

# A Breed Apart

by [Donald Liebenson](#) • August 24, 2016 • [Leave a Comment](#)

Hazel, 3, a notoriously finicky eater, regards the Crazy Twist baked treat from Happy Husky Bakery with her characteristic wariness, bites off a piece, and then drops it on the floor. Seconds later, she reconsiders, picks it up off the floor and, to the amazement of her parents, eats it, and asks for the rest.

To be clear, Hazel is a Golden Retriever, and Happy Husky Bakery is a purveyor of dog treats, all baked at the Prairie Avenue store in Evanston's Central Street Business District. In November, the bakery will mark its eighth birthday (that's more than 50 in dog years).



Evanston is something of a bakery mecca. You've got your Tag's Bakery on Central Street, which marks its 80th anniversary next year. You've got your Bennison's Bakery on Davis Street, which will celebrate its 80th in 2018. You've got Beth's Little Bake Shop, a mere puppy at one year old, also on Central Street. The Happy Husky Bakery offers a healthy snacking alternative for the community's canine constituency.

"The concept has always been to be a bakery with dog and cat supplies, rather than a pet supply store with a bakery," owner Todd Ruppenthal states. "I wanted it to be a bakery with treats that look like something people would want to eat but were created for dogs and cats."

Happy Husky Bakery's origin story is one of serendipitous inspiration. As Ruppenthal tells it, he and his business partner Stephen Farmer were having lunch at Prairie Joe's and mulling over future endeavors. Ruppenthal jokingly describes himself as a "Jack of all trades, master of none."

The Wisconsin native earned his degree in public relations and marketing and worked for two years in that field. He was a stockbroker, worked in nutrition, was an executive director for a not-for-profit arts organization, and was in the hotel industry for seven years. At the time of that fateful Prairie Joe's lunch, he was going to go back to school to get his masters in nutrition.

On their way back to the car, they passed an open storefront at 2601 Prairie Avenue. His business partner remarked, apropos of nothing, "That would be a great place for a pet bakery." Ruppenthal, a member of the Siberian Husky Club of Greater Chicago, responded, "We could call it the Happy Husky Bakery."

By the time they got back to the car, the idea had become less whimsical and more, "We can do that."

Four months later, they did.

A visit to a gelato emporium on Central Street afforded Ruppenthal an opportunity to watch passersby and see how many people with dogs walked by. A subsequent drive to scope out the neighborhood—single family homes, an elementary school and a middle school—confirmed his gut feeling: "This is a good location," he concluded. "Where there are kids, there are usually dogs."

Trained baker was not among Ruppenthal's skills, but his dog, Ginger (a Siberian Husky named after

the actress Ginger Rogers), was the original impetus to create healthy dog treats that he would one day sell at the Happy Husky Bakery.

"When I adopted her, she was underweight and was not food-motivated," he says. "She resisted store-bought treats."

Ruppenthal's first attempt at creating a homemade snack from a recipe included on a dog rescue group's e-mail was a success. Taking inspiration from pet treat cookbooks, he created original, healthier treats by removing ingredients such as bleached flour, added sugar, and salt. Once the idea for the bakery was solidified, he made use of his marketing degree, handing out his creations at the local dog park. He set up an online survey to gauge the favorites. He offered a one dollar gift card for each survey returned to be used when he opened his bakery. "That was my market research," Ruppenthal says with a laugh. "It worked pretty well. There is only one treat we don't sell now that we did when we opened."

Finally, Ruppenthal muses, he has found his "adult job." "I love what I do," he states. "This is the hardest work I've ever done, but I've enjoyed it more than anything else."

The Crazy Twist, whose primary ingredients are chicken broth and flaxseed, is the top seller, followed by Heather's Hydrants, a beef liver, bacon, and cheese treat created by one of the bakery's previous chefs, and the Turbo Treat, named after a black lab who is one of the bakery's most frequent visitors.

Eight years on, the Happy Husky Bakery is more than a bakery with dog and cat supplies. It is a meeting place for families who get their own ice cream and gelato down the street and then bring their dogs in for one of Ruppenthal's Snow Dog Sundaes. Ruppenthal's dog ambassadors, Ginger, now 10, and Kelly (named after dancer Gene), 8 months old, allow families without dogs an opportunity to see how their children interact with them. The bakery also hosts periodic rescue awareness events.

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