Goldendoodles, labradoodles and bernedoodles are everywhere.

They're now also a high-stakes, billion-dollar industry.

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On the first night of the 2024 goldendoodle conference, the breeders were out for pure blood. They'd come to a Radisson in Fort Worth, Texas, from suburbs across the US to eat Milk-Bone-dry sliders, throwback watery mixed drinks and take notes through two days of panels on everything from puppy socialization to post-whelping complications. The women—almost all the breeders were women—chatted about the best ways to acclimate doodle pups to the sounds of fireworks and ambulance sirens; debated the merits of Puppy Culture—a sort-of Baby Einstein program for dogs; and discussed whether something called Early Neurological Stimulation could stave off separation anxiety.

There was certainly a lot to celebrate—sales were booming, and they'd helped propagate what sometimes seemed like the most popular pet on the planet. But they were also concerned that their inability to attain approval by the American Kennel Club, and therefore the breeding establishment writ large, meant that their infamously cute crossbred creations weren't so-called true breeds, a designation that could put a premium on them. The AKC, which has final say on what is and is not considered an official breed, recognizes around 200 purebreds, and the goldendoodle, a golden retriever-poodle hybrid, is not one of them. So, by 8 p.m., the conferencegoers resorted to something many are guilty of in these overheated times: They likened the people they disagreed with to Nazis. "It's just like Hitler and some of his concepts," says Shari Hall, president of the Goldendoodle Association of North America (GANA), an organization founded in 2008 that now has about 200 members. "People no longer care about the concept of blood purity. And it's not like you can just make the ultimate dog." (AKC spokesperson Brandi Hunter Munden expressed offense at the organization being compared to Nazis and noted it has a separate program for mixed breeds.)

But the quest for the ideal dog is exactly what the business of doodles is about. Breeders have long been obsessed with dog optimization. They created the Labrador retriever in the Victorian era to help owners hunt. In Germany, also in the 19th century, a man who ran a local dog pound came up with the Doberman pinscher, thinking he could use more muscle at his other job—as a tax collector. But rather than breeding a dog that has a single utility for a subset of people, people engineered the goldendoodle and various other poodle-based hybrids—labradoodles, schnoodles, bernedoodles, cockapoos, on and on—as the ultimate pets for, well, everyone. PetMD deems their temperament a fit for cramped urban apartment dwellers, and insurance company MetLife Inc., in a pitch for pet insurance, claims they're just fuzzy-brained enough to withstand roughhousing from toddlers. They get rave reviews from DINKs (dual income, no kids), along with the kind of adults who uncomfortably refer to their animals as "fur babies."

How to Make a Doodle

"Is anyone else's doodle practically a child?" someone recently asked in the goldendoodle subreddit, which has 114,000 members. The resounding answer: "What do you mean practically?" Then there's the influencer class, like Cliff Brush Jr. and his canine celeb Brodie, a goldendoodle with 7.2 million TikTok followers. Brush, a full-time content creator, brags that his almost-human companion, who flies first class, is always feted by star-struck flight attendants. "A lot of times they let us do preboarding and let him sit in the cockpit with a captain's hat," says Brush.

The modern doodle was initially conceived of by Wally Conron, a breeder who worked for an Australian association for Seeing Eye dogs. He received a letter from a blind woman whose husband had a dog allergy, asking if he could create a hypoallergenic guide dog. After trying out 33 different poodles that didn't have the right temperament for the gig (poodles are famously independent-minded), he crossed one with an easygoing Lab. The experiment resulted in a full litter of what were then considered undesirable crossbreeds, so Conron came up with the catchy portmanteau that would soon ring out over dog parks from Adelaide to Zanesville: the labradoodle. Within a couple of decades, the AKC, which has always made the majority of its money through registering dogs as purebreds, saw its registrations starting to decline, in part, because of the doodle's usurping of the poodle. In 1990 there were 71,747 registered poodles; that number had dropped to a mere 21,545 by 2008—the last year the organization released this data.

While these days doodles are seemingly everywhere—on sidewalks, in cafes, at dinner parties—calculating the size of the Doodle Economy remains surprisingly elusive. "We do know that much like any other part of material culture, there are trends," says Stephen Zawistowski, a former senior executive for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals who holds a Ph.D. in animal genetics. "But we don't really have much statistics on any of this." Although there are now companies such as Pride & Prejudoodles, based in Virginia, charging more than $15,000 to deliver a fully trained doodle of "therapeutic quality," the average listing to buy one from a breeder is around $2,000. Factor in the cost of about $3,000 a year to maintain the animal, and it would put the industry easily north of a billion dollars. It's this kind of commercial frenzy that made Conron eventually call his doodle creation his life's greatest regret. "I opened a Pandora's box and released a Frankenstein's monster," Conron told ABC News Australia in 2019.

Hours before the goldendoodle conference ended, Robert Westra, a bald, bushy-bearded veterinarian who at the time worked in marketing for the genetic testing company Neogen Corp., took the stage to lecture on the Punnett square, a kind of genetic diagram that shows possible combinations of traits that parents can pass on to their offspring. It was a topic that would put any ninth-grade biology student to sleep, but the breeders were waving their phones in the air like they were at a Taylor Swift concert. That's because, according to Westra's calculations, their precious goldendoodle was mere generations away from becoming reliably replicable. Being able to produce dogs that are roughly the same in size, coat and temperament was the key in establishing new breeds. Doodles would soon look and act the same every time, making them even easier to market and sell.

"In the early 1900s we saw the largest expansion of dog breeds in history," Westra said. "And I think we're at this same point in time." By the time he declared the goldendoodle was bound to become an established breed—instantly increasing their value—the breeders were practically jumping out of their seats.

In the late '90s, from her home in North Carolina, Judy Hahn started emailing with an Australian dog dealer who let her in on a little secret: The future was here, the dealer said, and it had arrived in the form of a dog that didn't have any of the inconvenient characteristics we normally associate with a living, breathing pet. Hahn and her friend Amy Lane became among the first Americans to breed Conron's creation; they bought classified ads that relied on the curiosity gap to drum up interest. "People would call to ask what a labradoodle was and would giggle when they said the word," Lane says. "And it just caught on like wildfire. Everyone who met one had to have one, and then another one, and then their neighbor had to have one too."

Hoping to emulate the success of the labradoodle, breeders began crossing poodles with other types of dogs, with mixed results. There were cockapoos and maltipoos, both mischievous mutts prone to separation anxiety. Then came doxiepoos (awkward builds), the collie-hybrid cadoodles (too high energy), and even Great Danoodles (giant dogs with curly coats that proved a nightmare to maintain). All had their fans, but none were able to attain the mass-market hysteria that was soon to follow. Hahn eventually became one of the first goldendoodle breeders, but the magic wasn't fully unleashed until she started breeding smaller ones using miniature poodles. "When I created that first mini litter in January of 2002, it set the doodle on fire," she recalls.

What began as a mutt with a funny name was suddenly a high-end designer pet. The craze reached a fever pitch in 2009, when Barack Obama told George Stephanopoulos that the First Family was considering a doodle as a potential presidential pooch. The folks at the AKC went into full crisis mode. "All dogs are wonderful," a spokesperson told the press at the time. "But a labradoodle is a mixed breed and its predictability can't be compared to a purebred. We think especially for such a high-profile family, they need to know what they're getting."

The Obamas ultimately went with a pair of purebred Portuguese water dogs, but their hemming and hawing heralded the second doodle wave. GANA formed to help establish breeding standards for goldendoodles, and suddenly geneticists who'd been helping people detect genetic abnormalities in their pets were drifting into trend-forecasting territory, willing to locate and reproduce the most marketable aesthetic traits, like short hair and soft waves. In 2012, Lisa Schaffer, a geneticist who previously co-founded a biotech company that tested children for developmental disabilities, launched Paw Print Genetics, a trait testing company offering breeders a way to avoid deformities in their dogs. Eventually, they started asking for cosmetic help, too—particularly with doodles. "I really resisted it, because as an animal geneticist I was only interested in the health of the dog," Schaffer says. "But in the end, we listened to our customers."

