

# Boeuf Bourguignon Again?

## Pet Foods Go Gourmet

Published: February 15, 2012



Photo Illustration by Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times (Dog) and Tony Cenicola/The New York Times (Bowl)

TONIGHT, thousands of Americans will sit down to a dinner of warmed-up leftovers or delivery pizza. Their dogs and cats, meanwhile, will feast like epicureans, beneficiaries of a foodie revolution that has transformed many kitchens into four-star restaurants for pets.

Cats who used to put up with plain tuna or mackerel can now savor white-tablecloth dishes like wild salmon and whipped egg soufflé with garden greens, part of Fancy Feast's Elegant Medleys line, or Outback Grill, an Australian-themed entree from Weruva, with native fish like barramundi and trevally.

Their canine cousins might be sniffing lustily as the pop-top opens on French Country Café, a beguiling mixture of duck, brown rice, carrots, Golden Delicious apples and peas offered by Merrick, a small family-owned company in Amarillo, Tex., or sending their taste buds to Hawaii with Kauai Luau, chicken with brown rice, sweet potato, prawns, egg, garlic and kale in a lobster consommé. The beach feast is one of the Tiki Dog flavors from Petropics, another small company.

In most American homes, menus reflect belt-tightening. Mealtimes have lost some of their luster at the high table. Down on the kitchen floor, however, the picture is rosy.

"It is now considered socially acceptable to treat pets as members of the family and to express that by spending lavishly on them, especially when it comes to food," said David Lummis, the senior pet-industry analyst for Packaged Facts, a market research company.

Joe Davison, a financial adviser in San Francisco who shops at Catnip & Bones on Chestnut Street, gave his two black Labradors a culinary upgrade about four years ago. They now dine on Cowboy Cookout and Grammy's Pot Pie, two of the retro American flavors sold by Merrick.

"The dogs love it, and I believe it helps with their health and coat, but I admit that it's partly based on what looks good to me, Mr. Davison said. "You can see green peas and pieces of potato along with the chunks of meat. It's amazingly like real people food."

The new generation of chef-inspired pet foods accounts for no more than 5 percent of the pet-food market, but the market is big. Retail sales of dog and cat food exceeded \$19 billion in 2011, according to the market research company Euromonitor International. Also, profit margins in what is sometimes called the super-premium category, a fuzzily defined niche that embraces natural, organic and gourmet pet foods, can reach 40 percent, compared with 30 percent for premium brands and 20 percent for standard brands.

Pet owners, invariably called "pet parents" by the makers of super-premium pet foods, do not mind reaching in their wallets and paying extra, even in recessionary times.

Two underlying forces have intensified the urge to spend: aging pets and a growing population of affluent pet owners spending money on them.

The American Pet Products Association, an industry group, found in its most recent pet-owner study that about 4 in 10 American households own a cat and almost half own a dog. Increasingly, these pets are middle-aged or elderly. The most recent edition of the American Veterinary Medical Association's "U.S. Pet Ownership and Demographics Sourcebook," published in 2007, reported that about 4 in 10 of those cats and dogs were older than 6.

At the same time, Packaged Facts has reported, households with incomes of more than \$70,000 accounted for nearly half of total spending on pet food in 2010, up from less than a third in 2000. A new study of the pet industry by Dillon Media reports that those making more than \$100,000 a year increased their share of pet-food spending and now account for about a third of the total market.

These are precisely the health-conscious, label-scrutinizing, restaurant-going consumers likely to indulge their cats and dogs at mealtimes. "They might cut back on a new car or taking a trip around the world, but they won't skimp on their pets," said Tom Nieman, the owner of Fromm Family Foods, a fourth-generation family business in Mequon, Wis. "It's not going to happen."

The giant pet-food companies like Nestlé Purina Pet Care, the maker of Fancy Feast cat food, have taken note and added luxury lines. Purina introduced Elegant Medleys, a deluxe offshoot of Fancy

Feast, in 2006, with flavors like turkey Florentine “in a delicate sauce with garden greens,” priced at about 20 cents more a can than Fancy Feast, which sells for about 70 cents.

