**YOKO**

**Yoko is the dog treat brand with a conscience. Founded by creative partners Louis and Ashley with their Italian Greyhound mix serving as the muse, they have redesigned perceptions around the dog food industry to create products with purpose. Upon adopting Yoko, who came with specific health needs, they coalesced Louis’ background in healthcare research and Ashley’s creative experience in fine arts to create healthy, superfood-charged treats with a mindful, minimalist streak.**

Louis and Ashley’s journey into the complex world of canine nutrition began the moment they took the leap into becoming dog owners. Louis grew up in Portugal amongst a dog-oriented family and was therefore well-primed for the role, while Ashley used his spare time to actively scour the internet for breeders. However, their jet setting careers weren’t conducive to bringing a dog into their compact family of two at the onset of their relationship. It wasn’t until Ashley established his own company and began working for himself when they could see their lifestyles accommodating a new member of the family. Ashley pragmatically conveys their initial reticence and deliberation. “We didn’t want to foolishly jump into getting a dog without knowing whether we could look after it properly, so our decision process took months.”

When the time finally came, Ashley strategised a plan. He arranged a visit to the rescue bus which frequented their local pet shop each Sunday. However once arriving, the bus simply did not appear. Louis admits, “We were disappointed, but when we ventured downtown to run an errand…” Ashley finishes his story, “…We happened to walk by a rescue centre and spontaneously walked in.” Ashley then explained his particular interest in Whippets to the rescue representative, primarily due to their elegant appearance and affectionate temperament. He delineated the importance of having a dog of a manageable size which could accompany the pair at all times while living in such a large city. The woman wrote the information down and returned with a swaddled blanket in her arms. Yoko’s diminutive face popped out. While the men sat on the floor, Yoko instantly jumped onto Louis’ lap and the couple simply looked at each other. They did not anticipate it would be quite as easy as this.

Louis describes the memory of his elation. “We were beyond excited. Just thinking about it makes me emotional - I will never forget that moment!” Yoko’s formative period was unfortunately not quite as easy as her smooth transition into Louis and Ashley’s lives. She was left at the rescue centre as a puppy because her previous owners were not able to properly look after her. Severely malnourished, had been dropped on the floor which broke both of her front legs and resulted in her succumbing to life in casts for the seven months following surgery. The amount of care and devotion Ashley and Louis have since shown her has fortunately outweighed her previous adversities. Ashley gushes about her unique character: “Yoko has the best personality and is perfect for us in all aspects. She’s discerning about other dogs and the food she eats. She loves to play. I wouldn’t think of any other breed than Italian Greyhounds in the future, though admittedly Yoko has some Pinscher or Chihuahua thrown in as well.”

Yoko not only enhanced the men’s personal lives, but also played an integral role in inspiring their career direction. When asked about the preparatory steps involved in developing the Yoko brand, Ashley explains how the precursor was investing a great deal of time and energy into Yoko’s personal health and healing. The couple paid particular attention to her food and how nutrition plays a significant part in the repair process. Louis’ work in healthcare informed their research as he channelled his focus into the way superfoods can heal illness. He states, “While researching dog foods, we were shocked at the number of additives, unnecessary sugars and colouring, which inspired us to make our own food. Yoko benefitted from this new diet and not long after, the rescue centre emphasised how they were amazed at the degree of her healing progress.” Yoko’s health became their key concern and soon transferred into the ethos for their entire brand.

Louis unveils an enduring problem in the dog nutrition industry: “Chocolate made specifically for dogs might be safe for them, but it perpetuates the message that it’s fine to feed your dog chocolate - which is a dangerous message needing to be addressed. Unfortunately, this leads to humans projecting their emotions onto their dog, such as, ‘I like this cupcake, so I’ll let my dog have it.’” There is a level of necessary education which sadly too many individuals fail to integrate. This is why the core of Ashley and Louis’ business and principal of their brand is to encourage dog owners to become mindful of what they feed their dogs. Ashley suggests, “It doesn’t have to be expensive, but just conscious. We want to change the mentality around treats.” Their conscientious products reflect this holistic mentality. The first Yoko treats which took two years of development were spinach biscuits with tahini, chickpea flour, apple, fig, coconut oil and cinnamon. They created a comprehensive range by adding five additional nutritionally-rich products: kale, flaxseed, fish oil, seaweed and spirulina; carrot and turmeric; goji and raspberry and most recently salmon and sweet potato.

Yoko’s ingredients each have a purpose. Seaweed and figs support the digestive system while flaxseed and turmeric are anti-inflammatory. Figs are a fantastic source of fibre and goji berries are this generation’s go-to superfood. Chickpea flour ensures sensitive dogs’ stomachs aren’t triggered by gluten while tahini is a nutritional powerhouse and a source of a multitude of vitamins and minerals. All of Yoko’s treats contain ingredients brimming with Vitamin C and antioxidants which benefit joint health and quality of fur. They also produce an organic joint oil infused with naturally anti-inflammatory turmeric and ginger. Yoko products work for dogs in the same way vitamins assist humans, therefore by giving your dog Yoko treats and oils on a daily basis, you are directly feeding them the powerhouse nutrients allowing them to lead longer, healthier and happier lives.

Ashley outlines Yoko’s specific process: “Yoko ingredients are dehydrated, not cooked. As soon as you bring heat to vegetables or fruit, it diminishes the nutrients while dehydrating ensures enzymes, vitamins and minerals are preserved.” Dehydration also works to intensify flavours and is a tried and trusted 1,000-year-old preservative method. While many store-bought dried vegetables and fruits are laden with sulphur dioxide to prevent discolouration, Yoko’s ingredients are 100% natural without additives. Louis explains, “We began by investing in dog nutrition and recipe books to educate ourselves. Although certain products are safe for dogs, it doesn’t mean they add any nutritional value, so we aimed to create a product with each ingredient benefitting their diet.” Their next step was speaking with pet nutritionists and laboratory testing, ensuring values of fats and proteins were well-balanced for treats given to dogs up to four times daily.

From the laboratory to the market, the Yoko brand debut was introduced organically. Louis and Ashley spoke with dog owners about their needs which incrementally shaped the way they developed products. Ashley illustrates, “We had dogs in front of us to ascertain their immediate reaction which allowed us to receive direct, unbiased feedback. We didn’t want to go online as we valued the face-to-face approach with our customers in order to build a community.” During the brand’s early days, the couple lived near Brixton and began with a grassroots approach: starting the process at the local street market just outside their door. Their customers purchased treats and soon returned, explaining how their dogs’ stomach issues disappeared alongside their fur appearing much healthier. Louis details, “This was what we needed to hear to know our products are working within the community. There is a space for better dog nutrition which dog owners are looking for, and Yoko fills this gap.”

Within the company, Ashley and Louis place the most value on continual knowledge development. They highlight the critical importance of educating themselves on the negative environmental impact of standard dog foods while delivering products which provide a positive counterbalance. On a local level, they continue setting their sights on benefitting local economy while also offering workshops for dog owners so they can learn to make their own healthy dog treats at home. Even Yoko’s considered branding stands by their ethical values while remaining entirely functional, from the aesthetic design to the colour palette. The Yoko packaging comprises minimal design, focusing on the quality of materials over visuals and utilising simplistic brown paper bags which are recyclable, biodegradable and effectively protect treats from water. Louis and Ashley close with a statement pointing to the integrity which runs through their business. “We don’t need superfluous elements in order to promote a good lifestyle. More than ever, our generation has a responsibility to become more conscious. That has been Yoko’s aim from the beginning.”