Restaurants for Rescue
At Virginia cafés, restaurateurs pursue their passion for saving pets

On a wall at the Stray Cat Café in Arlington, Va., a giant kitty rendered in vibrant colors stalks toward the viewer, a white feather in his mouth. An enormous cat eye peeks from a doorway, and a huge paw rakes in a football-size chunk of kibble that spills from an overturned trash can.

Meanwhile, down the street at the Lost Dog Café, painted pooches are having a great time, some roasting a pizza over a fire, some playing a game of pool. (Sorry, no dogs playing poker.) Diners at both restaurants get a great beer selection, plus vegetarian and vegan options and fun food items like Mouse Tails (curly fries) and Cats-a-Dillas at the Stray Cat Café and a variety of pizzas named for dog breeds at its sister establishment.

The rescue takes dogs and cats from overcrowded shelters and other at-risk situations, providing spay/neuter, vaccinations, and any needed medical care before the pets go to their adoptive homes. The group has helped with HSUS-led rescues, accepting several heartworm-positive dogs from a hoarding raid who needed behavioral training, as well as dogs from a Missouri puppy mill rescue, pets displaced during Mississippi floods, shar-peis from a breeder surrender in Ohio, and more.

Each weekend, an army of volunteers (the rescue has about 2,400) transports dogs and cats to adoption events at pet stores in Virginia and Maryland. The rescue estimates that it has rehomed about 18,000 dogs and cats since its founding in 2001.

McAlwee and Underwood have been friends and business partners for almost 30 years, splitting their time between running restaurants and helping pets.

There’s no legal relationship between the cafés and the rescue, nor does the rescue receive a set percentage of the restaurants’ profits, but McAlwee and Underwood contribute a lot to keep it going—at least $100,000 a year, sometimes much more.

It’s the perfect arrangement, McAlwee says. “The bigger we grow, the more money we make, the more we’re able to help more animals.”

— Jim Baker