

Gourmet Goddesses



Queens of the Pet Food Chain

Photo by Animax

Like you, I've been buying pet treats since I first had a dog, and in the past decade I've veered away from highly processed, hugely marketed convenience foods for pets just the same as I've chosen to eat healthier. You've probably made some of the same decisions being an Urban Animal reader—seeking out those healthy food options for your fur child at the same time that you steer away from the pet junk food treats that are epitomised by Schmackos and other supermarket 'fast foods' that contain lots of artificial colours, flavours, preservatives, salt, sugar and other questionable ingredients.

So, like me, you've probably encountered some of the women of this article at markets, council pet days, the recent BarktoberFest event in Newtown or at the pet stores and health food shops that happily sell their wholesome, independent products. In just the past four years that I've published Urban Animal and written about pet foods, I've seen close to 20 solo operators or partners come into the market with a grand idea that they could make treats or fresh food products and turn a profit. I've seen most of them exit quickly after burning out due to the workload, going broke doing deliveries or badly calculating their food costs. Others saw their stock go off or get infested with weevils, or they've had to put products on consignment in stores that would not pay for them up front.

It's not an easy task to run a business, much less one that deals in portion-controlled, perishable, often upmarket foods. Your dog mates marvel over those lovely little treats you make for your dog and tell you they're better than anything they've bought in a store, so you're encouraged you to live your dream as a dog cookie-cutter. But it can quickly turn into a nightmare. That packet of liver, bag of wholegrain flour and bunch of parsley is nothing to whip into a small batch of dough. It's when you are up to your elbows in 20 kilos of cold liver in a 45-degree home kitchen, having to buy flour by the pallet and parsley by the case, without professional tools or proper storage and using rudimentary packaging, that the dream turns into terror.

I didn't want to dwell on those failed businesses I've seen come and go, so the five women I decided to profile are all inspirational, have suffered for their art and craft and have vastly different products yet similar talents. Above all, they share a dedication, enthusiasm, dogged determination and great sense of humour, to which they owe their success. Oh, and a survivor instinct as well as maybe a bit of luck or a guardian angel.



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Luciana Callaghan of Sassy Treats

The most visible and longest-lived in dog biscuit years is Luciana Callaghan, who conceived Sassy Treats in 2001 and started with a range of delights in early 2002. Not content to rely on treats as a sole line, she created the Main Course range of prepared fresh and frozen food packs and set up a delivery service. In the four years I've seen her on the pet biz scene, she's done countless council pet days, is a hit at the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras' Doggywood event, has endured her share of Pet Expos and also runs the dog events at the Newtown Festival.

Her pet partners are Chandos the horse and Smudge the dog, who both turned 14 in October, as well as Dude, the cat whose fourth birthday also falls in the same month. She also has a human food side with the recent opening of her Café Butch in Newtown, on Church Street behind Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

She started as do many in this craft because of a problem with her own dog. "After having a terrible time with Smudge's coat, behaviour and general wellbeing, and being told the only thing for it was to keep her on cortisone as she appeared to be allergic to everything, I decided to investigate whether the links between pet food nutrition and her general health issues were intertwined. After examining the leading dog treat/food products I found most were high in sugar and salt and preservatives. They also contained questionable ingredients."

"With a hospitality background and good understanding of food, I set about creating recipes for dogs, cats and horses that were delicious, nutritionally balanced and had variety. Let's face it, left to their own devices, dogs will scavenge a wide variety of foods. Eating the same thing every day is not a holistic or natural way to eat and if we ate the same thing every day we wouldn't be very interested in our food either."

Though she is a tireless talker and has more energy than a pack of border collies, it's been a tough row to hoe. "So hard... in fact, if I had known it would be this hard, I'm not sure I would have thought I was determined enough to keep going. When I started Sassy Treats, I had a full-time cafe job, was getting back on my feet after a life 'fall'. As the hours for research, marketing and sales increased, I found myself needing to spend more time on Sassy Treats.

"Unfortunately, with these areas came extra costs. Catering became my every-spare-moment job--usually a couple of double shifts during the week, and every Saturday, plus I started up a permanent 3-day-a-week night job in a restaurant, ensuring I had Sundays free to promote the product at council awareness days.

