

CODDLED CANINES

Dogs bark up the right tree at up-scale pet shops.

If you're living a dog's life in Orange County, chances are it's a good one – provided you've trained your Master to patronize the upscale boutiques catering to coddled canines that are popping up around the county.

If there's training to do, take your cues from Trooper. Trotting into Three Dog Bakery in fashionable Corona del Mar Plaza, the tiny Brussels Griffon headed straight for the racks of designer clothing. With outfits priced from \$20 to nearly \$200, a winter wardrobe could take a significant bite out of the coffers of Jacqueline and Gary Kaiser – regulars of the 5-year-old Newport Beach shop owned by Sandy Deem. But that's the last thing the Kaisers are worried about.

With a doggy dresser to fill, and the arrival of Trooper's new sister imminent, the Newport Beach couple want to ensure their prodigal pup has everything he needs for optimal well-being. After all, the two have no children without fur to pamper.

They've come to the right place. For luxuries from fresh-baked treats to wholesome entrées, chaise lounges, gem-studded collars and hand-painted dinnerware, the independently-owned franchise draws devoted dog owners from San Diego to the



PLACES TO GO TO PAMPER YOUR POOCH

Dogma

21113 Newport Coast Dr., Newport Coast
(949) 640-6072

Fido's on Forest Ltd.

332 Forest Ave., Laguna Beach
(949) 497-5656

Heidi's Pet Boutique & Bath

2400 Newport Blvd., Costa Mesa
(949) 646-6723

The Barkery

322 Marine Ave., Newport Beach
(949) 675-0364

Three Dog Bakery

949 Avocado Ave., Newport Beach
(949) 760-3647

Wiskers Pet Beastro & Bowteek,

301 Main St., Huntington Beach
(714) 969-8478 OCM

San Fernando Valley. Patrons run the gamut from singles and empty-nesters looking to fill a companionship void to young couples waiting to have furless offspring, as well as those who prefer the canine kind.

Farther up the coast, Deem's sister operates a Three Dog Bakery in Santa Barbara. Others are located throughout the U.S., and in Japan and Canada. The chain is no longer accepting licensing applications, having reached its quota of pet-pampering shops.

"This is a happy place because customers always get their way," says Deem. She's doubtless referring to her four-legged clientele, who lap up dollops of low-fat honey yogurt whenever they visit.

Their owners could just as guiltlessly indulge, since all treats baked on-premises are made without sugar, salt, chocolate or preservatives. New-fangled creations, "Drooley Dream Bars" and "Pawlines," are analyzed in an off-site lab to ensure compliance with the parent company's specifications.

A veteran of the retail fashion industry, Deem purchased a Three Dog Bakery license because she hated to leave Max, her yellow Labrador, alone at home when she went to work. After Max's demise, she became the proud parent of Storm, a 5-year-old black Lab who's a fixture in the store today.

"My dog is my stress-buster, my marriage counselor and my anti-depressant," she explained. "It's like that for a lot of folks. Two Sundays after 9/11, the store was packed."

Why the rush to provide for furry friends in an economy plagued by downsizing, corporate greed and global turmoil? "The pet industry is booming these days because people are looking for warm fuzzies," Deem surmises.

Booming, indeed. According to the 2003/2004 National Pet Owners Survey conducted by The American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA), the number of pet-owning households in the U.S. has increased by more than 10 million since 1992. In 2002, 64.2 million U.S. households reported owning a pet, compared to 54 million households a little more than a decade ago. While census figures indicate a 13 percent increase in population between 1990 and 2000, that's an 18 percent increase in the number of American households with pets in the past 10 years.

"The new survey indicates America's ongoing love affair with the companion animal community is solid," says Lee Alvarado, association spokesperson. "We estimate that pet owners will spend \$31 billion in 2003 to care for, feed, spoil and pamper the American pet population."