While competitors like OraVet and Embark Veterinary Inc. initially wouldn't test dogs that didn't have AKC papers, there was so much consumer demand they eventually got in the game, helping feed the market for custom dogs. Soon it wasn't enough to have a curly-haired doodle. The people had spoken, and they also wanted straight-coated ones. Breeders started crossing labradoodles with goldendoodles—creating something called a double doodle, presumably combining the best of all three breeds.

Meanwhile, the number of insurance policies taken out on doodles increased by more than 160% from 2013 through 2021, according to the pet insurance division of Nationwide Insurance. During the third wave of what we might call the doodle-industrial complex, demand for these modern pets reached escape velocity. This rapid level of commodification was enough to overwhelm even Hahn, one of the originators of the craze in America. "People are so removed from the production of puppies," she says, "that they think they can treat breeders like a department store and demand what they want, like a specific gender and size, at the specific time they want it."

Every year, in the lead-up to the Westminster dog show, the AKC holds an event at New York City's convention center called Meet the Breeds. Representatives, human and canine, come from across the country for what is essentially a high-brow petting zoo. In January, over at the poodle booth, 6-year-old Greta pranced atop a pile of flyers proclaiming, "Poodles can have any haircut, no need to buy a doodle!" as members of a bachelorette party in matching hats stopped to pick up anti-doodle buttons from a basket. "I'm obsessed with these," a bridesmaid whispered to the mother-daughter duo from

Rhode Island who owned Greta. "And with this poodle," she added in a whisper. "It's so hard to find one these days that isn't ... intermixed."

The AKC was founded in Philadelphia in the late 1800s, a consolidation of 13 smaller regional entities. At the time, purebred dogs were still very much the province of the elite, who prized pets as status symbols renowned for their beauty and strength. "These were upper-class people who believed they had better breeding than other people, and they wanted their dogs to be a representation of that—something different from the mongrels that the servant class might have," says Zawistowski, the animal geneticist and former ASPCA exec.

But as the middle class ballooned in the years following World War II, more people got into the purebred game. While this was financially great for the AKC, it altered the notion of what constituted a desirable dog—beauty sometimes trumping qualities like speed or intelligence. Zawistowski says this shift reached its apotheosis in 2021, when Wasabi, a 20-month-old Pekingese, won Best in Show at Westminster, despite needing a cooling pad to avoid overheating. (The AKC says many dog owners use cooling pads since the animals don't sweat.)

Today the AKC pulls in about $100 million in revenue each year, mostly from registering dogs and selling their owners tracking chips. (The Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show is run by a separate entity.) AKC recognition is the best way for a nascent dog breed to become popular with the public, but the path for getting on the canine version of the A-list is opaque at best. A breed club must provide a written history of the breed, as well as its ideal size, coat, head shape, temperament and gait. Breeders need to be able to perfectly reproduce this profile again and again, which can take decades. Then, once a new breed standard is established, members have to put their dogs through agility and tracking events at dog shows, knowing that they can't yet earn points in the conformation world. Eventually, over time, the public becomes familiar enough with the creation that the organization begrudgingly accepts its existence.

Take the Biewer Terrier. This fragile-looking dog was first created in Germany in 1984 when a pair of Yorkies owned by the Biewer family randomly produced two puppies with a genetically mutated tricolor coat. The Biewer Yorkshire Terrier a la Pom Pon soon became a hit despite its unwieldy name. But, according to the breed club's website, Germany's kennel club wouldn't recognize it. As the club's official story goes, the Biewers laid low and kept tinkering behind the scenes until they were able to prove their creation was its own distinct breed through blood tests. In 2021, about 40 years after it was first conceived, the dog, now known as the Biewer Terrier was finally accepted into the AKC.

When asked if it had an official position on whether a goldendoodle might at some point become a recognized breed, AKC's spokesperson, Hunter Munden, emailed back one word: "No." (She later said, in a phone call: "We have yet to have doodles apply to become a recognized breed. They could try if they wanted to.")

