

University of Canberra

Sandra Burr

A dog's breakfast: from canned food to cookbooks

Abstract:

Across many cultures companion animals have attained the status of significant others in human households. Pets are now family members living in the intimacy of our homes occupying our bedrooms, our hearts and our deepest affections. In many ways, the lives of our pets mimic our own with designer outfits and personalised accessories, exercise classes, heated beds and specialised diets. There are doggy day care facilities, dog friendly restaurants and businesses that cater for pet birthdays and other important occasions. Dogs no longer survive on a diet of bones, off cuts and table scraps and cats can expect more than a menu of own-caught mice supplemented by a bowl of milk. Today pet food is a significant global industry producing a complex range of scientifically formulated nutritionally complete canned and dried food for busy pet owners. In response to this phenomenon is a rise in the number of pet cookbooks whose authors refute the claims of commercial manufacturers, emphasising instead the importance of home-cooked food for the health and well-being of our animal companions. While America continues to dominate the pet cookbook market, Australia has produced a number of pet cookbooks that reveal a great deal about past and contemporary cultural attitudes towards companion animals in this country. This article reflects on the evolution of human-animal relations in Australia through the lens of this small but significant body of Australian published cookbooks for pets.

Biographical note:

Sandra Burr has a doctorate in creative writing. She is an Adjunct Professional Associate in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra where she also teaches creative writing and cultural research. She is a member of the University's Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, on the editorial panel of the online journal *Axon: creative explorations*, and is a regular reviewer for the *Australian animal studies bulletin*, *M/C reviews* and *TEXT: journal of writing and writing courses*. Her research interests include human-animal relations and urban animal art.

Keywords:

Food writing – Cookbooks – Companion animals – Pets – Nutrition – Human animal relations



Fig 1. Russell Drysdale, Australia (1912-1981), Man feeding his dogs, 1941
Oil on canvas, 51.2 x 61.4cm, Gift of C.F. Viner-Hall 1961
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery, Photograph: Natasha Harth

In recent decades dogs have become increasingly humanised and in many ways their lives mimic our own. They sit beside us on the couch while we watch television (and who is to say they are not watching too), we celebrate their birthdays, give them Christmas presents and spend a fortune on their diets. Feeding pets has become increasingly complex and a simple regime of bones, off-cuts and table scraps supplemented with an occasional rabbit carcass has been replaced by a confusing selection of scientifically formulated canned, dried, fresh and frozen pet food. Pet products have become a significant global industry. Home cooking for pets is also on the rise with a growing number of pet cookbooks gaining a niche in the pantheon of specialist cookbooks. While America continues to dominate the pet cookbook market, Australia has produced a small but significant number of publications that reveal a great deal about past and contemporary cultural attitudes towards companion animals in this country.

Research conducted by the Australian Companion Animal Council reveals that more than 63 percent of Australian households own pets, with dogs (3.41 million) and cats (2.35 million) outnumbering all other species (ACACa 2010: 13-14). Sociologist Adrian Franklin (1999) theorises that the absorption of companion animals into contemporary households has led to the hybridisation of the modern family and 91 percent of Australia's pet owners say they feel 'very close' to their pets and regard them as integral members of their family (ACACa). As one journalist commented, 'Once upon a time dogs were pets, now they rule the roost' (Booth 2001: 2). Pets are 'Increasingly cared for according to human patterns and human aesthetic standards' (2004), and the way that we feed our pets is a clear indicator of how we feel about them. As well as a growth in commercially available dog food, an extraordinary array of food related services have emerged including: organic restaurants offering home delivery (*Organic restaurants for pampered pets* 2012); doggy gelato (Bain 2012); dog beer 'a beer for your best friend' (*Dutch brewers launch dogs beer* 2007); and

hotel pet packages that include gourmet meals (*Outrageous culinary pet vacations* 2012). Pet owners are faced with a bewildering array of choices when it comes to feeding their animals, a phenomenon that began with the industrialisation of pet food in America.

