

We are what we eat - and now so are our pets

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More people are feeding their animals in their own image, writes William Birnbauer.

IT SOUNDS silly, Sandy Anderson admits, but she believes her unique brand of vegan cat food — yes, meat-free food for carnivorous animals — creates softer and nicer pets.

"It makes them more gentle in their personality and their outlook," she says with a Cheshire cat grin. This is good news for mice because Mrs Anderson's customers have told her that their vegan-food-eating cats have stopped killing rodents, preferring simply to play with them.

Mrs Anderson, founder of Veganpet dog and cat food, hopes to capitalise on an increasing trend in which pet owners are shaping their animals' diets according to what they themselves eat or believe. In the US, for instance, Jewish pet owners can buy Evanger's Super Premium Gold Dinners, certified kosher by the Chicago Rabbinical Council. Then there's socially responsible Righteous Dog Food.

"Gourmet pet foods are increasingly being bought by households where the pet is treated more as a child than animal," says the Australian Companion Animal Council.

Australia has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world, even though dog and cat populations have declined recently. About 38 million dogs, cats, fish, birds and other pets live domesticated lives. Birds and fish make up 29 million of these, and there are 3.7 million dogs and 2.4 million cats.

The pet food industry, worth more than \$2 billion a year, is dominated by multinational companies. The key pet food makers include giants such as Mars Petcare and Nestle Purina.

Mrs Anderson's efforts are minuscule in comparison. Her company sells a limited number of products by word of mouth but she hopes vegetarian and vegan pet owners will take to her "cruelty-free" extruded soy and corn dishes which she says are human-quality, comply with high American nutritional standards and have passed scientific testing. However, Fat Cat, her rescued moggy, refused despite desperate exhortations during a lengthy photo session to eat the stuff. He didn't look all that hungry, anyway.

Mrs Anderson, a vegetarian whose business venture was motivated by a love of animals, does not dispute the obvious: cats are meat-eating animals. But she asks: "What is the harm if I can provide absolutely every other nutritional requirement from a vegan source and the cat grows and thrives and is very happy." Her customers' cats have eaten vegan food for five years, landing on their feet in recent blood tests.

Dogs, she says, can adapt to a vegan diet more easily than cats. Ned, a rescued stray dog owned by Mrs Anderson, similarly did not eat vegan food put before him. Oh well.

Mrs Anderson says we are living in the era of the boutique dog. Consider pugs, Pekingese and the basset hound. "These animals are dependent on us. You can't say to a poor old basset hound 'go out and

hunt and live on a raw carcass diet'. How cruel is that? We have made boutique dogs to fit in with our lifestyle. I think raw meat is cruel."

Which brings us to Tom Lonsdale, founder of Raw Meaty Bones — a movement dedicated to feeding dogs and cats, you guessed it, raw, meaty bones.

Dr Lonsdale refers to pet dogs as "modified wolves" and to cats as "modified desert predators". He advocates a raw meat and bone diet and says "junk pet food" is the cause of most pet animal ill-health. His book, *Raw Meaty Bones* begins: "If you own a dog or cat which you feed with processed food from the supermarket or corner store, you will probably find this book deeply disturbing."

Raw bones, he says, act as both food and medicine for domestic pets. Veganpet products are "shockers" and commercial canned and dry pet foods are behind periodontal disease, gastric problems, diarrhoea and allergies.

He came to this view — it resulted in his being forced out of the profession, he says — from his work as a vet. "The stench of stale blood, dung and pus emanating from the mouths of so many of my patients ... finally provoked this eruption of dissent."

Dr Lonsdale, who at one stage during the interview wondered if I was a spy for the pet-food industry, believes multinational pet food conglomerates are pulling the strings behind veterinary associations, vet schools and pet advisory services.

He buttresses his views on the beneficial qualities of a bone diet with a Gaia-like theory which takes anyone listening on a journey to the very beginnings of time and the role of anaerobic bacteria in regulating a world dominated by mammals. Carnivores live by the tooth and die by the tooth, he maintains. It's an evangelical rave, he concedes. It is perhaps no wonder that he fell out so badly with mainstream veterinary bodies.

With the right meaty bone diet "there is virtually no need for any vet services", he says. "If it doesn't clean its teeth, it's a sick, sorry carnivore. The way it cleans its teeth is by doing its job eating its food."

Dr Lonsdale, who stopped practising as a vet almost 10 years ago when facing charges before a disciplinary board, feeds Jed, his mixed breed dog, kangaroo tails, chicken carcasses, whole fish and whole rabbits. His website carries photos of dogs ripping into bloodied carcasses and ferrets with blood-speckled snouts: not recommended viewing for vegan food types.

Mrs Anderson, who has read his book, says rather politely: "I don't believe in what he says." She does concede that the downside of a vegan diet is dental problems in cats and dogs. To try to remedy this she is researching an oral spray that removes tartar from teeth.

The Pet Food Industry Association insists that products labelled as complete pet foods are all that animals need to meet their nutritional requirements. Executive manager John Aird quickly dismissed the claims made by his non-mainstream colleagues Dr Lonsdale and Mrs Anderson.

"The guy makes a lot of noise," he says of Dr Lonsdale, and "dogs and cats are carnivores ... they're built to eat meat" he says of Mrs Anderson.

Of course, the last word should go the grand poobah of all things pet, Dr Hugh Wirth. The RSPCA president says the "compromise attitude" of veterinary associations in Britain and Australia is that raw meaty bones should be fed to pets a minimum of three times a week for dental health.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2007/10/13/1191696236880.html>