

The Development Of A Perfect Ferret Food

The development of ferret-specific food addressed previously ignored nutritional needs of ferret.

By Jennifer Mons McLaughlin

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Passion & Results

Willard first began researching what was needed to make a quality ferret food in the early 1990s.

"We started our research and from that we started the first foods specifically developed for, tested and proven for ferrets," he said. After two years of getting their food developed, they began hitting the show circuit with it.

During that time, a revolution of sorts was taking place. Those in the industry started to take notice of what was happening and everyone started paying attention.

"We really spent a lot of time on education; telling people ferrets are different, they are not just a cat in ferret clothing," Willard said.

Veterinarians began getting involved and started studying the scientific information that was being put out on why ferrets nutritional needs differ from other animals.

"The veterinarians were starving for the information, being scientists themselves," Willard said. "They had a lot of clients coming in with ferrets, but there is nothing taught in veterinarian school about ferret nutrition."

What began in the 1990s is still going strong. "It's the evolution we saw in the '50s and '60s with cat and dog diets," Shepard said. "I think it took longer to catch on, but finally manufacturers have come forward and started to recognize these needs."

Recognizing those needs also led manufacturers to look for their own niche in the pet food market.

"In reviewing some of the ferret foods on the market, we realized that just about everything available was jam-packed with grain-based carbohydrates," Haukom said. "So, seeing an opportunity to address that and knowing that carbs might be the key to adrenal problems and some of the other things that plague ferrets and ferret owners, we decided to make a diet that was predominantly meat-based, eliminating any grain protein."

Challenges To Creating A Ferret-Specific Food

As with any great idea, an enormous amount of work goes in behind the scenes to make a desirable final product. In doing so, many manufacturers overcame quite a few challenges.

"From the formulation side, you have to realize that any time an animal eats a food, they have to first recognize it as food," Willard said. "That is overlooked a lot. Just because one can formulate a food doesn't mean it can be taken that way by the animals, because it's not a conditioned reflex, it's a learned trait."

Willard explains that a lot of times ferrets are raised on soft foods, so going to solid foods is something they have to learn. In order to make it attractive, it has to appeal to the ferret's senses. "It's not just another pet food. Ferret food has to be a high-protein, high-fat food, and it has to have certain textures, appeal, aroma and then obviously the ferret has to eat it and do well on it," Willard said. "All those are challenges to making the ferret food."

"Anytime you formulate an animal diet it has to be palatable," Shepard said. "One of the things we notice is that the average ferret owner owns seven ferrets, and ferrets are very, very picky eaters and what one ferret will eat in the household may not be the same thing another one will eat."

Manufacturers are not immune to the changing economy, either. "Challenges can be the price of things," Peter Reid said. "We have a heavy chicken-base in our food and what do chickens eat?" Reid said the price of corn and the increasing cost of protein is something manufacturers have to deal with. "Anyone who makes a fresh, meat-based diet is dealing with the cost pressure of ingredients and having good, quality-safe ingredients. And we are very strict with the

ingredients we use.”

Other challenges, depending on the company’s goal for the food, come into play as well. “The biggest challenge we faced was trying to extrude something without too much carbohydrates,” Haukom said. “We guarantee our food to be less than 10 percent carbohydrates. The challenge was finding a blend of nutrients that would meet the high-protein, low-carb needs of ferrets and still be manufactured with the limitations of machines that we own.”

John Marsman, a nutritionist at Eagle Pack Pet Foods Inc., pointed out another challenge. “Some ingredients like glucosamine, probiotics (DFMs) and digestive enzymes can’t be run through the extruder or the heat in the cooking process destroys their efficacy, so we set up a separate process that applies these ingredients after they have cooled from the cooking process.”

Wysong Corporation faces challenges involving its raw food diets. “To make a food that most nearly matches the archetypal genetic expectation of ferrets requires creating raw diets that are shelf stable,” said Randy Wysong, DVM, the company’s founder and CEO. “The foods must be hand-batched and require around-the-clock processing over the course of days.”

Moving Forward

Many companies have ferrets at the workplace where they feed their ferrets the food, ensuring that they are producing the best possible product. Even though it has been a relatively short time since the change came about in ferret nutrition, companies are continually striving to better themselves by finding better ingredients or ways to optimize the nutritional requirements.

Companies continue to stay on task, continually evaluating the needs of the ferrets. “We let the ferrets show us by their production and health,” said Jack Fallenstein, president and CEP of Triple F Farms Inc.

The process is a daily one. “We make our food in small batches and it is fresh daily,” Peter Reid said. “When we put it on the pallets we can still feel it cooling down, so when it is at the distributor, it has been made in less than 10 to 20 days.”

Those doing the research and making the information available to the public have created a turn-around in how people view ferrets and nutrition. “A lot of it is due to the companies, veterinarians and ferret community in general banning together and getting the word out,” said Stefan Wawrzynski, operations director for Brisky Pet Products.

Looking back on how it all got started, Willard is proud of it and where it has gone. “It was a handy time,” he said. “We were there, carrying educational material and we still do. We think that’s the only way to approach this.” As a result, Willard makes himself available to those with questions to call upon him 24 hours a day.

Wawrzynski has seen quite a change in the general public because of the emphasis on education. “I used to work in a pet store and we sold hundreds of ferrets a year,” he said. “From day one, the employees were drilled that they do not send a ferret home with anything but ferret food, and if they did we did not stand behind the ferrets that weren’t being fed properly.”

With the education and wealth of information available, there is no excuse for ferrets to be fed anything less than nutritious meals that contribute to their health and longevity.

“The most important thing is the well-being of the ferret, and making sure they are living a full and happy life,” Wawrzynski said. “It’s gut-wrenching to see an otherwise normally vibrant animal lying there because it doesn’t have the energy to move.”

And make no mistake, a ferret’s diet can be the cause. According to Mazuri’s website, “Research has verified a direct link between diet and health in domestic ferrets. Dietary imbalance can lead to illness and can shorten your ferret’s life.”

Thankfully, ferret diets are going in the right direction.

“Since the formulation of the diets dedicated to ferrets, they have been healthier and living longer,” Shepard said, “and a lot of that is due to education. It has improved husbandry, health and improved things for the ferret owner.”

Jennifer Mons McLaughling lives in Minnesota and has been writing about the pet industry for more than 10 years.