Processed pet food was a mid-1880's response to overcoming waste in the North American meat manufacturing industry. Grains were added to discarded, sometimes diseased meat and offal, which was then cooked and chemically treated to destroy bacteria and to extend shelf life. Appealing to modern desires for convenience and economy, pet food manufacturers created a market by promoting canned and dry food that required minimal storage space, lasted longer, was quick and easy to prepare and, above all, negated the need to handle and store raw meat. Sales expanded during the Great Depression when fresh meat became prohibitively expensive. Sales in Australia were initially small due to an abundance of wild game and horse meat and the high numbers of butchers selling fresh offal and off-cuts. By 2009 however the landscape had changed with pet food sales in Australia totalling \$1.826 billion which was 3.2 percent of all major food products sold in this country (ACACb 2010: 27). It is interesting to note that rabbits, once the mainstay of pet diets worldwide, are now a luxury item. American social commentator Ira Glass (2012) describes paying eighty dollars a week for half a dozen rabbits to feed his dog whose health problems precluded it from eating anything else. In Australia rabbits currently cost between \$14 and \$18 per kilo (Light 2011). As well as commenting on the expense of feeding his dog Glass said 'it's weird feeding an animal that's cuter than your pet to your pet' (2012), reflecting humankind's changing sensibilities towards the killing of animals for food with increasing numbers of people questioning the way they feed themselves, their families and their pets.

Many pet food manufacturers enlist veterinarians to endorse their products and their claims that they are scientifically formulated to provide complete, balanced and safe nutrition for pets. This kind of advertising has led to a new sense of public helplessness (Olson 2005), with many abandoning their customary pet feeding practices in favour of these 'improved' commercially produced diets. Public faith in commercial pet food was shaken in 2007 when more than 60 million cans of pet food were recalled in America following dogs becoming ill and even dying from eating processed food found to contain contaminated wheat gluten imported from the People's Republic of China. Consumers began to question not only the high cereal content in canned pet food, but also the inclusion of low-grade meat and the amount of pesticides, preservatives, chemicals and other additives used in their manufacture. Similar concerns are apparent in the broader community where there is a growing mistrust of preservatives, cereals, fats, salts and sugars in all processed food. Indeed, 'As people eat more sustainable seasonable produce and meat raised and butchered outside the industrial system, so do their pets' (Storey 2011). The current trend is for owners to cook for their pets, and to include fresh, wholesome, organic ingredients just as they would for themselves.

Following the contamination scare, the growth in sales of pet cookbook in America was remarkable with sales of titles such as Twichell Roberts' *The good food cookbook for dogs* (2004) growing by more than 300 percent and Moore's *Real food for dogs*

(2001) almost tripling in one week (Newman 2007). A survey of giant bookseller Amazon Books reveals the availability of more than 300 cookbooks catering to a broad spectrum of companion animals. Many of the current recipe books reflect prevailing anxieties not only about how to feed pets, but also about a growing crisis in pet health as more and more animals succumb to a multiplicity of modern dietary-related illnesses including obesity, allergies, digestive problems, and organ, joint and periodontal disease. It is popularly held that if processed foods are wrong for humans, then they have to be wrong for pets for ‘If you can feed yourself healthily and your children, then you can feed your pets healthily too. It really isn’t that hard’ Storey (2011). Accordingly, a range of cookbooks for pets target specific health issues, but they also cater for owners’ preferences to feed gourmet, organic and wholefoods and for their animals to be vegan and vegetarian. Pet cook books follow all sorts of trends including the current fascination with celebrity with titles such as, *The culinary canine: great chefs cook for their dogs – and so can you!* (Feldman & Pierce 2011) and *The Beverly Hills doggie cookbook* (James 2012), with its trio of jaunty Chihuahuas wearing outsized sunglasses on the cover.

While pet cookbooks often present as quirky and whimsical, the central focus is on the health, happiness and wellbeing of the family pet and authors often present themselves as animal experts with a genuine interest in pet nutrition. However despite these pet owners are both wary and discerning and are quick to spot fraudulent or misleading material and expose it on internet forums such as the Amazon book review pages. Avian expert Robin Deutsch attracted considerable criticism for including processed human food in her ‘healthy’ recipes for birds, as well as a product known to contain a carcinogenic preservative. Similarly, Armstrong and Bagnasco were reproached for using ingredients such as oil, butter, cream, cheese and Italian dressing in their recipes which are known to be unsafe for birds. That said, the notion of cooking for birds is in itself rather peculiar.

