



Inside Ireland's €120m puppy farm industry — where designer dogs sell to Singapore for €5,000

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Sunday February 26 2023, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

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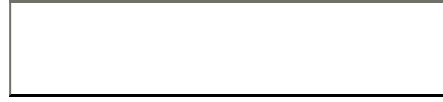
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Puppy farming in Ireland has developed into a €120 million international industry, with more than 122,000 dogs registered last year.

Earlier this month Grey the pomsky was put up for sale on Facebook and Instagram by Omo Omo Pet Shop, a smart retail outlet in the bustling city of Singapore.

The designer puppy had already traversed the globe by the time potential owners were given an opportunity to see him and his siblings Coal, Mooch, Ziki and Marble.



The pomsky was born in Carahill Kennels in Limerick, a puppy farm which produces tiny husky-like dogs with steel-blue eyes and fluffy coats by crossing Siberian huskies with pomeranians. It is a lucrative business.

Because of the very strict rules governing dog breeding in Singapore, puppies there can be far more expensive than in Europe.

The island state's wealthy and cosmopolitan dog lovers will pay up to €5,000 for a cute-looking pomsky, especially if it has unusual markings or eye colourations. As a result, puppy farmers across Ireland are keen to supply the demand.

Grey is just one of the Irish-bred designer dogs listed for sale by Omo Omo, which has embraced social media.

A black and white fluffy puppy, likely a Siberian Husky or Malamute, is sitting on a white, textured blanket. The puppy has striking blue eyes and a black and white patterned face. The background shows a green field and a stone wall under a cloudy sky. The word "MARBLE" is written in white, serif capital letters in the upper left corner of the image.

MARBLE

A social media post by the Omo Omo Pet Shop in Singapore

The shop's Instagram feed is dominated by scores of carefully curated pictures of designer puppies perched on blankets. All use Limerick's green countryside as a backdrop.

There are images of cavapoo puppies, little dogs produced by crossing a Cavalier King Charles spaniel with a poodle. There's also mini pomachons, small and fluffy dogs created by mating a pomeranian with a bichon frisé.

To make the puppies even more appealing and marketable, each is given its own name. The cavapoos on sale are called Tiger and Taco. To drive traffic to its social media posts, Omo Omo uses an assortment of hashtags including #puppiesofinstagram and #singaporepuppies. Images of its puppies have been viewed thousands of times.

The business has a quick turnaround. Puppies have a “shelf life” of approximately eight weeks from when they are weaned. They depreciate in value when they begin to lose the “cuteness factor”, typically after about four months.

Irish puppy farming has transformed itself for the digital world. And it has become an international business, turbo-charged by Instagram, TikTok, hashtags and dog influencers.

In years gone by, puppy farmers and dog dealers used to sell barely weaned puppies to dog lovers whom they arranged to meet in car parks over the phone. The trade has since morphed into a global industry with a turnover of €120 million.

An insight into the scale of the business can be gleaned from Dogs.ie, which is now the only classified website that caters for the Irish market. Rivals such as DoneDeal and Gumtree no longer accept advertisements for puppies for ethical reasons.

Approximately 30,000 dogs and puppies were advertised on Dogs.ie last year, which equates to roughly a quarter of the 122,000 dogs microchipped and registered in Ireland in 2022.



Almost two million people visited Dogs.ie in the past three months, with more than 11 million individual page views

GETTY IMAGES

The minimum set price for a dog listed on the site is €100, but there is no maximum. Prices can rise or fall depending on interest. Of the 701 open ads on the website last week, there were 1,826 dogs listed as available for sale. Their average price was €656, meaning the collective value of dogs being sold online would be €1,197,856.

Demand for puppies can be gauged by traffic to the site. Almost two million people visited Dogs.ie in the past three months, with more than 11 million individual page views. The majority of potential buyers who visited the site did so on a mobile device.

But the website, which is owned by Paul Savage, an Irish expatriate based in the United States, caters almost exclusively for Irish customers. Adverts posted on social media and other websites account for tens of thousands of other puppy sales. How many puppies produced on Irish puppy farms are being sold online? The answer is anyone's guess. The size of the trade is impossible to quantify, despite the government's assertions that it is carefully regulated.

