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Richard Patton, animal nutritionist, makes himself at home with his dogs, Gracie, foreground, Riley, center, and Layla at his home in Galisteo. Patton says scraps from the Thanksgiving table are OK for dogs, as long as there's no starch or sugar in them.

No Piggish Pups

Dogs can get into the Thanksgiving mood, but only with healthy foods

BY POLLY SUMMAR
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It's Thanksgiving Day and that can mean only one thing: Fido is probably going to be scoring some major scraps from the table.

Think that's bad? Apparently not.

"If your diet is healthy, and you give a cross-section of that to your dog, it will be fine," says animal nutritionist Richard Patton. "But hear those two caveats: If your diet is healthy, and if it's a cross-section."

That means: turkey, fine; dressing, not so fine (too many soluble carbs such as starch and sugar); potatoes, no; sweet potatoes, "better" (but not if they're covered with marshmallows); cranberry sauce, probably not (there's that sugar issue again).

And what about Fluffy on Thanksgiving? "Cats are carnivores, unlike dogs, who are omnivores, says Patton. "Cats are pretty savvy. They go for the high-protein, whether it's eggs, dairy or meat. If you give them potatoes, they won't eat it."

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Table Scraps OK for Dogs

Business behind it

Perhaps only in New Mexico would the term "animal nutritionist" raise eyebrows. Patton is not a New Age practitioner, but a university-educated consultant who jets from Egypt to Australia, tackling problems ranging from which type of vitamin E works best in rhinos to how the koala is able to thrive in eucalyptus trees.

Today, for example, while most Thanksgiving revelers are recovering from overfeeding, Patton will be flying to the United Arab Emirates to give a lecture on dairy cows. Despite the Emirates' oil money, Patton says, "They have the same problems all of us have with the dairy cow. It's an animal that gives milk way beyond our ability to feed her."

As a cow gives milk, she keeps losing weight, Patton explains. The challenge is to keep her healthy. "If she doesn't feel good physiologically, she won't give milk or won't give it as long," he says. And taking care of her will cost the owners more money.

But that challenge is what Patton likes about "ruminant nutrition," the subject of his doctorate from Virginia Polytechnic Institute. "In trying to take care of the dairy cow," Patton says, "you develop intellectual muscle unlike you would any other species."

The Pennsylvania native claims it wasn't a very lofty goal that first brought him to the field of animal nutrition. "I saw it as a chance to be a cowboy and a scientist at the same time," Patton says. He took a course while a sophomore at Penn State University in animal nutrition and it was a perfect meld.

"I just felt an immediate comfort and a logic that escaped me in so many other courses like calculus or chemistry." Still, an interest in science does run in the family; his father was a professor at Penn State University and an expert on the mammary cell. And Patton's twin brother started a drug company that makes an aerosol insulin for diabetics.

Curious mind

Patton calls their childhood, among five younger siblings, a Huck Finn existence in the Tussey Mountains of central Pennsylvania where their favorite explorations were in the field of explosives. "I was obsessed with gun powder as a kid and blowing things up," says Patton. "It's only by the grace of God that I have all my fingers and can see."

In a particularly memorable event, Patton and his twin brother blew up the family toilet. "My dad was convinced there was something wrong with us," Patton says,

If you go

Want the skinny on the best foods to feed your pets? Animal nutritionist Richard Patton, a Galisteo resident for the past 19 years who's consulted around the world, will speak on "Keeping Healthy Animals Healthy," at 7 p.m. Dec. 6, at The Feed Bin, 1202 W. Alameda, in Santa Fe. To RSVP, call (505) 982-0511. Tickets are \$15 each.

"although I think he's come to soften that view over the years."

Patton's other interest during those years — along with sports and girls — was horses. "I was always trying to keep one in the front yard," he says.

Even today, Patton says, "I love my work, but playing with horses is my passion." And the latest extension of that passion is fox hunting, the result of an English saddle he bought for \$95 five years ago. "I always felt that a good English rider was better than a good Western rider," he says.

"Fox hunting is the best-kept secret in the horse world," Patton says. "Everybody who ever had a horse dreams of galloping across the desert, but they never do it."

With fox hunting, it's possible. "We did 24 miles on Friday," Patton says of a recent hunt, "and it was all either a trot, high-lope or gallop, and we did it in 3½ hours over jumps and through streams." The fox is replaced by a coyote these days, and Patton says he thinks the coyote actually enjoys the chase.

On Patton's 24-acre spread in Galisteo, he points out his horse Lichtenstein, a Holstein (German sport horse) his wife, Elayne, a Santa Fe Properties Realtor, gave him for his birthday. Patton says he fell in love with the area when he was looking for a place for the two to be married 20 years ago. "It looks very much like the country where I grew up," he says.

Today, he's able to keep four horses next to his house, as well as three dogs and three cats, not that he has much to say about their diets, he says jokingly. "They pay me a whole lot of money in Europe to tell them how to feed dogs," he says, "but in this house I'm the last one anyone checks with. You're never a prophet in your own land."

Dietary problems

Patton says most of the nutritional problems he sees in pets are because of the owners. "The single biggest problem, about 85 percent, is obesity," he says. "Killin' 'em with love."

Nutrition, by itself, is hardly

ever the problem. "It just gets worse and worse until something else turns up," says Patton. During the early 1970s, for example, most dog owners fed their pets canned dog food that was essentially just raw meat without any bone or supplementation, he says. "If you do that, especially with puppies," says Patton, "they're going to end up with some kind of bone disease."

And some nutrition problems are slow to develop. If dogs are fed only dry food that's expanded with wheat and starch, he says, "Chances are, the dog will die at 12 instead of 16. The solution is to lower the soluble carbohydrates they get over a lifetime." To that, dog owners can add quality table scraps and quality canned meat, Patton says.

In explaining a proper dog diet, Patton suggests looking at the coyote, also an omnivore. "If you're up hiking and you read coyote dung, you'll see bunny fur, juniper berries, grass, mouse teeth," he says. "A dog should be eating some of everything."

Patton says the Eskimos have traditionally fueled their dogs on whole fish. "That includes the bones and the intestinal contents of the fish, which would include things like plankton," he says.

Most pet owners, too, feed big dogs just once a day. "They should get fed 2-3 times a day," he says. "Actually, all dogs should. We — dogs and people — have zero ability to deal with excess." So the excess gets stored as fat.

Patton says his job satisfaction comes in keeping healthy animals healthy, "which is much more rewarding than the sadness of veterinary medicine, fixing unhealthy situations."

Sometimes keeping an animal healthy is about keeping it happy. In his work with a number of zoos, Patton analyzed the diets of all the animals by computer. But at the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in the late 1980s, when the monkeys and chimps had eczema, dandruff and dull coats, a computer analysis wouldn't have worked.

The zoo was outfitted in glass and tile, considered state of the art in the 1950s, but it was a sterile environment the primates weren't used to. "I suggested adding hay," says Patton, but it wasn't until some keepers put peanuts in the hay that the skin conditions improved. "It was the activity," says Patton. "They spent all day looking for peanuts and got happy. It was occupational therapy."

Patton says he sees that happiness factor repeatedly. "A horse is meant to be free on the steppes and plains of the world, and we confine it in a stall — it's a social animal. Then they get colic and we think it's nutrition. It's not, it's behavior."