In 2009, doubling down, the company brought out a line of cat appetizers in flavors like steamed tilapia and tongol tuna in broth. Packaged in two-ounce servings, as opposed to the three-ounce entree size, they sell for about \$1.35, or 45 cents more than a can of Elegant Medleys. For dogs, Purina came up with Chef Michael’s Canine Creations (“chef-inspired, canine-desired”) in 2009, a line of dry and wet foods in flavors like rotisserie chicken with carrot and corn garnishes. The company is adding short rib, stewed chicken and beef brisket flavors this winter. Also in 2009, Mars Petcare added bistro entrees to its Cesar dog-food brand, and Del Monte Foods introduced the Market Selectline to its Meow Mix range.

Some of the biggest winners in the super-premium race have been the mom-and-pop pet-food companies, both the established names like Fromm, Evanger and Merrick, as well as newcomers like Petropics, Blue Buffalo, Weruva and Petite Cuisine. Although no match for the likes of Purina, which controls about a third of the pet-food market, the boutique companies have registered strong growth, often in the double digits, over the past several years.

All have benefited mightily from the great pet-food recall of 2007, when contaminated gluten and rice protein from China caused fatal [kidney failure](#) in thousands of cats and dogs around the world. The contaminated protein was found in pet food manufactured by Menu Foods, a Canadian company that supplied nearly 100 pet-food brands in the United States.

Overnight, thousands of concerned pet owners shifted their allegiance to small companies with a brand identity built on using pure ingredients, often marketed as “human grade” and manufactured in plants that also produce canned food for humans. In some cases ingredients are packed by hand, with chunks and shreds layered for maximum eye appeal.

“A lot of midline premium brands, which still have a lot of grain and [carbohydrates](#) in them, lost traction to companies like mine,” said Christine Hackett, who founded Petropics with her husband, Robert, in 2005 after working in research and development for PetCo.

Tiki Cat and Tiki Dog represent a fanciful, foodie niche that has, in the last five years, established a separate identity from the dozens of health-food and nutritional brands that crowd the pet-store shelves. Health-food principles remain part of the marketing pitch, but the new restaurant-style pet foods stake out new territory by targeting the susceptible salivary glands of pet parents.

“We wanted the art, the cooking, the feel of vacation,” said Ms. Hackett, a devotee of Polynesian culture and tiki art. “The recipes were inspired by our own dining out.” Hence Lanai Luau for cats (tuna in crab surimi consommé) and Maui Luau for dogs (chicken with brown rice, sweet potato, egg, garlic and kale in chicken consommé). Who knew there was a Margaritaville for pets?

Mr. Nieman, at Fromm, drew on his devoted viewing of Food Network shows in formulating his “four-star” line of dry food for cats and dogs. The grain-free Surf and Turf for dogs, a culinary voyage in a bag, includes ingredients like wild salmon, duck, chicken and “hand-picked” vegetables and fruit. Wisconsin cheese adds a subtle locavore touch.

Blue Buffalo's line of bistro-inspired cat food offers time-honored classics like boeuf bourguignon. The company has a spa line as well.

Reflecting a potent trend in restaurant dining, some pet-food companies have deliberately taken a detour around haute cuisine and tapped into nostalgia for blue-plate diner specials and comfort food — reinterpreted and updated. Merrick's canned dog food includes all-American temptations like Burger Pies and Sweetie Fries, Campfire Trout Feast and Gameday Tailgate. Cats can go regional with New England Boil (whitefish, lobster, crab, shrimp and sardines) and Southern Delight, a down-home blend of chicken, catfish and crayfish.

Weruva has introduced Cats in the Kitchen, a line of stewlike entrees with cutesy names like Pumpkin Jack Splash and Love Me Tender.

Nothing is too good, when it comes down to it, for that standoffish, persnickety fur ball that rules the house. "You get a lot of delight in being able to plate something new and see the cat lick it clean," said Ms. Hackett of Petropics. "And the cats do have the final vote."

A version of this article appeared in print on February 16, 2012, on page D1 of the New York edition with the headline: Boeuf Bourguignon Again?.

Fonte: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/16/garden/pet-foods-go-gourmet.html?ref=garden>