

Like a Whole Foods store for your dog? Pet food goes upscale

[Rob Nikolewski](#)

Some dog owners have long considered their pets to be part of the family.

And in growing numbers, canines are actually eating like they are.

In what has been part of a larger trend called the "humanization" of pets, more dog owners are feeding Fido a higher grade of more expensive chow that looks increasingly like the food humans eat.

A good example can be seen at the most recent store to open in the San Diego area catering to the specific dietary and nutritional needs of dogs.

At the [Del Mar](#) Highlands Town Center, employees at [JustFoodForDogs](#) could be mistaken for chefs or food preparers at a high-end restaurant as they slice fresh carrots and Brussels sprouts in a spotless aluminum kitchen, stocked with ovens within steps of a walk-in refrigerator filled with beef, fish, lamb and venison.

"I sort of accidentally found out what was in dog food, or what's allowed to be in dog food, and as an entrepreneur (and) dog lover ... I asked myself that question, is there a better way to do this?" said [Shawn Buckley, the company's founder](#). "We didn't want to have that highly processed food for our dogs."

Instead, JustFoodForDogs sells [bags of pre-prepared meals such as](#) tuna noodle casserole, turkey and whole wheat macaroni and, what Buckley said is his company's best seller, chicken and rice.

"We think the best thing to use is USDA-certified ingredients for humans, but nutritionally balanced for dogs," Buckley said. "So it's real food."

Buckley's storefront is not some quirky outlier. The Del Mar kitchen, which opens Saturday, is the 10th store to open since Buckley launched the business six years ago with a kitchen in Orange County that was quickly followed by another in West Hollywood.

“There is a huge demand out there,” Buckley said.

An increasing number of dog food companies have sprung up in recent years, promoting choices that reflect many of the same dietary concerns and demands of humans.

Want a gluten-free dog food? Or one without fillers such as corn, wheat or soy? You'll have no problem finding options like that, as well as others, at [The Naked Dog](#), a store specializing in healthy pet food with 11 locations in Southern California.

“We get (owners) from all walks of life,” said Jenna McLean, manager at the store in Rancho San Diego. “It's people who are really concerned about the welfare of their pet.”

Just as people spend more to eat more nutritious food for themselves and members of their families, a growing number of pet owners spend more on food for their dogs and cats that they consider to be of higher quality.

“We have customers in their 40s and 50s and they say, wow, this is nothing like it was 20 years ago,” said McLean.

And it's not just specialty stores.

Grocery stores offer more expensive choices by traditional pet food manufacturers such as Mars and Nestlé Purina. Shelves at pet care chains like Petco or PetSmart are stacked with higher end pet food of both the dry variety (also known as kibble) and assorted brands of wet food.

“We see the continued humanization of pets, people treating their pets like

family,” PetSmart’s president, David K. Lenhardt, [said during an earnings call in 2014](#). “We continue to feel very good about our ability to trade customers up.”

The financial numbers bear it out.

While the percentage of people owning pets increased by only about 3 percent between 2011 and 2016, the American Pet Product Association (APPA) projected a [25 percent rise in spending](#) for pets during the same time frame.

This year, the APPA has estimated spending for the entire pet industry to reach an [all-time high of \\$69.36 billion](#), with food making up the largest portion — \$29.69 billion, or 42.8 percent. Even during the recession years of 2008-2010, spending increased by \$2 billion to \$3 billion each year.

What’s going on?

Part of it, said [Roger A. Clemens, professor of pharmaceutical sciences at the USC School of Pharmacy](#), is the age-old connection that humans have with their dogs and cats.

In the 1970s, Clemens said he took part in a study showing how some people would place the food needs of their pets ahead of their own.

But a greater sensitivity has developed in recent years, which may parallel changing demographics.

Younger couples have delayed getting married and having children, the percentage of single households has nearly doubled since 1970 and the population of older Americans is on the rise, with an increasing number of retirees adopting pets as companions.

In addition, consumers read food labels more carefully.

“You want to make sure your companion animal is getting the safest, the best

food possible,” said Clemens, who has written about the humanization trend. “And now with a lot of push-back on dietary patterns for humans, they say, well we should probably take the same approach for our companion animals. And that’s why you’re seeing this shift.”

Researchers have also noticed a difference in attitudes about pets.

A recent survey from Morning Consult, a polling and market research company, and Fortune magazine showed that [76 percent of pet owners considered their animals to be “beloved members of the family,”](#) compared to 19 percent who said they are “well cared for, but still considered animals.”

There’s also been a debate over what’s considered a healthy diet for dogs.

Some recommend high-quality kibble while others are decidedly against dry food.

The raw food movement is home to its own level of controversy, with proponents saying [a diet consisting of](#) things like muscle meat, bones, livers and kidneys best [replicate a dog’s natural ancestral menu](#) while critics say raw foods may be difficult to digest and [run the risk of pathogens](#).

There’s also an entire discussion over whether a particular brand is truly “organic” or not.

Less traditional fare is generally more expensive.

Buckley said the owner a healthy 30-pound dog will spend about \$35 a more a month at JustFoodForDogs, compared to what would be spent on premium kibble. “But it’s less than many of the top raw brands or freeze-dried, dehydrated,” he said. “It’s a lot less expensive than people think.”

A 10-pound bag of lamb and brown rice at JustFoodForDogs is listed at \$56.95.

On the Petco website, a 30-pound bag of natural chicken recipe dry dog food from the Wellness brand can be [purchased for \\$53.99](#).

But regardless of which brand is bought, it's clear a large segment of consumers is willing to pay the price at specialty stores.

[According to the Susquehanna Financial Group](#), the share of natural products in the pet food market jumped from 11 percent in 2011 to 18 percent in 2015 while the mainstream pet food's market share dropped from 74 percent to 67 percent.

Peggy Chammas dropped by The Naked Dog earlier this week to pick up some food for River, a playful 15-week-old Australian Shepherd her family recently adopted.

“I have two cats at home too,” Chammas said, “and I always make sure not to give them food that has artificial colors and flavors, stuff like that. If they do get sick or something happens, it's staining my carpets. You realize if it's not good for the floors, it's probably not good for them either.”

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