

# Sojos Surges Into High Gear

Pet Product News offers an exclusive look at what's brand-new at Sojos, the trends that drive the company and its products, and what the industry can expect from its founder, Ward Johnson, in the future.

**BY ELLYCE ROTHROCK**

*Published: 2016.07.29 05:58 PM*



## **Sojos Complete for Puppies, the first life-stage food in the raw, shelf-stable food category**

---

The year 2016 marks another year of double-digit growth at Sojos, thanks to increasing interest in raw nutrition among pet owners who care as much about their pet's health as they do their own. To help meet demand, the company completed expansion of its production facility in Minneapolis and is preparing to release Sojos Complete for Puppies, the brand's first life-stage food, on the heels of its launch of its first freeze-dried treats for cats.

Mindful of independent retailers' competitive challenges, the company is implementing a new minimum retail price policy with the help of its new parent company, WellPet.

**Pet Product News: You bought Sojos in 1996 when freeze-dried raw nutrition was in its infancy. It's now 2016 and the category has exploded. It must feel pretty good knowing your beliefs were right on target all along.**



**Ward Johnson:** Sojos was founded on the belief that raw nutrition could make a visible and profound difference in a pet's health. But in '96, we were clearly ahead of the times. Back then, consumers put much less emphasis on the contents of their own food, let alone their pet's. As a result, there were only a handful of pet companies advocating raw nutrition—and freeze-dried raw food was virtually unheard of.

Of course, since then there's been a fundamental shift in attitude regarding the role of food—and the importance of a healthful diet. Today's consumers are keenly interested in where their food is sourced, how it's produced and how it compares to others in terms of nutrient content.

That said, concerned pet parents are now hyper-focused on nutrition as the key to whole body health and longevity. And raw food has become an important part of this movement—with pet parents looking for safe, convenient ways to feed their pets the freshest ingredients possible.

Our goal has always been to change the way that people feed their pets. And after 20 years of hard work, it's gratifying to now see more and more people discovering the benefits of a raw diet. From healthier skin, coat, teeth and gums to a stronger immune system to a reduction in allergies—it's adding up to longer, healthier lives. And we're proud to be part of that.

**PPN: This year wrapped up a decade of double-digit growth at Sojos. Looking back, when did the turning point for freeze-dried raw nutrition and Sojos occur?**

**WJ:** We've always experienced year-over-year growth. So it's hard to pinpoint exactly when freeze-dried raw nutrition took off. No doubt the recall of kibble and canned products in 2007 was a turning point. That opened the eyes of consumers to the importance of what they were putting in their dogs' dishes—and ever since, we've seen consistent double-digit increases.

I don't want to imply that pet parents haven't always wanted the best for their pets, but since 2007 they've developed a much greater awareness of what the "best" truly looks like. As a result, they started reading ingredient labels, researching sourcing and scrutinizing manufacturing practices. And no surprise, the interest in freeze-dried products began growing dramatically.

Today, I think it's fair to say the freeze-dried form is recognized as a full-fledged category and a clear alternative to kibble and canned foods. And I can't say enough about the role of the independent pet channel in making that happen. Our brick-and-mortar retailers continue to be instrumental in advocating, educating and spreading the word. And thanks in large part to their efforts, more and more pet parents are recognizing that freeze-dried foods are not only superior to highly processed food—they're also a safe and convenient alternative to frozen raw food.

# We're thrilled to be launching two new recipes made specifically for puppies: Sojos Complete for Puppies, the first life-stage food in the raw, shelf-stable food category—and Sojos SimplyPuppy raw, all-meat treats.—Ward Johnson, founder of Sojos

**PPN: Talk about Sojos' expanded manufacturing facility in Minneapolis. How long has the expansion been in the works? Was it backed/subsidized by WellPet? What has changed about the way the company produces its products?**

**WJ:** First of all, nothing has fundamentally changed about the way we produce our recipes themselves. But thanks to the growing interest in Sojos recipes, we've needed to expand in order to meet demand and help more pets realize the benefits of raw nutrition. Our new partnership with WellPet has enabled us to expedite that expansion.

As a result, we've been able to add more jobs to the local economy and we've been able to stay at the forefront of innovation in the freeze-dried and raw category. WellPet shares our passion to not only provide safe, high-quality products—but also to create a great place to work.

**PPN: Sojos has never experienced a recall. What is it about the company's processes that help ensure its foods' safety?**

**WJ:** Our patent-pending freeze-drying process locks in the taste and essential nutrients in raw meat while helping to eliminate the risk of food-borne pathogens. We employ a rigorous quality management system, all of our raw ingredients are USDA inspected, and our recipes are made here in the USA—under our own roof, of course.

In-house manufacturing, with a 360-degree view of our processes, gives us virtually complete control over everything with the Sojos name on it. That, plus our commitment to using only real ingredients, with no GMOs, nothing artificial and nothing from China—are all key components of our mission to make raw nutrition convenient, affordable and, above all, safe.

Finally, our partnership with WellPet ensures that as we grow, we'll continue to have the resources to keep manufacturing in-house and at the forefront of quality and food safety.

