

Global Pet Expo

When the Urban Animal crew strode into the San Diego Convention Centre, we weren't quite prepared for the Global Pet Expo trade fair which occupied the space of 11 football fields with over 750 stands in what seemed to be a kilometre long hall that was to be invaded by up to 10,000 pet industry professionals, retailers and salespeople. There were no consumers but we soon figured out what the pet business was plotting to foist on them in the coming year in the US and also what wouldn't work in Australia.

Two things we noted with amusement about the Yanks. They do not want to touch, smell or otherwise remove poo unless it is with a device at least a meter long that corrals it, wrangles it into a scented bag and removes it for long distance disposal without getting close to it. And judging by the more than 40 brands of puppy pram or dog stroller that we saw—including one with a Jeep logo like the 4WD car and a Burberry model at US\$1400—they have this obsession with pushing their pups to the mall rather than walking them around the block or in a park.

Paris Hilton has a lot to answer for. Aside from her evangelising doggie bags—not for scraps from a restaurant, she would have her Chihuahua catered for—the logoised or branded arm carrier has become a fashion fixture while her dress up antics have spurred a new rage for critters. If we see one more Taco Bell dog with a mini-sombrero, we'll go postal!

But here in Australia, we're not afraid of picking up poo and don't need a device to assist us. We don't need designer poo bags and on a chilly morning, probably welcome the warmth. We know dogs are meant to be exercised and walked, not carried in a shoulder holster or pushed in a stroller with their head peeking out of a fake Chanel design. So I think these are two concepts that won't really work here.

Same with lavish clothing for small dogs, I don't think Australians are as crazy about faux doggie style as the Yanks are. Do you notice they don't make fashions for big dogs, not even footy jerseys or soccer shirts? But at this show, there were puppy bikinis, doggy ballet-style tutus (with slippers), and a range of rugged outdoors gear for those who are more into mountain climbing than society crawling.

What will translate over here are the new ranges of 'nutriceuticals'—like the anti-aging compounds, vitamin and mineral supplements and other additives to feeding regimens. Within a year, I think we'll all be able to spell Glucosamine and Chondroitin Sulfate as well as pronounce this anti-arthritis compound.

From what I observe, there will also be a wave of new foods offered here, imported as well as locally made, with a far more healthy tilt to them. Gone are the days when a can of Pal was considered upmarket for the backyard life form and a chicken carcass or roadkill was a treat for the working dog. You would be amazed at the variety of canned, bagged, freeze-dried, frozen and dehydrated foods that are on the market over there. Some of this will translate here.

The other thing that is a certainty is that like the US where Petco and Petsmart are the competing chains of pet stores (like K Mart and Target, let's say) and Pets At Home is the massive UK pet superstore chain, we are about to be invaded with these concepts and it will be at the expense of the traditional mom 'n' pop shops we've grown up with.



Edible greeting cards to send to your pet mates - Photo by Animax

The only bad news out there in retail land other than the Big Guys rolling out superstores is that with the economic pinch of higher interest rates, soaring petrol prices and other hikes in the cost of living, it's likely that there will be a fallout in the boutique dog stores that have started to spring up here, emulating the American model.

But who knows? Who would have predicted that there are already over 200 registered designer dog breeds registered with the American Canine Kennel Club? But that's another story!



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