

Pet food sushi, anyone?

By Peter Surowski Staff Writer
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Donald Carter and his dog "Peanut" visit the Pawbar at Pussy & Pooch, a store and day spa for pets. (Stephen Carr Staff Photographer)

LONG BEACH - Pussy & Pooch, Belmont Shore's newest hot spot, combines a health spa, a boutique and a sushi bar, but with a twist - it is just for pets.

A bold green, black and white color motif and pulsating electronic music make the sales floor seem more like a dance floor.

The centerpiece of the room looks like a small bar, but without the rows of liquor bottles in the background. Instead, this bar serves only raw meat.

"It's food as nature intended," said Janene Zakrajsek, the store's co-owner and operator. "Cats are natural carnivores. They need to eat meat, not grain, not filler, not kibble."

Pussy & Pooch is more than just a pet store, Zakrajsek said. It takes a holistic approach to pet care. She sells healthy, mostly organic pet foods, both prepackaged and at the raw food bar, unique pet toys and supplies and is installing bath facilities to offer grooming services.

The raw food bar - which she calls the Pawbar - looks like a tiny version of those found in most sushi restaurants, but with one major difference. Three rectangular holes at knee level act as serving windows.

In front of each window sits a rectangular platform holding a ceramic dish.

Up to three pets can sit on the platform and try free samples of the raw food the store sells. Best of all, Zakrajsek said, it gives the pets a chance to socialize.

"It's all about the social experience for your dog," she said. "It's dogs eating sushi."

The bar even offers dog beer, which is just malted chicken-or-beef flavored vitamin water.

Zakrajsek created the Pawbar in answer to a question she asked herself. "How do you make raw food more accessible to our customers?" she wondered.

The Pawbar gives the employees a chance to talk to customers about what is in their pets' food, she said.

"You want to have transparency and know where the food is coming from," she said. "It's not enough to watch the ads on TV, read the front of the bag."

The food she offers is based on animal protein with small amounts of plant products to simulate what a carnivore may find its prey's stomach.

"It's not frivolous, it's not fancy, it's all about the health of the animal," she said.

Zakrajsek is not only committed to the health of animals, she is committed to doing business sustainably. She buys locally whenever possible and always chooses natural, organic products.

"I won't sell cheap knock-offs," she said. "It's important to me, and I think it should be important to everybody."

Husband-and-wife team Janene Zakrajsek and Rob Gaudio opened their first store on Main Street on Gallery Row in Los Angeles in December 2007.

She lived in the downtown area since 1996 when she began studying at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising.

After graduating, she freelanced as a marketer and worked at the school.

Then, she noticed all the pets in her neighborhood and had an idea.

"I really saw so much opportunity," she said. "I lived in the Old Bank District and I saw so many dogs."

The closest place for good-quality pet food was twenty minutes away, she recalled.

So they opened up the first Pussy & Pooch.

The day the store opened, the loft across the street closed its dog run for maintenance. So hundreds of people were going in and out of the building with their dogs and many noticed the new store.

In the store's first few weeks, Zakrajsek recalled, it was constantly packed.

The opening of her store in Long Beach was quieter. She just pulled the brown paper off the store's front windows and unlocked the door.

Though the shop has been less busy than the one in Los Angeles was when it opened, business is pretty good so far.

"We've had a buzz going, so people were in anticipation of our opening," she said.

But this "buzz" was only part of the reason she has been so busy. Belmont Shore is one of the pet-friendliest places in Long Beach, she said. Also, the store sits less than four blocks away from the dog beach.

This is one of the reasons she and her husband chose that location. The other reason is many of the clients who go to her store in Los Angeles are from Long Beach.

"We have people always saying, 'You should open a store here,'" she said.

On Nov. 1, just a few days after its doors opened for the first time, a steady stream of curious customers were stopping by.

Mallory Denny, one of the first customers that day, came in by mistake. The space Pussy & Pooch occupies had housed another pet food shop.

She came in for a brush, she said, but she and her dog, Zelda, stayed for a snack.

"I think it's great they can do meals because I haven't fed her yet," Denny said, gesturing to her tiny golden Shibe Inu.

Mike Feng, another customer, left his dog at home to get some pet food.

"I prefer shopping at these boutique stores," he said, because he feeds his dog all organic food and the variety is better at specialty shops.

In the back of the store, Zakrajsek is building a "bath house." She expects to finish it before the end of the year and offer full grooming services.

She is also putting together a calendar of events she will hold at her store, which will likely include a "mutt mingle," which is a social event for dogs and owners and adoptions for local nonprofit animal rescue organizations.

If you want to go

What: Pussy & Pooch

When: Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Where: 4818 East Second St., Long Beach and

564 Main St., Los Angeles

Information: www.pussyandpooch.com, 562-434-7700



11-08-09- Pussy & Pooch , 4818 East Second St, Long Beach Calif., a store and day spa for pets. The Paw Bar inside serves food through little windows at the counter. The store was formally " Whiskers " pet store. Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram