

Do You Buy Your Pet's Food from This Con Artist?

They surveyed 1,500 pet owners, collected their opinions and created a marketing spin to match those data points. They claim their new food focuses on what you want. Buyer beware! Its 40-item ingredient list is horrifying - the polar opposite of what you want. Do you buy this brand?

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Processed pet food companies appear to be planning to use the clean eating and clean label trends in human food to position their products as “clean”
- Clean eating is informally defined as eating whole, real foods that are un- or minimally processed, refined and handled, making them as close to their natural form as possible
- One big pet food company is now declaring all their dry formulas clean even though they appear to contain the same rendered, extruded ingredients most dry pet foods contain
- As a concerned pet parent, it's important to realize that the nature of the raw product used in rendering, combined with the extrusion process used to manufacture kibble, produces pet food that is essentially the opposite of “clean”
- As pet parents search for the optimal diet to feed their animal companions, it's important to know the difference between misleading marketing hype and honest information about the pet food they purchase

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Many of you have probably heard the terms clean eating and clean labels. Neither of these phrases has an official definition, however, generally speaking, eating clean “... is about eating whole foods, or ‘real’ foods — those that are un- or minimally processed, refined, and handled, making them as close to their natural form as possible.”¹ And according to Go Clean Label:

“Clean label is a consumer driven movement, demanding a return to ‘real food’ and transparency through authenticity. Food products containing natural, familiar, simple ingredients that are easy to recognize, understand, and pronounce. No artificial ingredients or synthetic chemicals.”²

In order to help you spot pet food marketing hype and learn the difference between marketing buzzwords and the reality of the pet food behind the spin, this article will discuss how Big Pet Food appears to be gearing up to use the “clean eating” and “clean label” trends to sell their products.

How One Pet Food Producer Is Co-Opting the 'Clean Food' Trend

NUTRO, a processed pet food manufacturer owned by Mars Petcare North America, conducted an online pet food survey of 1,500 dog owners. The survey collected the following data points:³

- 83% of pet parents make an effort to read their dog's food label, and half do this always or often
- Given the option, two thirds (65%) would opt for non-GMO ingredients for their dog's food
- 92% say it's important that their family's food has ingredients that are whole, simple and not artificial

Coincidentally (not), NUTRO has "... launched a new corporate philosophy that focuses on the concept of clean food: NUTRO. FEED CLEAN."

*"The NUTRO brand is taking the clean eating trend in human food and translating that to pet food, creating recipes that satisfy the nutritional needs of dogs," says the general manager of pet specialty for Mars Petcare North America. "That's the sweet spot we're going for, and I believe NUTRO dry dog food gets it exactly right."*⁴

Let's dissect this glaringly obvious example of marketing spin, shall we? NUTRO/Mars Petcare is claiming they're applying clean eating philosophies to processed pet food, which is, to my knowledge, virtually impossible to accomplish (more about that shortly). However, since there's no formal definition of "clean food," anybody can make any claim they like.

Interestingly, NUTRO also states that in "translating" the human clean eating trend to pet food, they'll be "creating recipes that satisfy the nutritional needs of dogs." So what were they creating before jumping on the clean food bandwagon? Non-nutritional dog food recipes?

Bottom line: The Mars Petcare statement above says nothing specific about the ingredients used, and commits to nothing. It's 100% meaningless marketing hype.

Here's What Big Pet Food Considers a 'Clean' Dry Dog Food

To understand how rendered pet food could possibly be "clean," NUTRO's website posted this announcement on their home page:

"CLEAN is the new standard

A pet's food energizes them from the inside out, and NUTRO™ clean recipes are simple, purposeful, and trustworthy — made of real, recognizable, non-GMO ingredients†. Each of our Dry Dog Food recipes is clean, and the same is true for our NUTRO™ Dry Cat recipes.

But we have more work to do on all of our wet, treats and MAX™ Cat products, and we won't rest until choosing any of our products means choosing clean for your pet. NUTRO. FEED CLEAN™.

†Trace amounts of genetically modified material may be present due to potential cross contact during manufacturing."⁵

More marketing spin, obviously. “Simple, purposeful, and trustworthy” recipes — what do those buzzwords really mean with regard to your dog’s nutrition? And the recipes are made of “real, recognizable, non-GMO ingredients” (except there might be trace amounts of GMO ingredients due to the manufacturing process ...).

Take a look at the ingredient list for one of NUTRO’s “clean” products, WHOLESOME ESSENTIALS™ Adult Dry Dog Food with Farm-Raised Chicken, Brown Rice & Sweet Potato Recipe:⁶

Chicken, Chicken Meal, Whole Brown Rice, Brewers Rice, Split Peas, Rice Bran, Chicken Fat (preserved with Mixed Tocopherols), Barley, Lamb Meal, Dried Sweet Potato, Natural Flavor, Dried Plain Beet Pulp, Flaxseed, Potassium Chloride, Choline Chloride, DL-Methionine, Salt, Dried Apples, Dried Blueberries, Dried Carrots, Mixed Tocopherols and Citric Acid (preservatives), Zinc Sulfate, Niacin Supplement, Biotin, Vitamin E Supplement, Iron Amino Acid Chelate, D-Calcium Pantothenate, Riboflavin Supplement (Vitamin B2), Selenium Yeast, Vitamin B12 Supplement, Copper Amino Acid Chelate, Pyridoxine Hydrochloride (Vitamin B6), Manganese Amino Acid Chelate, Vitamin A Supplement, Thiamine Mononitrate (Vitamin B1), Vitamin D3 Supplement, Folic Acid, Rosemary Extract