One breeder who straddles the poodle and doodle world says she knows what would happen if they did, indeed, try. "If you go into a purebred community, it's all they talk about," the breeder, who asked not to be named for fear of retribution, told me. For the past 10 years she's been studding out her poodles to doodle breeders—a clandestine service for which she charges as much as $3,000. She finds prospects—people who want to start breeding goldendoodles—through word of mouth, uses a burner phone to conduct her business and requires clients to sign NDAs. This might seem like a comically large amount of security to an outsider, but she insists these measures are necessary to

protect her livelihood—and even safety. "These people are brutal," she says of the purebred community. "They will destroy your breeding program, and they will destroy you personally and even dox you. They make it their entire personality to tear apart anyone associated with the doodle world." (The AKC says it doesn't endorse harassment or doxing of people who stud out their dogs to doodle breeders.)

Lane, one of the women who brought the doodle craze to America, says the AKC's animosity toward doodle breeders comes down to simple economics rather than legitimate health claims or anything else. After all, the Biewer Terrier is prone to tracheal collapse and bladder stones. Generations of inbreeding have resulted in purebreds often suffering from serious genetic issues, including breathing difficulties and spinal disease—so much so that some veterinary surgeons and experts are now urging consumers to rethink purchasing flat-faced dogs like Pekingese, pugs and the ultra-popular French bulldog. "It's not complicated," Lane says. "We stole their market, and they're angry about it. So, they try to discredit us."

Selling doodles in 2025 is not for the faint of heart. Lauren Huston, a social worker-turned-Australian labradoodle breeder in suburban New Jersey, posts a minimum of 40 Instagram stories per day so potential buyers can monitor every step of a pup's young life. Each of her dogs goes through six obedience classes of eight weeks each—conditioning that she's convinced burrows its way into her stock's DNA. "My dogs are being raised to be the most well-behaved dogs that are members of our society," she says.

Huston considers every dog to be a walking advertisement for Sunny Heart, her three-year-old Australian labradoodle business, and those advertisements work. Last year, weeks after buying one of Huston's pups, a woman sent her best friend and her sister to buy dogs from that same litter. Another customer has also referred her cousin and best friend, who were both happy to plop down $3,200 apiece. But Huston recognizes she's something of an alpha dog herself and says not everyone has what it takes to compete in an ever-tightening market. "I wouldn't say that I've seen sales slow down, but I think it's harder to market than it once was, because the space is very competitive and saturated. You just have to be consistent with your marketing and communications and be confident in your worth."

Lane says this heavy reliance on advertising could be a signal that we've reached peak doodle. "We could have sold 20 puppies a day during Covid," she says. "Then when everybody went back to work, the market died." Although she may be the most reputable goldendoodle breeder in the world, she still has to spend $5,000 a month on SEO advertising to unload dogs that used to sell themselves.

Even so, new doodle breeds like the Pomapoo abound, spawning their own subreddits and social media stars. And the dogless continue going to great lengths to land their very own. Around 6 p.m. on a Wednesday evening last winter, Christine White came walking toward the departures section at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport with a giant Marshalls bag under her arm and a pet carrier in tow. "Meet your mom and dad," exclaimed White, a goldendoodle breeder who had flown in from Chicago, as she handed over a eight-week-old pup to Justin Katz and his wife, Alana. The young married couple, who live on Manhattan's Upper East Side, beamed as Montego squirmed and chewed on the side of a folder.

Katz grew up around Frenchies who could barely breathe, not to mention Wheatens, pugs and dachshunds, but he'd always considered a doodle to be the one that got away. A couple of years back, he'd tried to adopt one from Pride & Prejudoodles—the uber-expensive breeder in Virginia—but

he says the dog suffered from intense separation anxiety, and he had to send it back. So when Katz got engaged, his mother searched far and wide for a different doodle with a red coat. She finally connected with White, a Midwestern private insurance broker who moonlights as a breeder. In just a year, she managed to increase the price of her puppies from $2,000 to $2,900.

But Montego was clearly worth it. “The stewardess knew there was a dog on board and said she spent the whole flight looking for him,” White says. The flight attendant apparently wanted to know: Could she take a picture? Although it was against protocol, the dog was too cute to resist. Katz and his wife weren’t yet sure if they were going to make Montego his own Instagram, but with that blocky head and those big, beautiful eyes, they might have no choice. No wonder it’s a billion-dollar industry. “You’re famous! You’re famous!” Katz exclaimed as he walked toward the exit and toward his new life as a doodle daddy. “Everybody loves you.”