**PPN: For independent retailers unfamiliar with or new to the concept, what is MRP, how does it benefit them and how do resources from parent company WellPet make establishing one possible?**

**WJ:** Manufacturers, like Sojos, deploy a minimum retail price policy (MRP) to ensure competitive price points across all channels and all retailers. In effect, the MRP is a means to level the retail playing field—and introduce more rigorous enforcement measures to monitor and manage pricing compliance across channels.

By joining the family of WellPet brands, we've been able to tap into their expertise and resources, including the technology needed to effectively administer our new MRP. As a result, we're confident these new measures will help keep products competitively priced across channels—while ensuring ready access to pet parents and fair return for our retailers.

**PPN: The humanization of pets has touched almost every corner of the independent pet industry, especially food. Do you believe pet owners will continue to pay the rising costs of pet foods, especially those in the raw and dehydrated/freeze-dried categories?**

**WJ:** At Sojos, we see pets as part of the family—as children—and our customers feel the same. That means choosing food based on what’s inside the bag, not the price tag on the shelf. Our pet parents want to know they’re feeding the best—and that includes an ingredient list they can understand and trust.

If you know what you’re putting in your pet’s bowl, and you can see the difference that quality, raw nutrition makes, price becomes a secondary consideration. But even so, our customers soon discover that Sojos’ unique blend of freeze-dried meat and air-dried fruits and veggies delivers a price-per-feeding that’s actually highly competitive compared to better kibble and canned foods.

**PPN: How have retailers and the cat-loving public taken to the NaturalCat treat line since its debut? Is the Sojos Turkey Complete cat food similar to your dog foods? How do the ingredient profiles differ? Is the consumer education process different?**



**WJ:** Since we unveiled them earlier this year, new Sojos NaturalCat treats have blown away our sales projections. It’s obvious that cat parents are looking for more healthful alternatives—and that clearly sets the stage for future NaturalCat offerings, including equally appealing main meals.

Like our dog food, it’s a blend of freeze-dried raw meat combined with fruits and vegetables. But given cats’ unique nutritional needs, our feline recipe is calibrated to meet their specific daily dietary requirements.

In terms of consumer education, it’s obviously important for both cat and dog parents to understand the power of fresh, uncompromised ingredients and the benefit they deliver to their pets. But at the same time, the physiology and lifestyles of cats and dogs are different—and pet parents should be well-versed in how to choose a diet that fits their pet’s particular needs.

**PPN: The company is preparing to launch a diet in a whole new category: life stage. Tell me about Sojos Complete for Puppies.**

**WJ:** We’re thrilled to be launching two new recipes made specifically for puppies: Sojos Complete for Puppies, the first life-stage food in the raw, shelf-stable food category—and Sojos SimplyPuppy raw, all-meat treats.



Sojos Complete for Puppies is appropriate for all breeds. It combines raw, freeze-dried turkey and omega-rich salmon with select superfoods and a blend of essential vitamins and minerals. The “soft-serve” mix is particularly beneficial to puppies with developing teeth and gums. And five-minute rehydration, a first for Sojos, offers added convenience for puppy parents who are new to the category.

**PPN: What is your one-sentence sales pitch you’d like to see independent retailers use with Sojos’ diets and treats?**

**WJ:** That’s easy: Sojos is the “sweet spot” between the superior nutrition and taste of raw and the convenience of kibble.

**PPN: What has been your best moment since purchasing Sojos? Since WellPet acquired Sojos?**

**WJ:** Nothing beats meeting dogs that have been transformed by a Sojos diet. My favorite example is a dog named Celia, the inspiration for Project Celia—our outreach to seemingly unadoptable shelter dogs.

When we filmed “before” footage of Celia, she was in horrible shape—virtually no hair, covered with sores, obviously miserable. A handful of weeks later we had her back for a followup, and the transformation was amazing. She was happy and healthy, with a full coat of healthy hair and a proud, wagging tail. It brought tears to my eyes. We talk every day about transforming the lives of pets, but nothing compares to seeing it with your own eyes.

Since being acquired by WellPet, I can rest easy knowing that Sojos’ mission of transforming lives is not only going to continue—but grow like never before.

**PPN: What plans do you have in store for the pet industry?**

**WJ:** I’ve always been a passionate pet parent, and I plan to let that passion continue to guide me and my choices. I’m sure that will include working with others to continue moving the industry down a path toward greater transparency, improved sourcing and higher standards of excellence. And no doubt, as an active member of the Sojos team, I’ll keep advocating on behalf of pets and the transformative power of raw nutrition. With the support of WellPet, we’re going to take that mission to an ever-wider audience.

**PPN: What does the future hold for Sojos?**

**WJ:** Our plan for the future is simple: continue to introduce more pets to the power of raw nutrition while staying at the forefront of innovation, safety and quality. Nothing would make me more proud than to one day see raw pet food as the new normal.

We're always looking for opportunities to innovate and push the boundaries in raw nutrition. That said, you can be sure we have a robust new product pipeline and we'll continue growing our offerings—including new life-stage foods.

*Ellyce Rothrock is editor-in-chief for Pet Product News.*

Copyright 2016 PPN, LLC. All rights reserved.