

Cuisine de Critters

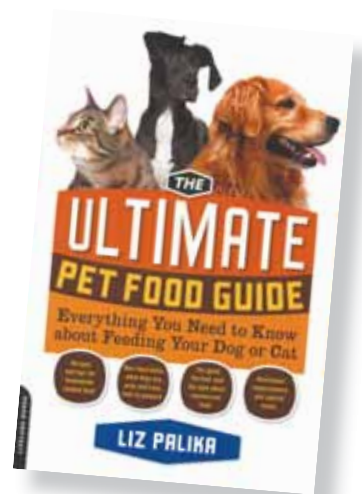

By Phil Tripp

It's confusing for people who want to feed their pets the best choices available when there is so much conflicting information about raw food versus cooked food, bones as a part of the diet of cats, dogs and even ferrets (see our next article in this issue) as well as meat-based versus grain-based versus vegan diets. To top it all off, the Internet offers far too many uninformed and unbalanced opinions dressed as pure facts. And there is a broad range of books on the subject of how best to feed pets ranging from dogs to birds and beyond. We've covered quite a few of these in the past in both our Pet Reads book reviews as well as our articles on pet nutrition.

The pet food tragedy of Menu Foods in North America and previous contamination problems of Diamond Foods which led to recalls of hundreds of brands (see our previous issues 10-14) have not only created a greater market for organic, holistic and natural superpremium brands, it's also caused people to evaluate what they feed their pets and how to make their pet foods better quality. It's created a whole new market for pet food books, pet cookbooks and books on pet nutrition as consumers seek options other than solely relying on commercial pet food.

In the past couple of months, we've received close to half a dozen books on the subject and culled the more fanatical ones to concentrate on a couple that are more current and less controversial than their scarier counterparts with titles like "Food Pets Die for: Shocking Facts About Pet Food". Another one, "The Natural Pet Food Cookbook: Healthful Recipes for Dogs and Cats", has a lot of recipes that include corn, a less than ideally digestible grain for dogs and cats. And just as is the case with humans, there are already bizarre diet books for pets hitting the market.

We found "The Ultimate Pet Food Guide: Everything You Need to Know About Feeding Your Dog or Cat" balanced, informative and easy to digest. Veteran dog trainer, behaviorist, and author Liz Palika focuses on nutritional needs and covers every type of feeding, including controversial raw diets, homemade cooked food, and commercial foods. Palika also addresses introducing new foods; what "human foods" pets shouldn't eat; free-feeding; responsibility for food safety; where ingredients come from; and red flags in ingredients. Included are over fifty veterinarian- and

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pet-nutritionist-approved recipes and diets tailored to special-needs pets, such as puppies/kittens and pregnant, older, overweight and/or more sedentary animals.

Understanding the nutritional needs of dogs is not obvious to most consumers - for example, it turns out that there is "good" kibble and "bad" kibble. Good kibble tries to mimic what dogs and wolves evolved to eat in the wild being mostly protein, while bad kibble mostly consists of grains and whatever meat by-products that major pet food conglomerates can put together at a cheap price. As another example, ground corn (the first ingredient in some dog foods) includes the entire ear of corn - not just the corn kernels, but also the corn cob, all ground up together.

Palika demystifies ingredients as she translates what can be said by law into what is fact. What are by-products? What's the difference between meat and meat meal; what purposes do artificial colours play and are pet foods, like human junk food, loaded with sugar, salt, preservatives and other questionable ingredients?

She acknowledges the super premium foods place in a pet diet but also shows how to augment it with home-cooked meals and other nutrients. The industry over the past few decades that introduced high-quality dry and canned foods as well as fresh and frozen alternatives has created a new market and new products that are high-priced, but also healthier and higher yield than the older, fading brands that were made as cheaply as possible with grain proteins and filler rather than meat based products.

There is easy to understand information on the pros and cons of raw food diets as well as supplements. Tables based on weight of pet vs activity levels and calorie needs are clearly laid out. Food values of a broad range of meats, vegetables and others are easily understood.

"Pet Food Nation: The Smart, Easy, and Healthy Way to Feed Your Pet Now" is written by Joan Weiskopf, a Veterinary Clinical Nutritionist and borrows its name from the "Fast Food Nation" book and film for effect.

She advocates breaking away from reliance on the commercial pet foods and offers the solution: Stop feeding your pet from a bag or a can—gradually, and then permanently. Her theory is to return to the way our ancestors fed their cherished pets since the dawn of time, with a variety of fresh and cooked foods from our homes.

"Pet Food Nation" features how to transition from commercial food to a healthier diet with the six signs of dietary problems with your pet. She explains why homemade food is better for your pet, what the best diet for an older pet should be, what to feed your breed with basic easy recipes for dogs and cats. While her preference is to feed homemade, Weiskopf recognizes that won't work for everyone. With that in mind, she goes into how to read a pet food label - what the placement of ingredients means, what those ingredients actually are, and what terms like lite, low-calorie, and lean actually mean.

There's a seven-page history of the pet food industry and info on recent events. It goes into sound nutrition, balanced diet essentials, dos and don'ts of table scraps. She also shows why raw food diets failed in many cases. Recipes are based on breeds for both dogs and cats for home cooking with a lot of information on nutrient mixes, vitamins, minerals and doing it right. All in all, not as inflammatory as the title suggests and a bit lighter than the first book.

But there's an investigative book on its way to be released in September and though we've not read it, the acclaimed author Marion Nestle previously had a hit with "Food Politics" about human food issues.

"Pet Food Politics: The Chihuahua in the Coal Mine" tells the gripping story of how, in early 2007, a few telephone calls about sick cats set off the largest recall of consumer products in U.S. history and an international crisis over the safety of imported goods ranging from food to toothpaste, tires, and toys. Nestle follows the trail of tainted pet food ingredients back to their source in China and along the supply chain to their introduction into feed for pigs, chickens, and fish in the United States, Canada, and other countries throughout the world.

What begins as a problem "merely" for cats and dogs soon becomes an issue of tremendous concern to everyone. Nestle uncovers unexpected connections among the food supplies for pets, farm animals, and people and identifies glaring gaps in the global oversight of food safety.

Should be a gripping read. We'll report on it in the next issue.

Now for some home-cooked goodness with a recipe for a health-food meat loaf. Sort of the beast of both worlds.



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- ½ kilo firm tofu
- 1 cup cooked brown rice
- 1 cup cooked calf's liver, finely chopped
- 1 cup dry wholemeal or whole grain breadcrumbs
- 2 free range eggs
- 1 small cabbage finely chopped
- 2 tbs tamari soy sauce
- ½ tsp chopped fresh thyme
- ½ tsp chopped fresh sage
- 1 tbs melted butter

Heat oven to 180 degrees. Lightly grease a loaf pan or two with butter. Wash and dry tofu and break up into a large bowl. Mix all ingredients together, adding water if the mix becomes too dry. Place in loaf pan and bake for 45-55 minutes. Serve warm and allow leftover to cool. Refrigerate and serve within two days. Don't freeze.



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