Oddly, this list of “clean” ingredients looks quite similar to the ingredient lists of many processed dry dog foods. The words simple, real or recognizable should not be used to describe a dog food formula that contains almost 40 ingredients (most of them nutrient add-ins after high-heat processing destroys the nutrients in the actual food), synthetic vitamins and numerous impossible-to-pronounce ingredients.

The take-home message here for pet parents is that processed pet food producers are using trendy terms like “clean eating” and “clean labels” as marketing ploys. Rendered and extruded pet food cannot, by definition, be clean.

Rendered Ingredients Aren’t ‘Clean’

A quick refresher on the “raw product” renderers deal in, from a 2004 report to Congress, which describes how unclean some of their ingredients are:

“Renderers annually convert 47 billion pounds or more of raw animal materials into approximately 18 billion pounds of products. Sources for these materials include meat slaughtering and processing plants (the primary one); dead animals from farms, ranches, feedlots, marketing barns, animal shelters, and other facilities; and fats, grease, and other food waste from restaurants and stores.”⁷

Renderers drive around in specially designed trucks picking up dead farm and ranch animals, as well as dead pets from animal shelters. They also collect fat, grease and other human food waste from food outlets. All renderers operate the same way — there are no “clean” operations to my knowledge.

The rendering process involves combining “raw product” as described above in huge containers and grinding the mixture down to chips or shreds. The mixture is then cooked at 220 to 270 degrees F for up to an hour, which separates the meat from the bone.

The grease, also called tallow, rises to the top, is skimmed off the mixture and often becomes the mystery “animal fat” frequently found on pet food ingredient labels. The remaining product is put in a press that squeezes out all the moisture and pulverizes the material into a powder. Shaker screens are used to separate excess hair and large bone chips from the powder. The result is meat and bone meal added to pet food formulas.

Let's quickly compare the above to the definition of clean food: "Whole foods, or 'real' foods — those that are un- or minimally processed, refined, and handled, making them as close to their natural form as possible."

Extruded Ingredients Also Aren't 'Clean'

Extrusion is a process that has been used by the pet food industry for decades. About 95% of dry pet diets are manufactured using the extrusion process. Batches of dog or cat food ingredients (including meat and bone meal from the rendering process described above) are mixed, sheared and heated under high pressure, forced through a spiral shaped screw and then through the die of the extruder machine. The result is a ribbon-like product called extrudate that is knife-cut and dried.

The high temperature used in extrusion (nearly 400 degrees F) and the short time frame to process (under five minutes) creates continuous chemical and physical changes to the ingredient mixture. These changes include starch gelatinization, inactivation of nutritionally active factors, protein denaturation and vitamin loss (which is why so many of the items on dry pet food ingredient lists are vitamins that must be added back in after the manufacturing process kills all the vitamins in the food).

Further, low-quality proteins and fats, when processed at high temperatures, create cancerous byproducts, like heterocyclic amines. Now let's take one more look at the definition of clean food while keeping the extrusion process in mind: "Whole foods, or 'real' foods — those that are un- or minimally processed, refined, and handled, making them as close to their natural form as possible."

Bottom Line: Don't Buy the Hype!

There are few situations in which the old adage "let the buyer beware" is more appropriate than when deciding what food to offer your animal companion. Between low-grade ingredients, too-frequent recalls, and an exploding population of pets with chronic digestive issues, allergies and degenerative disease, the last thing you need as a pet parent is to be sucked in by the latest, greatest pet food marketing gimmick designed to make you believe you're doing the right thing for your dog or cat.

Many knowledgeable pet parents these days are exploring homemade diets, fresh food diets made by smaller, transparent pet food producers, raw diets and other alternatives to low-quality processed pet food sold via high-quality, typically misleading marketing campaigns.

The best thing you can do is to search this website for more information on choosing the best diet for your pet. There are dozens of videos and articles here that can help you become more knowledgeable about pet nutrition so that you can make the best diet choices for your own dog or cat.

If you want to help change the deceptive practices occurring in the pet food industry, consider becoming a member of the **Association for Truth in Pet Food**, which is the only organization out there committed to holding the regulatory agencies and AAFCO accountable. Also, truly "clean label" pet food manufacturers are choosing to join the new professional pet food organization, **Next Generation Pet Food Manufacturers Association**.

Sources and References

¹ Fitness

² [Go Clean Label](#)

^{3, 4} [PetfoodIndustry.com, April 27, 2017](#)

⁵ [NUTRO](#)

⁶ [NUTRO Wholesome Essentials Dry Dog Food Farm-Raised Chicken, Brown Rice & Sweet Potato Recipe](#)

⁷ [Animal Rendering: Economics and Policy. CRS Report for Congress, March 17, 2004](#)
