

Building a Better Biscuit

By Eve Adamson

Once upon a time, there lived a very good dog, whose reward was a crunchy, baked dog biscuit. This quaint story may be decades old, but its 21st century incarnation has evolved. Customers still like to give biscuits to their good dogs, but today's biscuit isn't your parents' dog's biscuit. The 21st century dog biscuit has become something more than just a treat.

In his 33 Pet Food Express stores in Northern California, Michael Levy sees consumer demand shaping the biscuit market.

"People want healthy, holistic biscuit treats, and they want safe treats with no ingredients from China," Levy says.

Retailers like Terri Grow, who owns PetSage, a pet retail store in Alexandria, Va., are pleased to see manufacturers responding.

"Manufacturers have started listening to what the consumer wants and targeting what people want for themselves," Grow says. "People want whole grains, olive oil, whole foods like Cheddar cheese, organic ingredients and human-grade ingredients. They don't want byproducts, fillers, corn, wheat gluten, hormones, antibiotics."

Fortunately, new biscuits on the market fulfill all those demands. Grow just brought three new biscuit lines into her store and opened up one of the bags.

"These smell pretty darned

good," Grow says. "I smell oregano, rosemary, Parmesan, molasses. It smells like focaccia. We tasted these ourselves and they were really good."

Better Batter

"Dog treats have evolved dramatically in the past five years," says Doug Daymond, owner of KicX Nutrition in Guelph, Ontario. "Dog biscuits used to be basically void of nutrients and existed purely for the sake of giving a dog a reward. Now, consumers want biscuits that contain human-grade ingredients and also target specific health risk factors. They want the same quality and safety standards as those applied to human foods, ingredient lists you don't have to be a scientist to understand and natural, holistic products."

Daymond compares the change in priorities to the change in how many people now feed their own children.

"We used to reward our kids with candy," he says. "Now, more health-conscious parents choose treats like fruit bars. We're seeing a very similar shift in the pet category, as people feel a sense of responsibility to nourish, not just reward, their pets."

Margot Kenly remembers when natural treats didn't even exist. The president of Blue Dog Bakery in Seattle spent a lot of time teaching retailers that natural products really were worth the shelf space.

"Ten years ago, most treats were made with remaindered ingredients, but we knew customers wanted something better," Kenly says.

A decade later, the ingredients lists on the boxes and bags

of biscuits looks considerably different, and customers insist on better biscuits. So do retailers, who

are perfectly right to be finicky about what they stock, Grow says.

"I am a little picky," she says. "I had a manufacturer change their treats recently, and sugar became the second ingredient—so I got rid of them. My customers appreciate that we are very discretionary and they get very excited when we get in something new. They trust us."

But making good decisions about which treats to stock means looking beyond the buzzwords on the front of the package and turning the package over to scrutinize the ingredients list, Daymond says.

"There are a lot of 'me-too' products in the marketplace right now, and a lot of companies are jumping on the bandwagon to capitalize on buzzwords like 'gluten-free' and 'human-grade,' he says. "They aren't necessarily looking at functionality and next-generation nutrition."

Multitasking Treats

Aside from ingredients that rival a human bakery's, the newer biscuit treats serve another purpose: functionality.

"People are looking for more functional foods, both for themselves and for their pets," Kenly says. "Dogs have the same issues with obesity, joint pain and hypertension, so as people take care of themselves, they want treats for their pets



that will do that job, too. They want antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids and organic ingredients. They don't want byproducts and additives and wheat gluten."

Daymond attributes the popularity of functional treats to a desire for convenience.

"It's like protein drinks for humans—if we can get our treats along with therapeutic levels of things we need, that's convenient," he says. "Supplements are becoming passé because there are other ways to get nutrients into our bodies besides pill-popping. The general population is tired of pills."

Levy suggests using the functional qualities of treats to help fuel sales.

"A lot of people come in to our stores looking for treats and aren't necessarily looking for any health benefits from biscuits," he says. "However, if you point out that a particular biscuit contains glucosamine and chondroitin, which help promote healthy joints, that's a really good selling factor."

What the new generation of biscuits really boils down to, Daymond says, is just one more step toward humanizing our pets.

"It used to be that a treat was a treat was a treat," he says. "Throw the dog a treat, and the dog would eat it. But now people want treats that enhance health."

Hold the Grain

Unlike the fizzling Atkins trend in the human food industry, grain-free pet food shows no signs of slowing down—and dogs going grain-free need treats, too.

Pet Food Express owner Michael Levy agrees that grain-free is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the food and treat market.

"The issue with grain-free in biscuits is fairly cut and dried," Levy says. "It's 'My pet is allergic to corn or wheat,' the customer tells you—a lot of times, this isn't accurate, but it's their perception—and they want a grain-free biscuit."

"Making a grain-free dough is a challenge," says Maggie Johnson, director of marketing for Sojourner Farms in Minneapolis. "We found that garbanzo bean flour, arrowroot flour, potato flour and almond

meal can replace grains."

Johnson believes two factors fuel the grain-free trend.

"One, people have dogs with genuine allergies, and they see a real difference when they remove the grains from the dog's diet," she says. "Those dogs genuinely require a grain-free food and treats."

The second factor, Johnson says, is left over from the Atkins trend.

"Some people still believe that all food should be grain-free," she says. "This is a bit of a misconception because dogs are not strictly carnivorous, and the problem is more the low quality of grains than the grains themselves. But people really want grain-free, so we came up with products to appeal to the Atkins culture as well as to those dogs with legitimate grain allergies."