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# A Sniff of Home Cooking for Dogs and Cats



Jennifer May for The New York Times

Sham, one of Barbara Laino's cats, with the fresh food Ms. Laino prepares for her at her organic farm in Warwick, N.Y.

By SAMANTHA STOREY  
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ORION'S appetizer was a giant carrot.

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Barbara Laino with her Alaskan malamute, Orion.

The Alaskan malamute, a 12-year-old who bounced into the kitchen like a puppy, followed that with a main course of ground raw chicken necks and livers, red cabbage, cucumbers, carrots, berries, garlic and parsley, formed into tidy patties. He licked it off a plate embellished in blue and green flowers.

Like nearly everything else Orion has eaten for most of his life, this meal was prepared for him by his owner, Barbara Laino. Her standard recipe, which will feed Orion along with the other dog and the three cats in her house for around 10 days, calls for grinding 40 pounds of pasture-raised chicken necks with another 20 pounds of chicken giblets. To this, she adds five pounds of carrots, a whole cabbage and several other fruits, all from the organic fields of [Midsummer Farm](#), Ms. Laino's farm in Warwick, N.Y. Finally, she blends the mix with herbs and supplements.

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The meal-size meat patties Ms. Laino makes for cats.

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Randy Klein of Bayside, Queens, holding Maggie, as Rachel looks on. She attributes their long life (both are 25) to the pet food she makes for them and sells at her store in Manhattan.

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Jennifer May for The New York Times

Ms. Laino's dog, Orion.

Ms. Laino, 39, demonstrated her technique at a workshop on homemade pet food that she gave in her kitchen in July. In addition to the workshop, which she has led regularly for the last four years, she also coaches human clients who want to eat seasonally and organically. And in fact, her philosophy for the two classes is not all that different. She says she wants for her pets what she wants for herself: a healthy [diet](#) of unprocessed organic foods.

"We know processed foods are wrong for us," Ms. Laino said, scratching behind Orion's ears as he licked his nose and paws clean. "It has to be wrong for them. If you can feed yourself healthily and your children, then you can feed your pets healthily, too. It really isn't that hard."

According to many veterinarians and pet food producers, it can, in fact, be quite hard to formulate an animal's diet at home. But Ms. Laino, the students in her workshop and others say they have reasons for taking on the challenge. Many of them say they made the switch out of desperation after their animals had lingering illnesses that resisted medicine and other remedies. With home-cooked meals, they say, those health problems cleared up.

But they also say it's hard to justify dumping a can of mystery meat for Bo while the rest of the family is sitting down to grass-fed osso buco with a side of biodynamic polenta. As people eat more sustainable seasonal produce and meat raised and butchered outside the industrial system, so do their pets. And as do-it-yourself hobbies like [canning](#), gardening and raising backyard chickens have taken off in recent years, grinding 40 pounds of pet food starts to look like another fun weekend project.

"The dog has always been a mirror of the human style of life," said [Cesar Millan](#), host of the television show "[The Dog Whisperer](#)."

"Organic has become a new fashion, a new style of living," he said. "And if the human becomes aware, if he eats organic, he wants everyone around him to be healthy, too, especially the one that is always there for you."

Mr. Millan was referring to the family hound, of course, but cat owners are also far from immune to the impulse.

Only a fraction of American pets are lucky enough to have a live-in cook. But millions have gone organic in recent years. Sales of organic pet food were \$84 million in 2009, and have grown more than tenfold since 2002, according to the [Organic Trade Association](#). The group reported a sales increase of 48 percent in 2008, the year after several brands of cat and dog food were recalled for [melamine](#) contamination.

"There is a general distrust in the food supply at the moment," said [Marion Nestle](#), a nutrition professor at [New York University](#) and the author of "[Feed Your Pet Right](#)." In addition, people who have chosen to eat food grown on small, sustainable nearby farms, she added, want to apply their dietary choices to their pets.

Rachael Scot Lingerfelt, a 25-year-old freelance writer in Bozeman, Mont., said the only meat she eats is either raised by an organic farmer or hunted by her boyfriend. When she began cooking for her beagle, Maddie-Sue, two years ago, she researched dogs' dietary needs before coming up with a recipe of brown rice, cooked ground beef or



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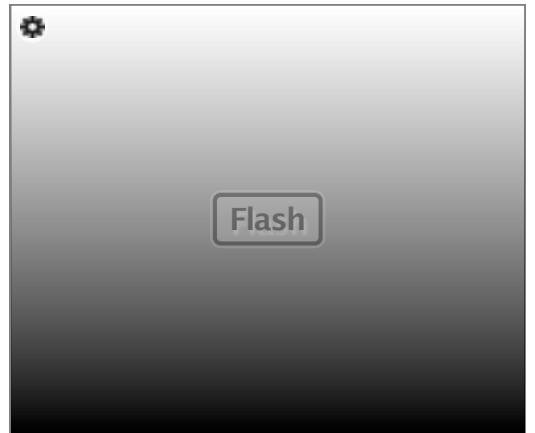
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chicken, peas, green beans, yams, dry milk and Tums tablets for [calcium](#). Most of the ingredients are organic. All are bought at a food co-op nearby.

“The aroma is a little interesting,” she said. “You usually wouldn’t combine those ingredients.”

But each batch lasts about three weeks and costs from \$10 to \$12, she said, around the same price as inexpensive commercial pet food.