Modern pet cookbooks emulate mainstream cookbooks in their design and presentation with chapters on entrees, mains and desserts and sections for making food for celebratory and other special occasions. Most feature a single recipe to a page illustrated with stylish colour photographs of food and dinnerware, together with endearing portraits of cute cats and well-groomed dogs. Treats, foods for family outings, and recipes for specific dietary needs are commonplace and there is a growing trend to include recipes for dishes intended both for pets and their owners. Gayle Pruitt says in the introduction her *The dog-gone good cookbook: 100 easy, healthy recipes for dogs and humans* (2013) that it ‘offers more than 100 delicious, healthy recipes that are wonderfully nutritious for both humans and dogs’ and, according to Andrew Newman (2007) ‘When Arden Moore cooks ‘Marvelous Mutt Meatballs’ for her dogs, Chipper and Cleo, she digs in too’. This trend not only attests to the exceptional quality of food available to pets these days, but also gestures towards the increasingly blurred boundaries between humans and their pets. The cover of Pruitt’s book has a rose-bedecked pug sharing a candle-lit dinner with an equally adorable canine companion illustrating author Sandy Moyer’s contention that, ‘Dogs are no longer ‘just pets’. In many homes they are truly part of the family. They are our fur kids, our babies and our grand dogs’ (undated).

A singular feature of pet cookbooks is the playful, often outlandish, recipe names with ‘Snickerpoodles’, ‘Meowish Sushi’, ‘Gizzard Goulash’, ‘Muttloaf’ and ‘Dogwiches’ just a few examples of this bizarre phenomenon. While this self-conscious jokiness may indicate a degree of uncertainty about the status of companion animals among the authors of pet cook books they and pet food manufacturers appear to have few reservations about conflating food with love and using emotional blackmail to sell their products. Renowned American dog trainer Cesar Millan clearly illustrates this phenomenon when he says, ‘One of the ingredients missing from pet food is the love and energy you put in by cooking it. ... It’s that essence that you can’t purchase anywhere in the world’ (in Storey 2011). In this instance, ‘pet food seeks to please the master, not the beast and is one of the clearest examples of food as displaced love’ (Wilson 1999). Confusions over food and love is evident in the conflicted relationships humans have with ‘bad foods’ – chocolate biscuits, doughnuts, birthday cakes and other nutritionally poor salt, fat and sugar-laden snacks, and this conflict is also apparent in pet cookbooks.

Compared to American outputs, Australian publications in the field are relatively modest although the growth of online sales has seen an increasing homogeneity in the genre. The National Library of Australia has a small collection of Australian pet cookbooks that exhibit similar characteristics to those published overseas. They illustrate changes in national attitudes towards household pets in Australia ranging from the pragmatic to their inclusion in family life, with recent publications reflecting ‘the full range of human diets and desire’ (Masters 1999).

Stockfeed manufacturers Thorpes Limited (undated) released a pamphlet describing their products as being thoroughly cooked, easy to transport, store and feed while warning against allowing dogs to gorge on meat. In 1970, Uncle Ben’s of Australia produced an educational manual for veterinarians in which they identified obesity as ‘the most common form of malnutrition in the dog’ and highlighted the changing status of pets in society with the statement, ‘The feeding of pet animals can be said to occupy the middle ground between human food and the feeding of farm animals’. In the 1990s owners were being urged to replace canned dog food with raw meat with veterinarian Ian Billinghurst recommending a diet comprising 60 percent raw meaty bones and scraps. He also pointed out that dental problems caused by poor diets accounted for one third of the income of veterinarians. Similarly, Tom Lonsdale, a passionate advocate of raw foods (including fresh rabbit) published *Raw meaty bones: promote health* (2001), and *Work wonders: feed your dog raw meaty bones* (2005). In 2008 another veterinarian, Clare Middle published *Real Food for dogs & cats: a practical guide for giving your pet a balanced natural diet*, warning that carbohydrate-based commercial products led to medical problems such as arthritis, periodontal disease, epilepsy, cancer, obesity and joint issues. Middle suggested feeding raw natural whole foods supplemented with products such as kelp, spirulina, sprouted grains and quinoa that are becoming increasingly common in human diets.

