

Cuisine de Critters

By Phil Tripp (Pet Chef)

This column in each edition has nothing to do with eating animals, but rather with enhancing the animals' eating habits, choices and healthy options. Having had well over a 20 year gap between dogs and never having owned a bird, over the past decade, I've learned a tremendous amount on the feeding of pets for their health and longevity. Some would argue that my pets—a dog and two parrots—eat a far healthier diet than I do!

Thirty years ago, when I had my previous dog in the US, canned food was the predominant food choice and there were few options in dry food, or kibbles as we call them. Birds were fed seed primarily and cats got the can as well. Research on pet animals was restricted to using them as cosmetic testers and there was little knowledge available on animal dietary needs in an urban home environment where table scraps were regarded as a delicacy.

When you invest in a pet, there's both the money and the love. Just like humans, animals need varied foods - they'd get just as bored with being tossed a can of food daily as we would - and also a variety of nutrients, without the convenient use of vitamin supplements that humans use.

When I acquired Mick, my first Dalmatian about 15 years ago, I was fortunate that his breeder was on top of dietary needs and generous in sharing tips. I was also a consummate reader and researcher - aside from having few clues on the vagaries of animal diet - and we wanted to make our new family member as healthy and long lived as possible. Of course we knew chocolate was a poison and beer was not a beverage option. But when it came to sussing out what sort of diet plan we needed for such an active dog I did my homework and decided early in the piece not to take the convenient route of canned food.

Though we started with supermarket grade dry food augmented with vegetables, fish, meat and raw bones, we soon upgraded to premium and super-premium foods as the primary bed for additives for variety and nutritional enhancement. But we found the simplest things often eluded caring owners because they either don't ask, don't read the instructions on food packets or don't seek out information vital for the health of a pet.

Though it's no secret that we're not fans of canned food - some of which is mostly water and sadly lacking in nutrients - we recognise the convenience factor of owners tossing a can into a bowl of the life form in the back yard. But let's face it, the new generation of caring dog and cat owners are more responsible and responsive to their fur children. So many of them are taking the premium dry food option.

A premium food shouldn't need anything added to it as it is balanced, however would you like to eat dry pasta every day? So here's a good way to get extra veggies into your dog's diet and give him a little more variety - simply called Dog Soup! It can take many forms but it is, in essence, a combination of fresh vegetables, liquids, beans and grains and other ingredients, taking care not to use bones, fish, dairy products, rancid oils or other highly spoilable products. Generally, the more veggie the soup, the better but added items your dog likes can't help but enhance the mix. Notice we use no salt or spices.



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If you thought the science of feeding a dog is daunting, try figuring out the best for birds! I started out with a ringneck and we added an Eclectus -neither which we converted to a pellet diet, opting instead to use fresh fruits, vegetables, protein, nuts, sprouts, grains and breads - even cooking our own mini-muffins, hot chilli pepper corn bread and other delights. As for using milk products, we only feed them low fat yoghurt and often go for soy yoghurt as a change. Cheese is given in small quantities and we have also used cottage cheese in limited amounts. The birdie boys do adore well cooked eye fillet steak and we give them the occasional cooked chicken wing bone from antibiotic and hormone free chickens.

As for seed, we do give them a set of two mixtures - one for a larger parrot with big seeds and nuts and the other suited to the smaller ringneck with more grains and smaller nuts. But this is not their main diet - they're fed fresh fruit and berries, crunchy veggies, cooked yellow veggies, peas, beans, pasta and other foods - like I say, they eat better than we do! It's not unusual for me to pick up out of season US cherries, early mangoes, exotic fruits and especially passionfruit which they love, but in small amounts.

When I first started researching what was best for the avian flock I maintained, I came across the wonderful Sally Blanchard of the fabulous 'Companion Parrot Quarterly' magazine out of the US who also maintains an informative website with heaps of information on diet, behaviour and socialisation. Following is her famous recipe from the site at:

<http://www.companionparrot.com/articles/ahhealthy.html>

Doggie Delights

Dog Soup

- 4-8 liters water (but feel free to add V8, a small amount of fruit juice or non-meat, non milk liquids)
- A colander full of rinsed deep green leafy vegetables such as bok choy, carrot tops, spinach, brussell sprouts, broccoli, beans, peas, etc but avoid beet greens as they are high in oxalic acid and go light on any cabbage which seems to produce flatulence.
- Root vegetables-perhaps a few carrots, sweet potatoes or kumera cut in cubes
- Yellow-orange vegetables-a couple of cups of pumpkin or squash
- A cup of a grain--brown rice, barley, oatmeal, cous cous...
- A cup of a legume-dried beans or lentils or even better, fresh sprouted legumes
- Optional- cup olive oil, flaxseed, other good nut/vegetable oil - avoid avocado & mac nut oils
- Optional-one head of garlic - avoid onion or onion greens
- Optional-a half cup of bran
- Optional-a quarter cup of wheat grass juice or spirulina juice.

Method:

Fill large soup pot 2/3rds full with water and bring to boil. Add any grains or beans and return to boil. Let simmer covered 20 minutes or so, then add root vegetables (and garlic if used). Simmer covered for another 20 minutes. Add water to keep level above solids and then add green vegetables and any other ingredients and simmer for a maximum of 20 minutes.

Let cool and refrigerate, to use half over one week perhaps every other day, freezing the rest in individual containers (or ziplock bags) for later use, thawing in a microwave and serving warm but not hot.

Just for the Birds

Sally Blanchard's Famous 'Glop'

- 1 small jar of baby food carrots, sweet potatoes, or winter squash (I use Only Organic because it is certified organic - they also have high vitamin A vegetable varieties with chicken and turkey. I occasionally use apricot, peach, or papaya baby food. Avoid baby foods with high sugar content)
- 3 slices of coarse whole-grain crumbled toast. (Vary the bread but use the healthiest bread you can find without sugar.)
- 2-4 Tablespoons of nonfat plain yoghurt.

Optional:

1/8 cup high quality handfeeding formula or a sprinkle of a spirulina or wheat grass type supplement.

Method:

Put in a large bowl and mash together until toast is saturated with baby food and yoghurt and everything is evenly mixed. Consistency can be changed according to your parrot's preference. Mine like the toast chunky and the mixture thick - about the consistency of turkey stuffing. 'Glop' is ready to feed - it does not have to be cooked.

It can also be frozen. Place it in plastic ziplock bags, flatten them and score them with the dull side of a knife or spoon to make easily broken off cubes. This makes it easy to snap off a piece, place it in a bowl to be thawed and fed as part of a meal.

Meow Chow

Special Sardine Surprise

Quick and easy to make and parsley helps combat whiffy-kitty breath.

- 2 cans of sardines in oil (do not drain)*
- 2/3 cup cooked rice**
- 1 Tablespoon pureed liver (or canned liver cat food)
- 1/4 cup chopped parsley

Method:

Combine all ingredients and mix well. Shape into balls of desired size or simply spoon into cat's dish and serve. Balls may be stored in the refrigerator for up to three days in a plastic airtight container and can also be frozen.

*Cost effective tins of sardines can be found in your supermarket for less than one dollar

**If you're time poor and don't want to cook a small amount of rice, then pop into your local Thai or Indian take-away shop and purchase a small container of cooked rice.