"A year and a half after I started Sassy Treats, I'd stopped consuming most products--clothes, makeup, movies, CDs, going out ... and was left with the daily takeaway coffee I enjoyed whilst walking Smudge in the morning. As I scrounged around for the \$3 and came up with \$2.20, I remember bursting into tears, thinking 'when is this going to end! I do nothing, spend nothing and eat sleep Sassy Treats- how long is this going to take! I cannot work harder, or save more. If no one wants this--why am I doing it?'"

"But then someone would be kind or something would happen- a thank you from someone who was advised by the vet there was nothing to do but put her dog down as she was so sensitive to food, her dog wouldn't live passed 7- her dog is now 10 and doing fine. My website is full of the reasons I keep doing this.

"There are so many people who have stuck by me and Sassy Treats. I still feed my first clients. I have even had friends offer loans to stave off the creditors. How can you give up when no one else will!" she laughs in her raucous way.

When asked to break down her work week, she laughs again. "Cooking, freezing, baking, bookkeeping, sourcing supplies, delivery... it's a constant round every day and many nights. But now the focus is more seasonal. For example, I spend more time on research and development in January than any other month, but spend more time on trade selling in October and November. My time off is between Christmas and New Year when I get out of town with the furkids."



Luciana Callaghan photo by Animax



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Carmen Nichol & daughter Lily

Carmen Nichol of Four Paws

Carmen Nichol has faced the same challenges as Luciana, but has had to overcome different hardships on her way to establishing her own business, Four Paws Bakery. Her start was prompted by an ailing dog too.

"I've been making treats for the last dozen years or so, more as a hobby, but it wasn't until Whiskey our Jack Russell was diagnosed with an enlarged heart that I seriously started researching what was in pet products and what I could do to make sure he was receiving the best possible food and treats.

"After many conversations with our vet to confirm my information, I created a selection of wonderful treats Whiskey loved. Family and friends encouraged me to take the next step and on April Fools Day 2005, Four Paws Bakery became a reality. The response for our biscuits has been so overwhelming. Our customers are so supportive and loyal. It's fantastic!

"In the beginning it was all very easy but as the demand for our treats grew the real work began. Earlier this year I received a very intimidating letter from a Victorian lawyer, which knocked the wind out of my sails. Unknowingly, I used a word, 'snaps' - which is a common name for a cookie in the US where I hail from - as part of a flavour name for one of my four types of cookies.

"The lawyer's client had registered a trademark on the use of snaps in pet food, unknown to me. The letter I received was several pages and I also got a very stressful, demanding call. This alone would be enough to shake anyone up, but two weeks prior to this Whiskey had died and my daughter and I were so sad and missing him very much.

"I spoke to a friend in the entertainment industry who is very familiar with trademark and copyright law and asked his advice. He immediately put my mind at ease and interceded on my behalf by calling the lawyer and getting him to 'call off the dogs', suggesting that if the media got a hold of the story of the single mum and bub grieving over their dog getting served... you get the picture. Without his guidance and help that day, I think Four Paws Bakery may have come to an end."

As a single parent, it's not easy juggling a six-year-old and a business, but she's not afraid to put in the hours and keeps a lot of balls in the air. "Baking 3-5 days a week, 6-8 hours a day - that's 18-24 hours a week. So about 50% of my time is food prep and baking.

"Bookkeeping takes 2-3 hours (5%), receiving and picking up supplies 2-4 hours (5%), deliveries 3-5 hours (5%), answering emails and web searching to keep up-to-date with new products, 5-10 hours (15%), and then there are the markets. You could do one of these every day of the week if you wanted to. I like to do a few of these a month, so that's another 10-plus hours a week (15%). It's not unusual to spend 50-60 hours a week on the business and sometimes more. I love what I'm doing, so most of it doesn't feel like it's work."

She and daughter Lily have had time since Whiskey's passing and are now ready to have a companion. "This is the first time in my life I haven't had a pet. Since Lily was brought home from the hospital as a baby we've had dogs and cats running through our house. My grandparents had a farm and we all had ponies and ducks to ride and play with as children. Lily and I are very excited about bringing home a new dog. We can't wait. We're going overseas for Christmas, so we've decided that when we return in the new year we'll be going to Monika's Doggie Rescue to find a new member for our family. Our only problem is to choose just one. You can't help but to fall in love with them all."

