

## FEEDING CATS

Spend some time in the pet aisle of any grocery store and you will find pet owners staring blankly at the cornucopia of pet foods offered. The dog owners grab a bag of dry food and throw in a six-pack of canned food, and move on. But the cat owners dwell. Not wanting to return home with the “wrong” food, yet again, they have copious notes on their grocery list citing the types of cat food that are NOT acceptable to their feline house partners. You can see the distress on their faces, the hesitation as they reach for a can. “Is this the one Fluffy liked, or was it the can with the pretty white cat? No, Fluffy only ate that once. Perhaps the variety pack would have something Fluffy likes; at least there is one chance out of ten choices. Then, maybe not.”

One has to wonder if the cat food industry is driven by a group of neurotic cat owners who feel the pressure continually to expand the variety of choices as dictated by their own cats? No matter what the food product, it can be had grilled, sliced, marinated, minced, roasted, chunky, flaked or with gravy. It appears to be just a matter of time before every house cat figures this out and snubs yet another form of cat food, knowing full well that something new is on the horizon.

As each flavor is passed up: fine cuts with chicken and gravy, prime filets of beef with gravy, ocean whitefish and tuna with sauce, another emerges: classic pate beef and chicken entrée, meaty bits with lamb and rice in gravy, grilled tuna feast in gravy, marinated morsels of turkey, thus creating an almost infinite variety of product. As the cat food gets more specialized, the names become more like something you would see as an entrée at a five-star restaurant: New England crab cakes, sesame chicken, yellow fin tuna, seafood and tomato bisque. With flavors like that, why aren't we eating cat food?

Our cats were unquestionably in tune with the cat food industry. Every new can that was opened and presented to the cats had great expectations; Strubble Peter twirled in circles in excitement; Gypsy Rose Lee tried to paw the can from my hands; Bob meowed quietly; and Miss Marple sat politely by her dish waiting to be served. Amelia Ear-heart (as dictated by her distinct coloration) was the most honest of the bunch, willing to give everything a try before leaving the rest uneaten.

I would expound on the fine qualities of the cat food by reading the label to them, “seafood dinner - whitefish, salmon and tuna blended into a delicious pate. Doesn't that sound nice?” Strubble Peter would dive into the first spoonful and suddenly realize that he was not crazy about seafood this week as he was last week. Gypsy inhaled her portion before I got the next one to Bob. He sniffs it, meows, and then sits down to decide whether or not it is edible. He better be quick, or Gypsy or Amelia was going to eat it for him. Miss Marple, always with the best of manners, refuses to offer an opinion until the food has warmed on the plate, and, even then, shows the correct amount of restraint before acknowledging that, in fact, dinner has been served.

The success of each feeding would inversely diminish with the next serving after the cat food had spent time in the refrigerator, ick; it is now cold, hard, less tasty, perhaps even inedible. The cat food industry knows that only too well as indicated by the increasingly smaller and smaller size cans offered at ridiculously high prices. One could feed a horse on what all of those cat food cans would cost in a year!

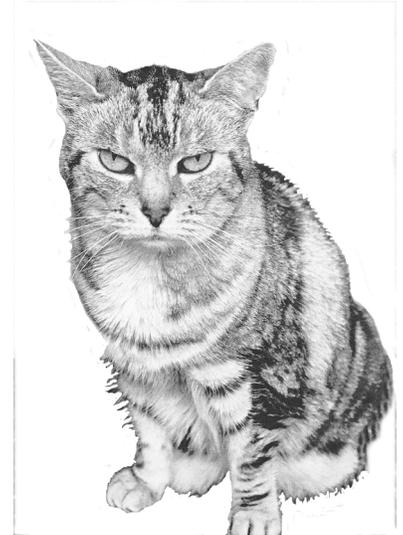
I had to be sharp and pay attention to what food was served previously in order to keep the cats interested in the next opened can. “Chicken and giblets,” I'd say, “that sounds yummy.”

When you stop to think about it, the cat food can has nothing to do with what a cat would be able to catch and eat for itself. Ever see a cat out crabbing? Fishing for yellow fin tuna? Running down a full size turkey? Grilling slices of beef? Cats, at least my cats, have happily eaten crickets, cluster flies, voles, mice, and an assortment of unfortunate birds. However, the shelf appeal of a can of chopped vole with bones and entrails in sauce probably would not sell.

Feeding cats was enough of a challenge without also having to medicate them. Miss Marple was the most vicious of cats when it came to pills despite her demure appearance. I would rather shove my hand down the garbage disposal than pop a pill down her throat. Instead, I tried a liquid form of her thyroid medication that I ordered at my pharmacy. Miss Marple had her own account. I would send the husband into town, and he would walk up to the nice lady at the counter and ask, “Miss Marple's medication please.”

“Do you have a form of ID, sir?”

“Will a picture of the cat do?”



“Are you authorized to sign for this, sir?”

“I am sure I am, although the cat has never actually said so.”

“Here you go, I just love Agatha Christy mysteries; please give Miss Marple my regards.”

The medication was cloaked in fish oil, the pharmacist’s attempt to outsmart a cat who could detect medication a mile off. The assumption was that any cat worth her whiskers would love fish oil. The fish oil was contained in a plastic bottle with a childproof lid and sealed in a plastic bag. It was a pretty reasonable bet that a child would rather endure a trip to the dentist than try to open a bottle, no matter how tightly sealed, which exuded the odor of a breeding colony of sea lions.

The odor was none too pleasant to have in the house, although it announced to the cats, no matter where they were on our one hundred and twenty acre farm, it was feeding time. The molecular weight of that odor was so heavy that when it entered a human’s olfactory canal it lay there for hours. Any cat food, when dressed with the oil, took on the all the characteristics of that breeding colony of sea lions. This occurred twice a day for over a year. I was ecstatic when Miss Marple finally decided to turn it down. The prospect of returning to putting a pill down her throat truly looked good.

One attempt to pill her was all it took to for me again to find a way of getting her to eat the pill in food. My arm was healing nicely when I came up with the idea of slicing a slit into a hunk of raw chicken and stuffing the pill inside, kind of like a pita pocket. Miss Marple ate the chicken but more often than not the pill would be spat out, sometimes sticking to the fur of another cat. I had to be quick enough to retrieve the pill for fear that all of my cats would end up with thyroid problems. I tried making meatballs with cat food. Freshly opened cat can contents were slimy and unwieldy for making meatballs, the pill often left at the bottom of the dish. Refrigerated can contents were more pliable, but better than half of the time, left by the cat; after all, it was old and cold.

The search went on for cat food with the right texture to roll into a meatball fresh from the can. Not only did we read the label for hints of texture, we peered at the tiny picture of the cat food on the can. Flaked, bits, or chunks were out. We needed ground up, homogenized, old-lady cat food that could be swallowed, not necessarily chewed. Somewhere during this tedious process, I accidentally bought dog food.

Can you believe it, the solution was canned dog food? Freshly opened the texture was perfect to roll up a pill into a meatball. One or two licks and the thing stuck to the cat’s tongue, and she had little choice but to swallow it, pill and all. Success! Amazingly, the other cats thought the dog food pretty decent fare as well; whether that was because it was so new and different, or because they sensed the revenge of eating “their” food. Eventually, the smell of the breeding colony of sea lions faded from the house, Miss Marple prospered, and the feeding of cats became a simple and civilized event. The next time you need a little entertainment visit the cat food aisle. There will always be someone there desperately trying to find something their cats will like. Don’t suggest dog food, it will spoil the cat’s fun.

*“I gave an order to a cat, and the cat gave it to its tail”*

*- Chinese Proverb*