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S.F.'S BEST FRIEND / Where pooches outnumber kids, impassioned, doting owners and hounds dressed to the canines treat all days like dog days

June 17, 2007 | By Meredith May, Chronicle Staff Writer

Carter, in a royal blue rugby shirt and tie, was ready for his first birthday party. A 6-foot poster bearing his likeness marked the gathering spot at Allysne Park in San Francisco, where 60 of his closest friends dipped their toes in an inflatable pool and noshed on beach-themed cupcakes designed by a food stylist.

Yes, it was a bit over the top for a Yorkshire terrier, but his parents were so proud.

Nobody beats San Francisco when it comes to doting on dogs. It's a city with luxury dog hotels, rooftop dog cocktail parties, a pet cemetery and City Hall plans to turn dog droppings into alternative energy. And the urban legend is actually true: Dogs outnumber children in the City by the Bay.

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Wilco (center), a Saluki, takes in the conversation at Zazie on Cole Street during Monday's dog night at the French restaurant, thanks to his owner, Gary Ellis (left). Chronicle photo by Brant Ward
Credit: Brant Ward

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There are an estimated 120,000 dogs in San Francisco, according to the city's Animal Care and Control department. There are anywhere from 108,000 to 113,000 children, according to U.S. census figures from 2000 and 2005.

Dogs dominate in part because it's becoming increasingly impossible for parents to afford to live in San Francisco -- 1,000 students disappear from the public schools each year. Also, a large percentage of the city's gay couples are choosing canines over kids, said Laura Cavaluzzo, San Francisco editor of urbanhound.com.

Add to that empty-nest Baby Boomers who are filling the void with man's best friends and San Francisco is starting to look more and more like Paris or Carmel, with cafe dogs lounging and specialty shops offering everything from dog massage to hot-pink pup sweaters that say "Biatch."

And nowhere in the city is it more of a dog's life than in District 8 -- encompassing the Noe Valley and Castro neighborhoods. A computer analysis of ZIP codes shows the highest number of dog licenses there -- though just 15 percent of San Franciscans license their dogs. Bernal Heights is also in the top three dog ZIP codes.

"There are very few businesses that don't allow you to just stroll in with your dog," said Cavaluzzo, who lives in District 8.

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On weekday evenings, parks become the social centers for neighbors and their dogs. At Duboce Park, several dozen dogs play in the two-block stretch of grass -- the French bulldog people sit together in one section, the Chihuahuaaphiles in another, and the bigger Labs and retrievers run in circles in the lower flat portion of the park. On a recent afternoon, one woman pushed her toy dog in a stroller. Another sat on a bench knitting her dog a sweater.

"It's such a routine that everyone knows everyone -- a newcomer stands out," said Paul Holtz, who shows up almost daily with his Rhodesian ridgeback, Scout.

At the Best in Show dog boutique on Castro Street, sales of high-end designer dog toys go up every year, said co-owner Richard Shiu, who can sometimes be found sporting a T-shirt that reads, "Dogs Are the New Kids."

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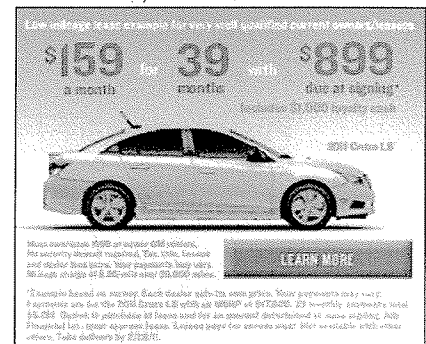
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"People want function, but they also want design," said Shiu, whose top-selling toy is a rubber squeaky bust of President Bush. (There's also Arnold Schwarzenegger, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and Hillary Rodham Clinton).

Six or seven years ago, Chiu said, pet "guardians" (the officially sanctioned term in San Francisco) had boring choices between rawhides and rope bones. Now, people with disposable income want water bowls in Eames-style bent cherrywood holders and Cubist pet car seats. Or a furry black "Jimmy Chew" pump.

Nationally, pet lovers spent \$38.5 billion on their animals in 2006, up from \$21 billion a decade earlier.

Miki Manji plunked down a couple of Benjamins at Best in Show for a gray zippered sweatshirt with a red leather Maltese cross on the back for her dapple dachshund, Louie.

"He goes everywhere with me," said Manji. "I'm going through a breakup, so he's really comforting to me right now."

Capitalizing on the dog worship is Ritu Raj, who just opened one of his posh pet resorts, Wag Hotel, in San Francisco. Vacationing owners can leave their beloved dogs and cats in suites with faux leather beds, flat-screen TVs and Webcams, knowing their animals will get daily play dates, organic meals and, for an extra fee, swim time in the pool, pedicures and blueberry facials.

Since it opened in May, Wag has had 1,000 overnight stays, and there are 5,000 upcoming reservation nights, Raj said. On Saturday, DJ Kid Loose spun on Wag's rooftop garden to entertain guests and their dogs at a cocktail party.

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"The key thing about San Francisco is people are looking for opportunities to go out and celebrate with their dogs," Raj said. "People are like proud papas -- they want to show off their dogs."

Dogs are also big politics in the city, and battles over whether to leash or not to leash in parks have been some of City Hall's most passionate. Local lawmakers vie to win endorsements from the San Francisco DOGPAC political action committee, and posing with dogs has become the equivalent of kissing babies.

San Francisco's dog culture is one of the main reasons city Animal Care and Control Director Carl Friedman moved here in the 1960s. Back then, he took his Weimaraner with him to classes at San Francisco State University.

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"Things have changed since then. People were more

laid-back about their dogs, now they treat them like family members. We certainly didn't have gourmet dog shops," he said.

Now there are dog restaurants.

Every Monday at Zazie in Cole Valley, dog owners can bring Fido to the trumpet vine-enclosed patio in back.

On a recent Zazie dog night, six dogs sat in their owners' laps or curled up under the tables. A pug from Carmel named Ruby insisted on roaming for scraps. The wait staff deftly stepped around her as they carried plates of salmon and poured glasses of Mutt Lynch Unleashed Chardonnay.

"When you come home after work and your dog has been alone all day, you really feel guilty if you go out to dinner, so that's why Zazie is perfect for us," said Janet Moomaw, who shared a table with her German shepherd mix Findlay, her girlfriend and her neighborhood dog walker.

Dog night has boosted what is a traditionally slow dinner night, said Zazie owner Jennifer Piallat, and aside from the occasional bark, there haven't been any problems. The only change was a ban on the long, stretchy leashes -- a request from the employees who kept tripping over them.

"We started dog night because we are a French restaurant, to be whimsical and to cater to the neighborhood," Piallat said. "I'd like to do it every night." Off-leash dog parks in San Francisco

Alta Plaza Park

(Jackson and Steiner) Second park terrace, on Clay, between Scott and Steiner.

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(19th St. and Dolores) South of tennis courts, north of soccer field, between Church and Dolores.

Douglass Park

(26th St. and Douglass)

Eureka Valley Park

(19th St. and Collingwood) East of baseball diamond.

Golden Gate Park

Four off-leash areas

1. Southeast section bounded by Lincoln, King, and 2nd and 7th Aves.
2. Northeast section at Stanyan and Grove.
3. South central area bounded by King, Middle and 34th and 38th Aves.
4. Fenced training area on north side of park near 38th Ave. and Fulton.

Lafayette Park

(Washington and Laguna) Near Sacramento St., between Octavia and Gough.

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McLaren Park

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2. Southsection via 1600 block of Geneva or 1600 block of Sunnydale ? exclusive of Sensitive Habitat Area.

Mountain Lake Park