

ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

Deconstructing “Dog Food”

Why Pets Crave Variety in their Diets as much as Humans Do



Alice Liberson is a Certified Veterinary Acupuncturist. She is also the owner of Dogma Catmantoo. She is shown here with her dog Satchel.



There is little question that dogs can survive eating only dried kibble. But these dogs probably do not have great energy, healthy coats, good disease resistance, and low incidence of chronic diseases, such as allergies, recurrent ear infections, immune mediated diseases, and cancer. Many people accept these as the “normal” condition of today’s pets, and bring out the antibiotics and steroids when there is a flare up. Still, many others have seen for themselves the huge difference that better nutrition makes, seeing changes such as renewed vigor, better breath, and even natural resistance to fleas.

You’ll find that the best foods come from companies you’ve never heard of.

All pet foods are not created equal. While you can be pretty sure cheap food will be of poor quality, you cannot be sure that expensive foods are of higher quality. “Premium” and “natural” are marketing slogans and bear no relation to the product’s contents. Healthy-sounding names or pictures of fruits and vegetables on the package reflect marketing, not nutrition. Some very recognizable, high priced so-called “premium brands” are anything but.

Fortunately, there are a number of good brands that use human quality raw ingredients. You’ll find that the best foods come from companies you’ve never heard of; companies that do not advertise in mainstream media and are not found in grocery or big box stores. Beware of anyone who tells you what the “best” food

By Alice Liberson

What would you think if your doctor said you should be eating “People Chow”? The doctor explained that People Chow was a complete and balanced food, with all the nutrients you or any person needed. And it was cheaper and more convenient than real food! People Chow should be eaten for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. You shouldn’t eat anything else, and if you did, it might cause a problem.

You probably would not follow this advice. What we choose to eat can reflect our nutritional, environmental, and other personal values. How and what we eat is also based on our available time, interests, and resources. We also choose food based on cravings. When we feel like we “need” an orange or ice cream, we can eat an orange or some ice cream. We like food and want to enjoy the tastes and textures of different foods. We know that fresh food is better than processed food. We know that every meal we eat is not perfectly balanced, but hope that overall we will come close to having a balanced diet. We may also take supplements to ensure we are getting everything we need.

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So how do we make food decisions for our dogs and other pets? Most people simply reach for a bag of dog kibble off the grocery store shelf. We have been programmed to believe that “dog food” is not just the best thing for our pets to eat; it’s the only thing they should eat. Variety and “people food” are not simply unnecessary; they are “bad” and possibly dangerous. Because we love our dogs and want to do what is best for them, we follow this advice.

Until relatively recently, dogs ate only “people food,” or what is generally known simply as food! After World War II, companies realized they could make use of waste products from the human food industry to make commercial pet food. Grain dealers found a market for moldy, contaminated products. Slaughterhouses were able to sell their “4-D” animals: those that are dead, dying, diseased, or disabled, and other animals unacceptable for human consumption. Many of these animals had been given drugs, including antibiotics, hormones, and even euthanasia solution. These raw materials were just the starting point. In much of commercial pet food production, high temperatures required for rendering, baking, and other processing denatures and depletes most of any whole food nutrients initially present, while, unfortunately, many drugs and other toxins can survive these conditions. Synthetic vitamins and minerals are then added to make the diet complete. Manufacturers acknowledged that fresh, real food was better for dogs, but had shown dogs would eat and could live on commercial food. The advantages of these new commercial foods were touted as cost and convenience.

A perfect storm of rapid growth in the agribusiness, food processing, and advertising industries following WWII contributed to the pet food industry gaining control of how we thought about our pet’s nutritional needs. Originally sold as cheap and convenient, we were now told this was the best and healthiest way to feed our dogs.

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is, because what may work best for one dog is not necessarily the best for another. Smaller independent pet stores or specialty health food stores are a good resource for information. Go online. Add some canned food, which is less heavily processed. Consider using dehydrated foods, which are dried at lower temperatures and preserve more whole nutrients. You might also try feeding some fresh vegetables — a lot of dogs love carrots! Or, you might use a combination of high quality pet food and fresh, whole foods. Switch up the commercial food, brands, and flavors. Variety is good for nutrition and makes our pets’ lives more interesting. You may want to add a supplement, preferably one that is whole food based. Use common sense. Remember that dogs should not be fed grapes, raisins, macadamia nuts, caffeine or chocolate. Dark, higher quality European chocolate is most dangerous.

Many people have decided to prepare their own dog food. If you do decide to be responsible for more of your dog’s diet, do a little research (I would not recommend making food for a puppy unless you are willing to do a lot of research). Remember that while every meal does not need to be balanced, the overall diet does. Use a good supplement. There are many books and websites dedicated to canine nutrition. I recommend starting with Dr. Susan Wynn (susanwynn.com) and Dr. Richard Pitcairn (drpitcairn.com).

Adding variety and fresh foods to your dog’s diet will bring better health to them and much joy to both of you. Remember to think about this the next time someone tells you to feed a family member nothing but “Chow.”

Alice Liberson, D.V.M., is a Certified Veterinary Acupuncturist. She is also the owner of Dogma Catmantoo, an Ann Arbor pet boutique that carries only top quality foods and treats. (Although she wants you to buy less and make more.) They also carry a wide range of U.S. made collars, toys, beds, and other supplies. Dogma Catmantoo is located at 208 N. 4th Avenue, just a few doors down from People’s Food Co-op. Find out more at www.dogmacatmantoo.com or call 734-929-0022.

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