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Naoko Okamoto photo by Animax

Naoko Okamoto of Chew Chew

Naoko Okamoto of Chew Chew, like Carmen and Luciana, is a ball of fire and enthusiasm. But she's different because she is Japanese and has overcome the language barrier and cultural differences to carve a niche with treats, prepared foods and a range of health additives from Japanese sources.

"I started my pet food business in mid-2006. Before that, I did office work for over seven years, and I have always wanted to do something I like. After I got my baby dog Douglas - a Shihtzu/Cavalier King Charles Spaniel cross that turned three in October - I noticed I love cooking and pets. So I considered that business opportunity. I noticed many pets here in Australia have allergic and health issues, so I decided to apply Japanese health principles into making pet food by using natural ingredients and organic products. The recipes are made under the supervision of an Australian veterinarian.

"I really love this work every day, as this is what I want to spend my life for the things I like - cooking and helping the pets. I know how these pets are supporting and loving their owners, and they deserve to receive a better treatment and joy in return.

"The hardest part for me as a small pet food business is that I have to organize everything including advertising, raw ingredients ordering, food preparation and delivery. There are so many things need to be done every day and mistakes can be costly. Sometimes I am just so exhausted physically and mentally--especially when the business just started, it was so hard for me to cope sometimes. Also the language problem has been something I have struggled to overcome, having to explain so much what my product is about.

"But after our customers start to use our products for their pets, they are so surprised our pet food and nutrition supplements really work so well, they can see their pets with a much improved health. All the positive feedback from our customers has given me lots of energy to stand up again."

She needs it. Her business is a 60-hour-a-week routine. Two days are taken in baking the Chew Chew biscuit range, two to three days are required for cooking her fresh food products, and she does markets Wednesday and Saturday. Add to that the making of her supplements range, mixing ingredients imported from Japan and the rest of the time is taken in deliveries.

Sharyn Hall of Dog-e Treats

Operating from Queensland but with a website and many retail clients in the Sydney region, Sharyn Hall started thinking about starting a dog treat business about seven years ago.

"Originally I said to my husband, 'You know, we (the royal we) should set up a website selling dog treats.' I thought it would be fun and I could do it with my hands tied behind my back, maybe 2-3 days a week! Ha! Try six days a week and many disturbed sleeps! I'm glad my husband works from home to help with the odd small crisis. Sunday is off-limits though... papers, pasta lunch and red wine, afternoon snooze. etc!"



Sharyn Hall

"The 'thinking about it' started in 2002 when I wanted healthy treats for our two German Shepherds. Pigs' ears and snouts were OK but the mass-produced biscuits and chemical concoctions (read Schm*##s) were just awful. I wanted different products that were actually good for our dogs...maybe other pet owners wanted quality treats too... maybe we should start a business..."

"A year of 'yes'/'no' followed. How hard could it be to get a range of our own together? Did we really want to commit the money, time and effort? Did I need the challenge? The word challenge is like red rag to a bull in our house; 'yes' won! And so began the year of planning, sourcing and organising, as well as one of the most frustrating times of my life!

"Online retail was the way for us so to reach more people with limited retail opportunity--from the woman of the outback station to the time-poor professional in the city. The website had to be friendly, easy to use and whimsical-pretty! Our service needed to be better than good with all the extras like ribbons and dogalised cards! And the products had to be best-quality Australian, presented in gorgeous packaging that the humans could feel happy buying/giving. Most of all, the dogs had to LOVE them!"

Dog-e-treats.com went live November 2004. In 2007 they launched wholesale dog-e-treats through vets, boutique pet shops, groomers and health shops.

"Initially everyone thought I was stupid for worrying about packaging for dogs when so many pet treats were 'chucked' into a plastic bag or displayed in the open - forget food hygiene for animals! Designing packaging and the best way to preserve freshness took as much time as establishing treats. Many times - as more money went out the door - I thought, 'Why worry? No-one really cares what dog treats look like;' then the product came together and I showed the first dog-parents, vet and groomer. They loved the whole concept!

"We concentrated on low-allergy treats like roo and fish - dried fish was unusual when we started and a hard sell, but now we have about 10 different types of sea-food alone! I make our small range of Pawtisserie from free-range eggs, organic peanut butter and carob, and honey harvested from our own rural property."

Her pet hate is when a retailer tells her their product is cheaper and that their clients don't care that it is often imported, irradiated, deep-fried and inferior.