Since the fall, the butcher shops [Marlow & Daughters](#) in Brooklyn and [Avedano’s Holly Park Market](#) in San Francisco have been selling pet food made from grass-fed meat raised on nearby pastures. Melanie Eisemann, an owner at Avedano’s, said the store’s custom mix of ground meats, organs, vegetables, garlic, eggs, parsley and yogurt sells for \$3.25 a pound. Avedano’s also reports a robust trade in marrow bones, many of them bought as snacks for dogs.

Ms. Eisemann said customers say that they like knowing the source of their meat, whether it will ultimately be served on the table or on the floor. Entering the pet food market has also been a boon for the business, since Avedano’s, like Marlow & Daughters, is a whole-animal butcher where no part of the beast goes to waste.

Joshua Applestone, an owner at [Fleisher’s](#), a butcher shop in Kingston, N.Y., specializing in nose-to-tail butchering and grass-fed meats, said that he started making patties of beef offal and whole ground chicken for about \$2 a pound for dogs and cats in 2004. At the time, he sold about 20 to 30 pounds a week. Now, the shop has to run 250 to 300 pounds through the grinder each week to keep up with demand.

“We had to get a designated freezer chest because it sells so well,” he said. He also said more customers were asking for cuts like chicken backs and organs to make pet food at home.

Many converts said their new food choices quickly resulted in healthier animals that no longer required endless trips to the vet. Charlene Smith, a project manager in publishing who attended Ms. Laino’s workshop last year, said that one of her two cats, Polly, had been on a steady diet of [antibiotics](#) to treat urinary tract problems before the switch to home cooking. Ms. Smith said that her other cat, Esther, “was angry most of the time” when she ate commercial food, and has a much better temperament now.

Some pet owners also credited better ingredients with helping their animals live longer. Randy Klein feeds her cats and dog a mix of cooked chicken or turkey, cauliflower, broccoli, carrots and zucchini, supplemented with [vitamins](#) and minerals. She sells this preparation for \$8.95 a pound at her pet store, [Whiskers](#), in Manhattan. She believes the diet is one reason two of her cats are 25 years old.

But Ms. Nestle said that she has heard the same claim from people who feed their pets commercial food. “It’s hard to sort out because there is no research on it,” she said.

Manufacturers of store-bought pet food are skeptical of the do-it-yourself ethos. Nancy K. Cook, the vice president at the [Pet Food Institute](#), a trade association for commercial pet food makers, cautions pet owners that it is hard to create a [balanced diet](#) at home, since dogs and cats have specific nutritional requirements.

“When you open a bag or can or box of pet food, you know that every kibble or food in the can is going to be formulated to meet the nutritional needs of the animals according to the feeding directions on the bag,” she said.

[Joseph J. Wakshlag](#), a clinical nutritionist at the [Baker Institute for Animal Health at Cornell University](#), said that if pets are not fed the correct balance of proteins, fats, minerals and vitamins, they can experience several health disorders, including [anemia](#), broken bones and loss of teeth from lack of calcium.

[Korinn Saker](#), a clinical nutritionist at the [College of Veterinary Medicine at North](#)

[Carolina State University](#), who treats animals at the school's teaching hospital, said she was not against people cooking for their pets. In fact, she said she prescribes such diets for some of the animals she treats. But she cautioned that if it was not done correctly, the consequences could be harmful.

She has seen several dogs with adverse effects from unbalanced homemade pet food diets, including a German shepherd puppy "who was walking on its elbows because it had no strength in its bones," she said. The dog, it turned out, was not getting enough calcium.

Dr. Saker, asked to analyze the recipe from Ms. Laino's workshop, found that it was lacking in a number of nutrients recommended by the [Association of American Feed Control Officials](#).

Ms. Laino said she rejects the standards recommended by the feed association, and suggested that her recipe might be richer in certain nutrients because the ingredients are organic. "Homemade pet food is not about recreating the same thing you could get in a high-quality can of premium organic dog food," Ms. Laino said. "It is about providing your animals with variety and the full gamut of nutrients, antioxidants, micronutrients and a variety of types of fat, et cetera."

Dr. Wakshlag, who feeds his English mastiff, his Stabyhound, his seven Alaskan sled dogs and his two domestic short hairs various commercial foods, said that any diet must meet the caloric requirements of the individual animal, which varies according to weight. And there are differences in dietary requirements for cats and dogs.

Though Dr. Wakshlag said that protein should come from animal meat, some pet owners apply their personal dietary choices to their pet's food.

Anastasia St. John, a [vegan](#) in Ithaca, N.Y., who works as an administrative manager, makes vegan food for Hazel, a 15-year-old greyhound, and Dixie, a 16-year-old beagle.

"The important thing for me is feeling good about giving my dogs the best thing I can," said Ms. St. John, 38. "And it's in line with my values, as well as being healthy."

She feeds a mix of lentils, rice, kale, carrots, apples, oats, [tofu](#), vegetable oil, a textured vegetable protein (a soy-based dehydrated product used as a meat substitute) and mineral and vitamin supplements. The dogs, fed on this diet since 1999, appear to be thriving.

"No one would think they are as old as they are," she said. "The beagle — we call her the Tank because she is so energetic."

With dogs, veganism may be a fairly new occurrence. But the care and attention of animal lovers like Ms. St. John have been going on for ages.

"One of the ingredients missing from pet food is the love and energy you put in by cooking it," said Mr. Millan, the television host. "It's that essence that you can't purchase anywhere in the world."

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