The Local PET Food Movement

Michael Clune

Photos by Molly McDonald Peterson

Consumers want local, safe food—for themselves and for their pets. Carole King has your pets covered.

uss, an energetic terrier cross, was zestful and dynamic, always ready for the next adventure. So it was a real surprise when, one morning, he could hardly move. His owner, Carole King, rushed him to the veterinarian, who diagnosed him with a rare form of anemia. After two weeks in intensive care, the little dog succumbed to his illness, devastating King and her husband.

Though grief-stricken, King felt compelled to find alternatives to conventional veterinary care that could prevent such a devastating nutritionrelated loss. In memory of Russ, she vowed that she would learn as much as possible so other pet

owners would never have to experience the untimely death of a beloved pet.

Be the Change

In researching holistic healing methods, homeopathy, Reiki, and raw foods, King became convinced that feeding pets raw foods, properly sourced and formulated, is not only natural, but optimal. According to King—who at that time was the owner of Doggie Dooty, a dog walking and pet-sitting service in Northern Virginia—her conclusions were confirmed by her interactions with hundreds of dogs who, in her opinion, lacked vigor because their conventional pet food did not provide ade-



quate nutrition.

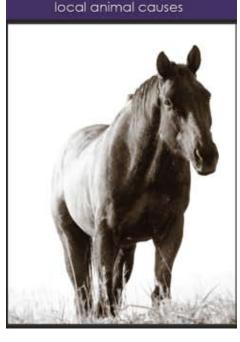
To supplement her research, King returned to school to become certified as a veterinary assistant, increasing her knowledge of canine and feline anatomy, physiology, and health. Soon she began providing individual consultations to clients regarding holistic preventative care and raw pet food. Initially experimenting with commercial raw foods, King found that she was uncomfortable using foods whose ingredients' origins were unknown. Rather than compromise, she decided to start making foods for her own menagerie of cats and dogs.

King began directly sourcing from farms who

meet strict criteria for animal husbandry and land stewardship, including The Farm at Sunnyside, Edgeworth Farm, Heartland Harvest, and Pleasant Hill Farm—all in Virginia. "We feel strongly about doing the right thing—sourcing from some of the best local organic and 'beyond organic' farms in the commonwealth that aren't doing things the easy way, but the right way," says King. Whether buying whole lambs, poultry, or vegetables, King purchases only products that she would feed her family. "Our animals should eat as well as we do. Our

Chow Now founder Carole King, shown here with Gil, purchases poultry and lamb from area farms for the company's line of raw pet food products.





will be donated to

hand-selected.



ingredients aren't from China, and they're not from New Zealand. They're from our 'backyard."

Her formulations use grass-fed lamb, pasture-raised poultry, and seasonal, certified organic produce: 80 percent protein and 20 percent vegetables for canines; 90 percent protein and 10 percent vegetables for felines. Following the massive pet food recall of 2007, when melamine and cyanuric acid were found in wheat gluten and rice protein imported from China, King decided to launch her company, Chow Now.

How Did We Get Here?

Once upon a time, domesticated pets were fed a meat-based diet supplemented

with grains and table scraps and scavenged game—much like they would eat in the wild. In 1860, an American businessman living in England invented dog biscuits after watching dogs eat hardtack thrown by sailors onto the docks. Made from vegetables, beef blood, wheat, and beet root, this precursor to dog kibble became a model that others emulated.

During World War II, when metal was rationed and pet food was classified as non-essential, production shifted to dry foods. Companies such as Quaker, General Foods, and Mars entered the pet food market, processing byproducts of human food production to make kibbles or pellets for pet consumption. Ingredients are cooked into a liquid, which is then pushed through a mechanical extruder and baked. Though this process produces a larger product—giving more value for the money—it requires the addition of starch. Nutrients must also be added to replace those lost during baking. Fats and flavorings are sprayed on the finished product to make it palatable.

Like Twinkies for Your Pet?

The problems associated with these products are considerable. First, most commercial foods are primarily grain-based, a direct contradiction to the dietary needs of carnivores like dogs and cats. Second, products are full of preservatives and additives, even though no rotation of shelf stock is required. Third, the industry is regulated by a nongovernmental body that has no enforcement powers and does

Rhonda Barnhart of Pleasant Hill Farm in Rixeyville, Virginia—seen here with Clementine the pig—supplies Chow Now with turkeys. Chow Now products are flash frozen to preserve freshness (below left). Vegetables come from The Farm at Sunnyside in Rappahannock County (below right).





not require analytical testing on pet food—as hundreds of devastated pet owners discovered in 2007.

Many people persisted in feeding their pets raw food, even as processed foods became the standard. In 1993, Australian veterinarian Ian Billingshurst



published literature indicating that dogs and cats fed a raw diet had shinier coats, healthier skin, cleaner teeth, more energy, and increased immunity against disease. In addition, some studies indicate that cats and dogs fed unprocessed foods had fewer urinary tract infections and gastrointestinal issues. Anecdotal evidence suggests that feeding raw foods to cats can reverse feline diabetes. Chow Now's King considers Billingshurst to be a "rock star" in the raw food movement and formulated her own mixtures based on his theory.

"Our ingredients aren't from China, and they're not from New Zealand. They're from our 'backyard."

—Chow Now founder Carole King

"We have a choice to eat healthy, local, sustainably raised, chemical-free food," King emphasizes. "We owe it to our pets to feed them as we would feed any other member of the family—with good, natural, healthy food."

A Piece of the Puzzle

Fortunately, as the local food movement grows exponentially, availability to high-quality raw pet food is improving, too; entrepreneurs and farmers are recognizing its market potential. Other raw food producers—such as Wolfie's Wild Pet Foods in Harrisonburg and Ayrshire Farm in Upperville—are also marketing additive-free, locally sourced raw pet foods and distributing them through retail outlets, farmers markets, veterinary clinics, buyers clubs, and websites.

"We're about making the best possible food with the best possible ingredients and knowledge and research behind it—while supporting our local farmers. We wouldn't have it any other way," emphasizes King. "The reward is seeing a 'picky' eater gobble Chow Now and the caretaker having an epiphany. Or getting a tearinducing testimony from a person whose cancer-ridden dog will only eat our foods and knowing we're helping to sustain that animal." She adds, "To provide safe and humanely sourced, traceable, and chemical-free food that will help them to thrive and live happy and healthy lives—that's my life's vision."

Agricultural gypsy Michael Clune is committed to narrowing the divide between local farmers and their customers.

Chow Now

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