Living with a gourmet pet: a most unusual bedside book (Carter 1977), epitomises the 1970s approach to pet cookbooks with recipes sprinkled among photographs of animals, poetry, axioms, terrible puns and cheesy cartoons. The roguish humour coupled with recipes for ‘Cat Talk Cocktails’, ‘Dog Grog’, and ‘Dog Dip Canine

Casanova' denotes uncertainty about the place of animals in society and the heavily anthropomorphic language is further evidence of this discomfort. Carter's recipes in order to give buyers confidence in their product, the recipes are endorsed by and named after the dogs that feature in the book e.g. 'Peppi's Pate' and 'Landseer's Lamb dinner'. While the recipes all require baking, frying, marinading, or stewing it is worth noting that tinned dog food is a common ingredient. Even more peculiar is a recipe for rabbit stewed in wine that calls for the inclusion of dry onion soup mix, a popular item in every 1970s pantry.

Australian journalist Marie Toshack published several books on animal care and nutrition in the late 1990s including *Kitty cafe: healthy, easy to prepare, homemade food for your cat* (1997), and *Doggie diner: healthy, easy to prepare, homemade food for your dog* (1997). Both books offer advice on animal care, behaviour and nutrition, and warnings that, common ingredients in processed including soya beans and artificial flavour enhancers cause allergies and illness in cats. Toshack's recipes are conceptually and descriptively human. She discusses textures and flavours e.g. 'The firm texture of the prawns contrasts with the crunchiness of the catnip garnish' and emphasises the importance of presentation:- the mince and egg yolk in Steak Tartare, should be formed into loose balls; grilled fish is served with butter and lemongrass garnish; a green salad is composed of grass shoots, catnip and celery; and frozen fish is defrosted in the microwave, crumbed with egg and weetbix, then deep fried and served with a side dish of catnip – all of which is designed to appeal to the cook and is probably of no real concern to a hungry cat.

Doggie Diner is an attractive hard cover book, with a clean design and appealing photographs featuring healthy, well-groomed dogs and appetising food. As well as brief chapters on selecting and caring for dogs, there are sections on diets that address a number of conditions from food allergies and kidney and bladder stones to old age and stress. Toshack discusses the bewildering range and expense of processed foods and the difficulty for pets to lose weight on these products. She recommends using rice, pasta, rolled oats, wholemeal flour and vegetables such as pumpkin, zucchini, carrot and onions, (although it is now known that onions are harmful for dogs). Toshack expands the usual cooking methods to include microwaving and stir-frying.

Jamie Young's *Grrrowlicious food for hungry dogs* was first published in 2006 and reissued for the American market as *Hungry dogs* in 2007. Young inspiration for the book arose from his refusal to feed his dog 'a can of processed offal' and because he could not find 'one simple book that told me how I could feed him [Frodo] meals that are cheap, easy, balanced, nutritious and, most importantly, tasty' (9). The book is organised into sections rather than courses i.e. Cooked, Raw, Carnivore, Treats, Vitamins, Oils and Toxic. The emphasis is on fresh produce and healthy choices and the recipes are simple, easy to follow and many require no cooking at all. Once again rabbit is included on the (mistaken) assumption that it is affordable, and the Risotto Stuffed Spatchcock (once cooked 'place the bird in your dog's bowl and run!') while exotic, is only recommended for special occasions. The author considerably replaces chocolate, which is toxic for dogs, with carob in his treat recipes advising owners to use them sparingly to reward desirable behaviours. Young's GRRR enterprises,

includes a website (<http://www.grrrr.com.au/home.html>) featuring GRRRR TV – the world’s first dog-centric cooking show.