Her pet love is every time she's told someone's dog will only eat her treats or knows when a parcel is from them and gets so excited... One Rotty has even been known to crash-tackle his owner! As for her own fur kids, she's got a few.

"We have only one dog now, my precious Floyd, who is a very beautiful, very big German Shepherd with eyes of melted toffee! We also have two grandpuppies-- Charlie, a German Shepherd, and Monte, an extremely spoiled longhaired Dachshund. Monte has a little kitten-sister, a Rag Doll called Cotton Tiger. On October 7 our first grandchild arrived, so now Charlie has a baby brother!"

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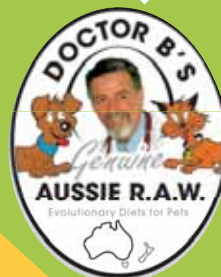
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Lesley Foord of Dogon Ezy

Lesley Foord of Dogon Ezy is fortunate to have a distributor in Dr. Neils, which many pet treat companies have trouble obtaining, but it was an uphill battle for this north coast powerhouse.

"The inspiration behind Dogon Ezy in 2003 was 'Pablo the Wonderdog' whom we adopted from the local council pound. He was an eight-month-old ridgeback, mastiff, staffy X on death row. When Pablo was about 5 years old he began having seizures which we discovered was epilepsy. I began to research what could improve Pablo's life while living with this condition. His diet was a very significant factor, and as I enjoyed spoiling Pablo I still wanted to be able to give him a treat from time to time.

"I found that there was a real lack of wholly natural for dogs on the market. So I started to experiment with making an all-natural treat that would not only taste great but also be good for the dogs. I made a few extra from time to time for the neighbours dogs for presents etc and they also loved them! So after much research and deliberation, "Dogon Ezy" was formed. We had one product, Savoury training treats which I loaded my car up with and drove store-to-store in northern NSW and a small part of QLD, slowly introducing Dogon Ezy. It was a slow slog of a way to begin but most great things are formed from something small and basic."

"Gaining a loyal, exciting and motivated national distributor was definitely the turning point for Dogon Ezy. Being able to have so much more exposure Australia-wide, without us having to be on the road all the time, gave us the opportunity to work on introducing new products and keeping the business fresh and up-to-date. Plus introducing new, modern and exciting packaging and continually adding new products keeps the business alive!

"We recently added Catch'em Ezy All Natural Horse Treats to our product line, which are extremely successful, and if you had asked me when we kicked this off if we would have been researching and baking horse treats, it would have been a definite no way! So I think it's really important to keep your options open and your ear to the ground and find out what people want.

"There have been some very tough times as with any new business. Had I not had great backing, total belief in my product and loads of support from my husband, family and friends, giving up would have been the easiest option on a few occasions. Probably the most frustrating experience the business went through was bringing our production line to a standstill for six weeks while awaiting the arrival of new machinery that was very delayed and then upon arrival did not do what we were led to believe it would. So it was back to the drawing board - well, back to the baking, more like it, to play a massive catch-up!

"In a general week I would probably spend around four days baking, packaging, organising production schedules, ordering stock, bookkeeping, chasing up everything and planning any upcoming events.

Plus we are always looking into what's next, which you can't really put a time limit on. It's a never-ending part of the business."

She only has one pet now. "Lexi is nine years old, a staffy X boxer. She is the first dog I have ever had from a puppy and absolutely adorable. She still is, just she is a little bigger and her nose a little greyer. She works alongside me when I am baking and every now and then she will sneak (when she thinks I am not looking) up to the racks that have the treats on them cooling, and she will look at me, look at the treat, back at me, then pounce on a treat, grab it and trot back to her bed munching away. So funny, it would make a great commercial if I could capture it on film. She has the ultimate dog job - dog-treat tester!"

Her business philosophy is simple. "When the going gets tough, the tough stick around. Business, to me, is all about persistence, continually chasing stuff up, loving what you're doing, chasing stuff up, and having lots of fun along the way, along with lots of hard but rewarding work and chasing stuff up."

These women don't chase their tails and rarely look back as it's a tough, competitive business when you're up against major multinational pet food companies mass-producing treats in fancy packages with millions in advertising. Yet see them at any public event where they meet and greet and it's almost a sisterhood of godmothers.



Lesley Foord

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