year-old mixed breed. “I do feel that animals are different; they’re designed differently and have different needs than we do,” she says. “I was hesitant to try a vegetarian food.”

Recently, however, Bacon researched the matter further and decided to make the switch, successfully treating both herself and her dog to the benefits of eating lower on the food chain.

► *Humane Choice is now available at Petco.com and select Whole Foods Markets. It will be introduced in select Petco stores this spring.*