Chaplin and Needham’s *Doggylicious: dinners and treats for a happy, healthy dog* (2012) is the most recent Australian book to reach the market. Again, the authors emphasise the importance of fresh, natural, preservative-free food and suggest a doggy larder stocked with low salt, low sugar, low fat ingredients. Recipes call for organic chicken, blueberries, brown rice, carob, chia, free range eggs, honey, molasses, olive oil, pumpkin, quinoa, rolled oats, spinach, vanilla essence, wheat bran, wholemeal flour and sugar free yoghurt drops. There are vegan options and references to iron, omega3 fatty acids, dietary fibre, and anti-oxidants and an underlying assumption that owners will unquestioningly buy the more expensive ingredients for their dogs. Richard Dennis describes this as ‘luxury fever’, explaining that, ‘As incomes rise, luxuries become necessities and owners are willing to pay even higher prices often to assuage their guilt about spending too little time with their pets’ (2004).

Each recipe has a brief anthropomorphising codicil: After dinner mints freshen a dog’s breath, ‘great for that good night kiss’; and carob instead of chocolate because ‘your dog won’t know the difference’. Some recipes such as the grilled liver treats require lengthy preparation time but this is dismissed because you will be ‘amply rewarded by your dog’s smile’. The illustrations point to restaurant quality meals:- the Lamb and Liver Loaf is served sliced with chips and parsley; the Chicken Licken Meatballs are artfully arranged on blue-themed tableware. Anyone who has seen dogs gulp down their food can only conclude that this concern with its appearance is aimed not at the pets but their owners. A section on themed doggy parties advises ‘hosts’ to check with ‘guests’ about allergies, and party foods include Blue and Mauve Iced Doughnuts which rather begs the question as to whether dogs care about the colour of their food. Paradoxically, healthy food, in this instance, is disguised as ‘bad food’ with assurances that these doughnuts ‘won’t harm dads’ should they sneak one for themselves. Owners are referred to as parents, the language is childish, and dogs are infantilised and conceived as having a childlike understanding of the world. It is also a little disconcerting that a cookbook that professes to focus on health contains a recipe for Doggy Christmas Pudding that calls for a weird combination of processed frankfurters, free range eggs and yellow food colouring. Happily Christmas comes but once a year.

As Erica Fudge reminds us ‘Being a pet now is not the same as being a pet in 1800. There have been very important changes in consumer culture, health care, legal status, and so on that seem to emphasize the increasingly equal status of these animals’ (2008: 107) and cookbooks, as Adrian Franklin points out, can tell us ‘a great deal about the society and culture from which they came’ (2008: 87). Pet cookbooks are a useful tool for tracing the trajectory of domestic animals from back yard pet to cherished family member. As well as reflecting modern concerns about food safety and a more inclusive attitude towards nonhuman species, pet cookbooks also serve to emphasise the ways that individuals have come to regard pet ownership as a way to fill the gulf of loneliness and isolation created by fractured relationships and dissolving family structures in today’s society. If, as Claude-Levi Strauss suggested ‘Animals are

good to think with' then pet cookbooks offer another way to think not just with, but about nonhuman animals and humanity's evolving relationships with them.

