

Elizabeth Farrelly, Excerpt from article: July 11, 2013

Within a whisker of being stigmatised

My own cats, it may not surprise you to learn, are both card-carrying eccentrics.

Jack Pussy, a big-hair mog, loves to drink bathwater - but only warm, and only occupied. He's fine with unguents and even rosewater but declines the more synthetic perfumes. Diesel, an otteresque Burmese, loves raisins - Thompson's organic, no oil - taking them daintily one by one with his tiny front teeth. He also likes rice crackers, especially the dried seaweed variety, and being suspended by his four paws. This makes him purr.

Diesel and Jack are mutually devoted. They share milk, reciprocate grooming and playfight without rancour. They sleep curled together in one round bed like yin and yang. They crave human affection. Diesel touches your face gently with one paw to make eye contact, and repeatedly to keep it.

They are, in short, sweet. Yet cats are carnivores, and carnivores hunt. Even Jack and Diesel hunt. Twigs. Leaves. Cockroaches (crunchy!). Bogongs. Baby rats. Inadvertent mynahs (rare) and, despite long-term lizard-aversion therapy, the occasional drop tail skink.

Frankly? Half a can of jellified ex-meat spooned out with the evening news doesn't cut it in the thrill department.

There's also this. That can of Purrfect Pussy is like putting your kids on a Maccas three times a day.

Jack, age four or five, was diagnosed with feline urinary tract disease. He had trouble peeing and needed a scientifically formulated biscuit diet, \$66 a bag. To feed him anything else, the vet said, risked hospitalisation and death.

It got worse. A couple of years later, Diesel developed dreadful smelly breath. He grew listless and refused food. The vet diagnosed feline stomatitis. Said he needed antibiotics, possible dental surgery and regular tooth cleaning.

I'm sorry, what? Me, twice a day with a cat toothbrush? There had to be a better way.

Meanwhile Jack, on his exorbitant science-nosh, was permanently ravenous. He lost weight and, under the big fur, became bird-light. He was anxious, and started escaping over the back fence at night, hunting. At least once a week I'd find a baby rat, or a tail, or just a blood-smear, on the bathroom floor.

Before remortgaging the house, I did what you do. Googled, found a website called Raw Meaty Bones. The message was obvious and compelling. I decided to try it. For a month, I gave them each a daily, raw chicken wing. Period. Pretty soon both cats were bouncing. No trouble peeing. No bad-breath or sore inflamed gums. Their coats became thicker and glossier. Two happy cats.

Slowly I added beef bones. Fish scraps. Milk (lactose free). Bathwater. Rice crackers. More love, more purring happiness.

That was a few years ago. The cats - now 10 and 12 respectively - have never looked better. Yes, I feel bad for the chickens, but as I write, Diesel lies beside me, snuggled in, supine, nibbling raisins, purring deeply, feet flopped in the air. Weird, but happy.

But cat cuisine turns out to be intensely controversial. The blogosphere, unending spring of sincere misinformation, bristles with advice. Some is eminently ignorable, like the railing against "raw fish, chicken or eggs" and "bones of any kind".

More difficult is when verified truths contradict my experience. Grape and raisin toxicity, for example, is a recognised cause of acute renal failure in dogs and possibly cats. Yet mine like them. Chocolate is meant to kill dogs, yet our overbred poodle puppy, with stomach issues of his own, once ate an entire dark-chocolate yacht, weighing at least a kilogram, and was fine.

The problem becomes epistemological. Who to trust? Science? Nature? Experience?

When science fails (or worse, seems captive) we default to nature. The scientific cat diet, emerging as less a treatment than a subtle vet loyalty program, made nature's raw meaty bones a plausible alternative.

But take nature to its conclusion and it is clear cats should gorge irregularly, as in the wild, and should hunt. It's what their teeth, physiology and instincts imply.

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