

# SPECIAL INTERESTS

## HOME COOKIN'

### Pet owners say animals benefit from meals made from scratch

By Tania Soussan For the Journal

A year ago, Jackie Robertson was making trips to the vet every other week because her four Labrador retriever puppies were suffering so many injuries.

The day one turned up limping with elbow dysplasia, she knew something had to change.

"I was flipping out because they're show dogs," Robertson says. "I left the vet's and I went straight to K9 Kitchen" to buy ingredients.

Friends had encouraged her to try a homemade raw diet for the Labs she raises and shows, but she was skeptical.

It didn't take long to win her over.

"I tried the raw food for six weeks and it was a miracle," the Rio Rancho woman says, adding that her dogs traded injuries for healthier coats, more energy, tighter muscles and quicker healing time after neutering.

"I'm really sold on it," she says. "I've just seen such a remarkable difference in my dogs."

Other proponents of homemade diets for cats and dogs agree, but warn that making the switch takes a little work.

Pet owners who want to make food for their dogs and cats need to do a little research and make sure they're giving their animals everything the critters need to stay healthy, says Norm Shrout, co-owner of Long Leash on Life pet store in Albuquerque.

There are good books available and the staffs at Long Leash on Life and K9 Kitchen are able to advise pet owners on how to fill their dog and cat bowls.

Shrout suggests "Dr. Pitcairn's Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs & Cats" by Richard H. Pitcairn, a veterinarian, and Susan Hubble Pitcairn.

Kathy Herman, owner of K9 Kitchen, highly recommends adding items like alfalfa, kelp, ground bone and fish body oil to homemade pet foods.

Pet owners also can opt for premixes that take some of the guesswork — and the hassle — out of making food from scratch. The mixes are dehydrated or freeze-dried vegetables that are simply rehydrated and mixed with meat and maybe a little oil, Herman says.

Either way — premixes or from scratch, cooked or raw — your cat or dog will be getting better food than commercial kibble, she says.

"When you're making your own food, you're using whole foods, you're using vegetables and meats, you're eliminating the synthetic vitamins and minerals," she says.

Pet owners also have the control to eliminate chemicals, preservatives and specific allergens and to know exactly what their animals are eating, Herman and Shrout say.

"It's the difference between processed food and fresh food," Shrout says. "It's the same as for a human."

It's also a way to eliminate the kinds of worries that swept the country last year when pet food ingredients from China caused kidney failure in cats and dogs and led to the recall of 100 brands of pet food.

There's nothing unsafe about a homemade diet, Herman says, even if you feed raw meats because cats' and dogs' digestive systems are designed to handle those raw ingredients without getting sick from things like e-coli or salmonella.

Herman says she has been making food for her three dogs for 25 years and they are never sick and have no allergy or skin problems and very few dental needs.



Under Gretchen's attentive eye, Jackie Robertson mixes a batch of food for her Labs. Robertson, who raises show dogs, says she has "seen a remarkable difference" since she started feeding them a homemade raw diet. **JAELYN DEMARIA/JOURNAL**

### **Time and expense**

There are a couple of potential downsides, however. Making your own pet foods takes extra time and effort and can cost more than commercial food.

"At first I found it cumbersome," Robertson says, adding that she also saw her puppy food bill almost quadruple from about \$40 a week for four dogs to about \$150 a week.

Now, however, she has cut costs by shopping sales and buying food like ground beef and canned salmon in bulk. She figures she spends about twice what she used to on food but saves that much in vet bills.

She has also overcome the time factor. On Saturday nights, she spends two hours making food for the next week, bagging each meal for each dog individually. Her pups get something with bone, a whole raw mackerel or a turkey neck perhaps, in the morning and then ground beef mixed with pureed vegetables in the evening.

"It doesn't have to be difficult," she says.

Herman adds that pet owners can decide how much to do so the routine fits their lifestyle.

Shrout warns that although making food at home isn't difficult, pet owners must be ready to make a commitment.

"Not everyone is capable of feeding their pets a homeprepared diet," he says. "It requires planning, it requires organization and it requires research."

Shrout advises clients to make sure their animals are getting a good balance of vitamins and minerals over the course of a week. Many people don't feed enough calcium, important for dogs, or feed too many carbohydrates, he says.

"We do a lot of coaching," Shrout says.

For treats, Herman suggests fresh fruit like apple or banana chunks or naturally dried treats. Pet owners can make their own dried liver snacks at home, for example, she says.

The types of homemade diets Herman and Shrout recommend more closely resemble cats' and dogs' ancestral diets. That means the animals will thrive on the food, Shrout says.

## **DRIED LIVER TREATS**

(from Kathy Herman, K9 Kitchen)

**Liver (or beef heart) in ¼-inch or thicker slices \***

### **Garlic powder**

Stove top: Drop the slices into boiling water and cook about 10 minutes. Pour off the water. Place the slices on paper towels and pat until very dry, pushing down hard.

Microwave: Place the slices on paper towels and microwave on high for three to four minutes. Pat dry, turn and repeat.

Sprinkle with garlic powder and let dry for several hours, until soft but solid.

Cut into appropriately sized pieces for your dog or cat. Store in the refrigerator for three to four days or freeze.

\*You can buy the liver already sliced. Grassfed, organic meat is best.