That population includes 142,000 licensed dogs in Orange County, says Kathy Francis, public education officer for Orange County Animal Care Services. Their dutiful owners are clearly a prime market for local entrepreneurs looking to fetch a piece of the action.

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For most proprietors of the posh boutiques, the impetus to bite into the market seems to go beyond the mighty dollar. In Belmont Shore, just across the Orange County/Long Beach border, dog-lovers Scott Rinehart and Jim Poer opened Wiskers Pet Beastro & Bowteek in 1999.

"We didn't want to have to wear suits and ties to work," says Rinehart. With no previous retail experience, they deferred to devotion for Toby, a golden Labrador, and Chuck, a German shepherd, to drive their success. The two canine taste-testers can attest to the palatability of such treats as "Bark-la-Va" and "Toby's BBQ Bones." Rinehart can as well, having admitted to eating salsa with doggy biscuits and dining on milk bones as a boy.

"Any of the treats we sell can be consumed by humans," he says. "Since they're all low-fat, with no refined sugar, dairy or artificial additives, they're healthier than what most bakeries for people offer."

All are baked on-premises at the two stores.

In addition to edible treats, Wiskers features a full line of gifts for pet parents. Those eager to express their animal-loving nature in their homes will find eclectic art, picture frames, coffee mugs and other knickknacks.

In 2001, the business expanded to a second location on Main Street in Huntington Beach. The partners are exploring opportunities in Pasadena, Las Vegas and South Coast Plaza, hoping to sell eight to 10 turnkey franchises. A wholesale Chuck and Toby line of dog biscuits, beds, leashes and handbags is now in prototype production in China. Its retail debut is anticipated in January 2004.

Also looking to expand less than a year after its unveiling is Dogma, located on Newport Coast Drive. Owner Jerry Carter opened the store in December



2002 after seeing his golden Labrador's skin allergies clear up with better attention to nutrition. Plans call for the opening of a second store in Irvine's Quail Hill Shopping Center, on Shady Canyon at I-405, in April 2004.

The newest posh pet outlet is built around a mission to provide ultra-premium nutrition for canine companions. It has positioned itself as a comprehensive source for discerning dog owners.

"Dogs are no longer animals you adopt and just throw in your backyard," says Josh Lee, manager of the Newport Coast store. "Most of our customers treat them as members of their family."

A former manager at Petco, Lee affirmed that his clientele is affluent, yet cost conscious. "People come here because we offer an alternative to the big chains, with higher quality food, supplements, toys and treats at competitive prices," he says. "It's all about improving the bond between people and their animals."

If you're looking to cement that bond, you might do well with Bow-Lingual, now flying off the shelves of Dogma and other upscale outlets. Named among the best inventions of 2002 by Time Magazine, the brainchild of Japanese toy maker Takara helps dogs and their owners be better best friends by translating woofs into words. In addition to immediately revealing which of six emotions Fido is feeling, there's a home alone mode that monitors and records "ruffs" and "growls" for up to 12 hours while Master is away.

Other chic holiday gifts include a full line of Dogmopolitan furniture, priced from \$300 to \$700, trendy marble-topped raised pet feeders and imported leather handbags for gadding about town. For more practical pooches, car seats, bagel beds, and fashionable collars and leashes can be personalized to reflect the unique charisma of pet and parent.

Need more doggy stocking stuffers? Consider a string bikini, board shorts or reversible yarmulke (featuring tame blue and white on one side, a leopard print on the other, for the party animal inside any conservative canine). Or, head across town to Heidi's Pet Boutique and Bath in Costa Mesa to purchase a gift certificate for a full doggy beauty treatment including massage, manicure, aromatherapy and psychic reading.

RUNNING WITH THE BIG DOGS

If upscale pet boutiques are the chihuahuas and Labradors of the retail pet industry, PETCO and PETSMART are the Great Danes. Both are publicly traded companies, each with more than 600 superstores throughout the United States. In addition to pet supplies, both also offer grooming services, obedience training programs and opportunities to support animal welfare causes, including dog and cat adoption programs.

