

Consumer Interest In Grain-Free Pet Food Grows

Contributed by Euromonitor International

Its proponents argue that it is the most natural and healthy diet for dogs and cats, and a growing number of owners, particularly in the US, seem to agree that grain-free pet food is the way to go.

What is the science behind these products and how are grain-free brands connecting with consumers?

The case for grain-free

As pets have become increasingly humanised in recent years (almost becoming ersatz children in some cases), owners have become increasingly concerned about the quality of their pets' diets, leading to rising interest in grain-free offerings. According to its critics, grain is merely a "filler" in pet food that has little real nutritional benefit.

According to the website petmd.com,

"Although now 'domesticated', our pets have not evolved ruminants along their digestive tracts in order to ferment cellulose and other plant material, nor have their pancreases evolved a way to secrete cellulase to split the cellulose into glucose molecules, nor have dogs and cats become efficient at digesting, assimilating and utilising plant material as a source of high quality protein".

It adds that herbivores have "billions of microorganisms along their multi-stomached and lengthy gastrointestinal tracts" that produce many of the amino acids they require. However, it maintains that dogs and cats, "with their relatively short and simple gastrointestinal tracts", require amino acids (in the form of larger protein molecules) to be present in sufficient diversity in ingested food.

It also notes that "some plant material such as rice, soybean meal and corn have some, although limited, usefulness in the meat eater's diet" and that "corn, wheat, soy, rice and barley are not bad or harmful to dogs and cats... [they] are simply not good choices". However, others claim that high grain content in dog food can cause allergies as well as contribute to obesity.

Rise of the blogosphere influences owners

This trend is particularly marked in the US where many consumers were extremely troubled by the 2007 pet food recall, which profoundly upset their confidence in established brands and their manufacturers, which some pet owners now refer to pejoratively as "big pet food". They regularly and vocally air their opinions on websites like truthaboutpetfood.com, in addition to blogs and social media like Facebook and Twitter.

Sherry Shaffer, owner of Fur-Baby Boutique in Milford, Delaware, maintains that consumers are extending their own increasing awareness of health and wellness issues to their pets. According to Eric Klees, Manager of Concord Pet Foods and Supplies in People's Plaza in nearby Newark, Delaware, "There is much more awareness on the part of the public about what is really good for their pets. People today are doing their research and they are looking for specialised foods for everything from grain-free to foods for sensitive stomachs and skin". According to Tracey Hatch, co-founder of Portland, Oregon-based Radagast Pet Food, which makes grain-free cat food, "A lot of people get the 'ah-ha' when they realise their cats are out hunting mice and birds".

This surge in demand for raw pet food has even resulted in a surge in illegal sales of raw wild game online, according to Florida wildlife investigators. In 2010, its first year of operations, Florida Fish and Wildlife's Internet Crimes Unit logged 177 arrests and 92 warnings for cases involving the illegal buying or selling of wildlife or raw game meat online, some of it for pets.

The call of the wild

A variety of pet food manufacturers are now working to meet the needs of owners anxious for their pets to go grain-free. Much of the marketing behind grain-free pet food attempts to play up the naturalness and healthiness of a meat-only diet for dogs and cats, with the acronym BARF (biologically appropriate raw food) frequently used. Fremont, Nebraska-based Evo uses the tagline "Feed the carnivore within. Get the meat. Not the Grain". According to the company's website, the product "is formulated among the highest protein and lowest carbs of grain-free dog and cat food to maintain a strong, lean body, without sacrificing energy levels. Just as nature intended".

Similarly, Edmonton, Alberta-based Canadian company Champion Petfoods styles its Orijen brand as "biologically appropriate", using the tagline "Nourish as nature intended". It uses such "fresh regional ingredients" as "free-run poultry, wild-caught fish and free-range red meat" that are "approved 'fit for human consumption' by the Government of Canada". It is also anxious to differentiate itself from so-called "big pet food". According to its website, "In today's world of multinational and marketing companies (that sell but don't make their own foods), we're proud to stand apart as an independent and authentic pet food maker". It further states that "We don't buy the bulk commodity ingredients found in conventional pet foods".

Meanwhile, Taste of the Wild (a play on the title of Jack London's novel *The Call of the Wild* about the adventures of an Alaskan wolf), a subsidiary of Meta, Missouri-based Diamond Pet Foods, also claims to utilise "unique protein sources" such as bison, duck, quail, venison, turkey and trout, as well as such fruits and vegetables as blueberries, tomatoes and sweet potatoes. The brand launched puppy formulas during late 2011 and is planning to launch wet products in cans in the near future.

New Zealand manufacturer makes the case for rice

However, not all natural pet food producers completely eschew cereals. According to Christchurch-based K9, a manufacturer of all-natural dog food, its products "most closely resemble the way animals used to feed in the wild. That is, at the kill, the first part that is consumed is the paunch contents, which have been slowly 'cooked' in the gastric juices, and the liver. The different products typically consist of pure meat, farm fresh vegetables, rice, bran, garlic, bonemeal, vitamins and minerals";

It adds that "Domesticated animals today are at a tremendous disadvantage as they have almost no choice regarding what they eat. They do not roam vast areas to find their favourite food as they used to and are reliant upon what their owner feeds them. It is our responsibility as pet owners to work out what their eating patterns should be and then adapt to what is available";

In a similar vein, a super-premium, all-natural low-grain dog food was launched by Dynamite Specialty Products during late 2011. Its Super Premium Dog Food contains neither corn nor wheat and the company "has improved the quality of the vitamin and mineral pack in the food";, according to Jos Zamzow, Chief Operating Officer at Dynamite. The company is also planning to launch a grain-free product during 2012.

From one extreme to the other

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a number of vegan pet foods have been launched. However, these have proven to be controversial. In the Australian state of Queensland, Vegan (made by the company of the same name) is derived from entirely non-dairy and non-meat sources and is sold at the ethical alternative pet food store Complete Pet Company in suburban Brisbane. It lists rice and corn among its ingredients.

According to owner Jenny Golsby, vegan and vegetarian pet foods are becoming more popular as pet owners seek out ethical alternatives to mainstream products. In the US, talk show host Ellen DeGeneres, the owner of pet food brand Halo, Purely for Pets, and her wife, actress Portia de Rossi, are also said to be working on the creation of a range of vegan pet food.

However, David Neck, President of the Australian Small Animal Veterinary Association, has warned against feeding dogs and cats an exclusively non-meat and non-dairy diet. He said, "It really is a concept I struggle to come to terms with, that you would take what is the natural diet of such an animal and alter it in such a radical way. I can tell you from my experience with cats and dogs they don't have any ethics about where their food source is derived from. If a vegan pet owner is making that decision on behalf of a pet that they own, they should perhaps consider the reasons they have that pet";

Interest in grain-free now extends well beyond the US

The debate regarding the efficacy and healthfulness of grain as an ingredient in dog and cat food is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. However, it is clear that interest in grain-free pet food has spread well beyond the US. Such brands as Taste of the Wild, Orijen and K9 are widely exported to markets as varied as the UK, Portugal, Japan and Malaysia. Meanwhile, the Middle East's first all-natural pet food brand, Tails, was launched at the Bahrain Business Incubator Centre in early 2012.

All of its ingredients (meat, fruit and vegetables) are human grade and sourced locally, according to the company. At the same time, grain-free is unlikely to become anything more than a niche product (albeit quite a lucrative one), with its appeal limited to a relatively small number of affluent and anthropomorphic owners.

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