

Gourmet Dog Treats

Some dogs won't settle for a bone.

Sandy Robins

Every evening, the LoBianco family of California takes an after-dinner stroll to Wisker's Beastro and buys their Basset Hound Molly a treat from the store's amazing selection of gourmet canine confectionery.

The ritual is always the same. Molly waits patiently while 5-year-old Donald scans the delectable dog treats and picks out something that appeals to him. Donald's favorite is a "nutterbone" — a peanut butter cookie sandwich drizzled with carob. Next he taste tests the dog treat before handing it over to Molly. She scarfs it down quickly in case Donald decides he wants another taste.

"It's a daily outing that we enjoy as a family," Leslie LoBianco says. "For Molly, it's the doggie equivalent of a coffee at Starbucks." Molly howls when she knows they are getting ready for their walk. If Molly ever had a chance to escape, "that's the first place I'd look for her," LoBianco says.

The Starbucks analogy is a good one because like the on-every-corner coffee stores, dog bakeries are springing up everywhere to cater to the growing demand for handmade dog treats. The charming shops have become a popular meeting place for dog owners, too. They often stroll to a coffee shop for some caffeine and conversation where their dogs settle down to munch on their goodies.

"It's all about spoiling your pet as you would a child," says AdreAnne Tesene of Two Bostons Pet Boutique and Gourmet. "Anything that resembles human confectionery — like Oreo cookies or cannoli, donuts, or croissants — has instant appeal."

Virtually all gourmet dog treat bakers point out that they use human-grade organic ingredients and go easy on sugar and other fattening ingredients because canines count calories, too.

"And if you can't get out to the store, you can always shop online," points out Kristina Robertson of Barkely Square Bakery. "We can ship anything anywhere and even customize treats to take care of special dietary needs."

Apart from fun cookies shaped like fire hydrants and postmen, and Labrador Retriever-shaped cheese dogs, bakers have geared up to fill the demand for special occasion cakes to celebrate birthdays and other milestones. What dog wouldn't love a cake as a reward for passing the AKC Canine Good Citizen test, graduating from training class, or winning a big ribbon at a dog show?

According to dog bakery owners, many pet parents also buy yummy munchies hoping to use them as distraction treats. "One year my wife went out and bought what she dubbed 'Oscar Treats' — huge pup cakes," says Marc Rumaner of Illinois. She hoped to sidetrack their Samoyed Igloo and Alaskan Malamute Tundra so the couple could watch the Academy Awards on TV. "Of course they woofed them down before the opening credits were over," Rumaner says. "But the name stuck. Now when we mention 'Oscar Treats,' they bolt straight for the kitchen. They know exactly what award is coming up next ..."

Whatever the reason for giving our dogs these gourmet dog treats, it makes us feel good to reward our companions. And they seem to enjoy it, too!

Sandy Robins is a freelance writer who lives in California.