Commercial dog breeding operations are regulated under the 2010 Dog Breeding Establishments Act, which allows councils to license dog breeding establishments, or puppy farms. There are presently 92 such farms in Ireland, ranging in size from six to 300 bitches. Many of these operations, including puppy farms that have been the subject of adverse publicity and media exposés, have become registered companies in recent years to gain an air of formality.

For example, Five Star Paws is the registered name of an operation in Poles, Co Cavan, which is thought to be Ireland's largest puppy farm. In 2016 the BBC aired footage from inside the farm, owned by Ray Cullivan, that showed dogs kept in cramped and horrid conditions.

Eamonn Mulvaney, aka the country singer Eamonn Jackson, who operates a large puppy farm in Redhills in Cavan, also incorporated Aghadreenagh DBE in 2021 to regularise his puppy farming operation.

Both operators say their farms comply with all animal welfare regulations.

Michelle Strauss of the Animal Advocacy Project said her research showed there were just under 3,300 breeding bitches in licensed commercial breeding establishments in the country.



Corina Fitzsimons of the Dogs Trust monitors the puppy trade in Ireland

“Under the Dog Breeding Establishments Act, each of these bitches can only be bred three times in a three-year period. Using a high average litter size of

six pups, a breeding bitch population of 3,300 is capable of producing approximately 19,800 pups per annum if they are bred once a year,” she said.

Pointing out that 122,000 dogs were microchipped in Ireland last year, she asked: “Where did all the other dogs come from? Were they bred in the Republic of Ireland? How many of them were legally or illegally imported only to be relisted for sale on arrival?”

Corina Fitzsimons of the Dogs Trust, like others who monitor the trade, suspects that illegal puppy farms, concealed in barns and on remote farms across Ireland, are producing the bulk of these additional dogs, though greyhounds and unwanted litters may also account for some.

These puppies are being laundered into the pet trade by dealers who sell them on private Facebook and WhatsApp groups and export them.

“There is a vulnerability in the system as there is no requirement for people to register the number of puppies they produce annually. People can breed puppies, have them microchipped and sell them on. There is no verification system or central microchip database to establish where the puppy has come from and where it was bred,” Fitzsimons said.

There is also no prohibition or regulations to stop people purchasing puppies and selling them onwards, or even exporting them to dealers around the world.

The Animal Advocacy Project has documented cases of people who have imported dachshund puppies from Hungary, which are then sold online. Such entrepreneurs can earn €1,000 or more per animal, most likely tax free.

Fitzsimons said technology and social media had transformed every aspect of both the legal and illegal trade in dogs.

“If you want to buy a designer handbag or a designer puppy on your phone, you can do it. It’s about what the puppy looks like rather than the welfare of the dog itself. If you see a dog advertised online, it’s not coming from a reputable breeder who takes the time to breed puppies properly,” she added.

There is no legislation governing the advertising of puppies and other animals offered for sale on social media, regardless of their history.

Facebook said it does not allow the sale of animals unless it is organised by a legitimate entity such as a pet shop or a welfare organisation. It urged the public to report possible breaches but many of those who complain say the company rarely, if ever, takes action.

Tiffany Quinn, a founder of Animal Law Ireland, which provides information on the legal protections afforded to creatures, urged the authorities to regulate advertising to protect both animals and consumers.

“The responsibility for dictating and regulating the ethics of online adverts or social media platforms cannot be left to themselves — they are in business for profit. This should be governed by trading blocs and individual states. However, laws on their own are ineffective without a commitment of government resources to enforce them alongside targeted, online awareness campaigns to empower buyers to make ethical choices when purchasing animals,” she said.

While technology has enabled the Irish puppy farming sector to grow and spread across the world, it may also hold the solution, according to Strauss.

She believes the state should establish a central database where all dogs born and bred in Ireland should have their microchips registered by law.

“If the government wants to ever get a handle on the situation, they need to invest money in a central microchip database, which can be used to assist them to effectively and efficiently enforce the law across a variety of departments, including revenue. This will require legislative change, but it must happen — the microchip is the key,” she said.

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