Works cited

- Armstrong, H & M Bagnasco 2001 *Gourmet bird food recipes: for your cockatiel, parrot, and other avian companions* Hayward, CA: Bristol
- Australian Companion Animal Council a 2010 *Australians and their pets: the facts* ACAC, at http://www.acac.org.au/pdf/PetFactBook_June-6.pdf (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Australian Companion Animal Council b 2010 *Contribution of the pet care industry to the Australian economy* 7th ed, at http://www.acac.org.au/pdf/ACAC%20Report%200810_sm.pdf (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Bain, Zoe 2012 'Italian company makes gelato for dogs' *Delish.co* 21 June, at <http://www.delish.com/food/recalls-reviews/gelato-for-dogs> (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Billinghurst, Ian 1993 *Give your dog a bone: the practical commonsense way to feed dogs for a long healthy life* Lithgow, NSW: the author
- Booth, Lauren 2001 'At least the gentry know the order of things: landowners first, then dogs, then wives' *New statesman* 130: 4562m (5 November), at <http://www.newstatesman.com/node/141598> (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Carter, June (ed) 1977 *Living with a gourmet pet: a most unusual bedside book* Burwood, Vic: Craftsmen P
- Chaplin, Phillip & Alice Needham 2012 *Doggylicious: dinner and treats for a happy, healthy dog* Chatswood, NSW: New Holland
- Denniss, Richard 2004 *Overconsumption of pet food in Australia* The Australia Institute, at http://www.rawmeatybones.com/articles-others/AustInstitute_overconsumption_Jul2004.pdf (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Deutsch, Robin 2011 *The healthy bird cookbook: a lifesaving nutritional guide and recipe collection* reissue ed, Neptune, NJ: TFH
- 'Dutch brewers launch dogs beer' 2007, *BBC News*, 22 January, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6288107.stm> (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Feldman, Katherine Levy & Sabina Louise Pierce 2011 *The culinary canine: great chefs cook for their dogs – and so can you!* Irvine CA: BowTie P
- 'Food scare forces owners to retreat to their own kitchen' 2007 *CNN.com* 4 March, at <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/04/03> (accessed 6 August 2012)
- Franklin, Adrian 2008 *A collector's year* Sydney: U of New South Wales P
- Franklin, Adrian 1999 *Animals and modern cultures: sociology of human-animals relations in modernity* London: Sage
- Fudge, Erica 2008 *Pets* Stocksfield: Acumen
- Glass, Ira 2012 'Ira Glass on rescuing a pit bull dog with a ridiculous diet' *The daily beast* 27 August, at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/08/26/ira-glass-on-rescuing-a-pit-bull-dog-with-a-ridiculous-diet.html> (accessed 26 September 2013)
- James, Sarah 2012 *The Beverly Hills doggie cookbook* Kindle ed, Beverly Hills, CA: the author
- Light, Deborah 2011, 'Rabbits: from pest to plate' *Australian geographic* 17 February, at <http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/journal/rabbits-from-pest-to-plate.htm>, (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Lonsdale, Tom 2001 *Raw meaty bones: promote health* Windsor, NSW: Rivetco

- Lonsdale, Tom 2005 *Work wonders: feed your dog raw meaty bone* Windsor, NSW: Rivetco
- Middle, Clare 2008 *Real food for dogs & cats: a practical guide for giving your pet a balanced, natural diet* Fremantle, WA: Fremantle
- Moore, Arden 2001 *Real Food for Dogs: 50 Vet-Approved Recipes for a Healthier Dog* North Adams, MA, Storey
- Moyer, Sandy undated 'Make your own gourmet dog treats' *BellaOnline: the voice of women*, at <http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art6804.asp> (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Newman, Andrew Adam 2007 'Home cooking for pets is suddenly not so odd', *The New York times* 2 April, at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/02/business/02pets.html?_r=0 (accessed 26 September 2013)
- 'Organic restaurants for pampered pets' 2010 *Sydney morning herald* 4 August, at <http://www.smh.com.au/small-business/entrepreneur/organic-restaurant-for-pampered-pets-20100805-11i0e.html> (accessed 26 September 2013)
- 'Outrageous culinary pet vacations' 2012 *Fox New.com* 8 August, at <http://www.foxnews.com/leisure/2012/08/12/outrageous-culinary-pet-vacations> (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Pruitt, Gail 2013 *Tuhe dog-gone good cookbook: 100 easy, healthy recipes for dogs and humans* New York: St. Martin's Griffin
- Storey, Sarah 2011 'A sniff of home cooking for dogs and cats' *The New York times* 18 January, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/19/dining/19pets.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Thorpes Limited nd *Feeding the dog* Sydney: Thorpes
- Toshack, Marie 1997 *Doggie diner: healthy, easy to prepare, homemade food for your dog* Rydalmere, NSW: Hodder & Stoughton
- Toshack, Marie 1997 *Kitty café: healthy, easy to prepare, homemade food for your cat* Rydalmere, NSW: Hodder & Stoughton
- Twichell, Roberts, D 2004 *The good food cookbook for dogs: 50 home-cooked recipes for the health and happiness of your canine companion* Minneapolis, Quarry
- Uncle Ben's of Australia n.d. *Feeding the dog and cat* Wyong, NSW: Uncle Ben's
- Wilson, Bee 1999 'Pet hates' *New statesman* 30 August, at <http://www.newstatesman.com/node/135521> (accessed 26 September 2013)
- Young, Jamie 2006 *Grrrrrowlicious food for hungry dogs* South Melbourne: GRRR