At 15 stores in Orange County (the first opened in Costa Mesa in the early 1980s), San Diego-based PETCO aims to provide superior customer service through well-trained, pet-smart employees who do more than just move product. According to spokesperson Shawn Underwood, the firm is a "relationship retailer."

"We solve problems," Underwood says. "We understand our customers are pet lovers, not just pet owners."

To track their needs and desires, the company performs some 25,000 customer surveys per month. In addition, through the PALS (PETCO Animal Lovers Save) program, it tracks what its pet-loving patrons buy to facilitate targeted direct mail and other strategic marketing.

A look at what stores are marketing suggests that pet owners are scrutinizing their animals' diets with as much vigilance as they're dissecting their own.

"We're seeing a lot more brands for animals' life stages and health problems," Underwood says. "Just as people are looking at food they're consuming more carefully, they're also examining nutritional labeling on pet products. They're not just picking up the cheapest brand."

Such scrutiny translates into growth for the chain, which expects a six-percent sales increase through

2003 and the opening of four new stores within Orange County over the next two years.

Also in a continuing growth mode is PETSMART, founded in 1987 in Phoenix. Aiming for an eight-percent growth in square footage through 2006, the company opened new stores in Costa Mesa and Rancho Santa Marguerita this year. A Buena Park grand opening took place Nov. 10; another is anticipated in Fullerton in 2004.

"We've remodeled every store in the country in the last three years," says CEO Phil Francis. "At all of them, we deliver total lifetime care, for every stage of a pet's life."

Echoing the sentiments of retailers across the board, Francis says, "People were once pet owners. Now they're pet parents."

To help them care for their offspring, PETSMART offers styling salons and in-house veterinary hospitals in many of its stores. The chain is currently testing a PETSHOTEL program offering boarding and day camp services.

Like its competitors, PETSMART is suffering no ill effects of a soft economy. "We're insulated from today's macro-economics," says Francis. "Pets are not like yachts; they're affordable luxuries." While a family may miss a vacation to compensate for downsizing, Fido may get a new toy as a replacement treat. To maintain an elevated position in the clan, Fido may have to meet new standards. "A dog that makes the journey from barnyard to bedsheets needs to behave and smell differently," Francis concluded.

To look and smell the part, Rover might want to skip the slippers, fetch that Chanel sweater out of the doggy dresser and become a shopping basset.

OCM

—By Melissa Adams

Retail

Time for Fido to start sniffing out a list and checking it twice. OCM

Melissa Adams is a freelance writer. Please e-mail comments and reactions as a Letter to the Editor with your name and city to: feedback@ocmetro.com

FORMER ATTORNEY IS PRO-BONES

She may have done some pro bono work in a former incarnation. That was before she gave up a six-figure income as an estate-planning attorney at one of Irvine's most prestigious firms to open The Barkery on Balboa Island.

Meet Stephanie Bailiff, 31, proud pug parent of Bailey and Olive. Her clan also includes Oscar, a Brussels Griffon given to her by a customer.

Since 2000, Bailiff has been a self-actualized supplier of just about everything for the pampered pooch, at an outlet "where pets are welcome and owners are optional." The UCLA grad makes no bones about trading a corporate briefcase for doggy bags. "I found something I had a passion for," she says.

Relying on trial and error rather than any retail experience, she's turned a profit since day one. That may have something to do with the 80-hour, seven day-a-week stints she puts in, as well as an obvious love for pups.

While others may have their wedding pictures hanging in their bedrooms, Bailiff's master suite features a "pug shot" of her adored Olive with Tino, taken after their "puptuals."

"I need to do something that makes me feel good at the end of the day," she mused, straightening racks draped with hundreds of custom-crafted collars and doggy outfits. "There's a lot of reward in making a little animal happy."

Clearly, she's having a doggone good time bringing joy to pups and their people. OCM

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