

The Cat That Ate Tofu

By Michael Rosen-Molina, AlterNet
May 23, 2004

Alfredo Kuba stands in the kitchen of his Mountain View, CA home, stirring a spatula through a potful of lentils and tofu. Mussi, his sleek tabby cat, watches expectantly from his kitty bed, eagerly flicking his tail to and fro. Kuba spoons the stew into a bowl and sets it on the floor. It's Mussi's dinner. "It took him a little while to get used to this, but now he loves it," says Kuba. "For a special treat, I give him a little tofurkey."

Mussi eats this way everyday, and he's not alone in his peculiar tastes. Some cats will dig through trash only for the empty tuna cans, but others will lust for spinach, steal cantaloupe even slurp spaghetti. Mussi is a vegan cat, part of a growing group of cats whose owners, vegans themselves, have decided to wean their cats off their "natural" food and put them on a plant-based diet. With the proper supplements, these cat-owners claim, a cat can live a healthy, normal, even happy life eating vegetables.

From the outside, it might look like taking veganism to an absurd extreme. We can choose not to eat meat for many reasons health, ethics, animal rights but a cat can't understand those things. Even if he could, nature has designed everything about a cat, from his teeth to his intestines, for a carnivorous lifestyle. What would feeding him vegetables accomplish?

A lot, according to vegan cat owners.

"You're saving animals by not feeding your cat meat," says Kuba. "It makes you feel good to feed your kitty something this good. Sometimes I even try some myself when I'm cooking." Kuba sprinkles a tablespoon of Vegecat supplements, a fine powder that looks like pepper and smells like Italian spices, into the mix and adds some garlic salt for taste. I try a spoonful; it tastes just like split pea soup.

Vegan Cats?

The mainstream has yet to embrace the idea of vegan cat food. "I don't know about that stuff," says one Berkeley pet store employee when I asked about vegan cat food, "Some places have vegan dog food, but I don't know about that either. Dogs evolved from wolves and I can't imagine a wolf that would prefer a salad to a moose."

But despite conventional wisdom, some dogs do prefer the salad. As any dog owner knows, dogs love to munch down on meat, vegetables, old pizza crusts and just about anything else they might find in the trash. Most experts agree that dogs are omnivores that can thrive without meat; vegan dog foods can even be found in some mainstream grocery stores.

But cats are a different story. Unlike dogs, cats are obligate carnivores meaning that in the wild they would eat nothing but meat. Dogs can enjoy a meatless diet because they can synthesize some necessary nutrients that cats need to get from their food. Those essential nutrients, including taurine, arachidonic acid, and vitamin A abound in meat. Cats go blind and deaf without taurine. Without arachidonic acid, they suffer from reproductive problems. And a vitamin A deficiency will stunt their growth and bone formation.

At the heart of the vegan philosophy for many is a desire to reduce the pain and suffering of animals. But no matter how much progress a vegan cat-owner makes toward fighting animal exploitation, he's still forced into an uncomfortable compromise to keep his pet happy and healthy. If a cat can, in fact, live on vegetables, it would solve that problem in a flash. Many vegans see it as the only way they can stop feeling like hypocrites.

"As much as I would love to, I haven't switched my cats to vegan diets because I'm concerned that it's nutritionally inadequate for them," says Julie Ahern, a Berkeley vegan who lives with two non-vegan cats, Tiger and Memphis. "I've heard arguments that supplements can make up for inadequacies, but I just don't want to take any chances particularly Tiger,

because he's older and has health problems."

I met Ahern as she handed out vegan ice cream sandwiches on UC Berkeley's Sproul plaza, as part of Berkeley Organization for Animal Advocacy's (BOAA) community outreach. Ahern said she wasn't yet vegan when she adopted Memphis six years ago, but, by the time she'd adopted Tiger the following year, she was. "I'm not happy at all about feeding them animal products but I haven't come across any other viable options," she says. "I suppose I could be labeled a hypocrite because it seems like I value their lives more than the lives of billions of farmed animals."

Ahern hasn't given up searching for a better solution. She pores over cat care books like "Natural Health for Dogs and Cats," by Dr. Richard Pitcairn, a veterinarian and founder of the Animal Natural Health Center in Eugene, Oregon.

On Pitcairn's advice, Ahern wants to reduce Tiger and Memphis's meat consumption; she feeds them Jeffrey's Fresh Meat Pet Foods from Jeffrey's Natural Pet Foods in San Francisco. A store brochure describes the food as "a blend of raw, human grade, additive-free ground meats, organic vegetables and other essential nutrients."

"And as far as the animals that are killed to make the food are concerned, it really doesn't matter in the end whether they're organic or free-range, does it?" she says. "Whether factory-farmed or free-range, animals raised for food all end up at the same horrible place, the slaughterhouse."

Vegans like Ahern are still looking for an acceptable solution. Vegans like Kuba think they've already found it.

Healthy Choices

How healthy can a cat be if it's denied meat? Even healthier than it would be on meat, say some. Kuba notes that Mussi developed diabetes on his

old canned food, and required up to 14 units of insulin a day. On his new plant diet, Kuba says, he only needs a fourth of that. In Seattle, Lindsay Saibara says a vegan diet helps control her cat Kumori's bowel problems just as well as the medicated diet he used to eat, and Diane Kantor credits a vegan diet for her cats' glossier coats. But that's only anecdotal evidence. No one has ever conducted any scientific studies on what it means to keep a cat on a meat-free diet, and experts don't agree about what the long-term effects a vegan diet might be.

"Cats don't need meat," says UC Davis cat nutrition specialist Quinton Rogers. "They need specific nutrients found in meat and if they can get that some other way then they can be reasonably healthy on a vegan diet. I wouldn't recommend it because you're more likely to get into trouble, but if you know what you're doing, and you get the pure elements, you can make it work."

Pitcairn, the author cited by Julie Ahern, disagrees. He writes that many vegan cats he's treated appear less healthy than their carnivorous counterparts, that cats specifically need nutrients from animal sources. Other vets are skeptical, but reluctant to advise against a vegan diet without doing further research.

Neither ethics nor science are clear-cut on the issue. "The long-term effects of feeding cats a diet without animal sources of these nutrients are still unknown," says Teri Barnato, Director of Veterinarians for Animal Rights in Davis. "There is also the issue of whether humans should manipulate a cat's normal diet to address human ethical concerns. Vegans may want to consider not having cats as companions, given their need for animal products and the typical sources of those products."

Making the Switch

In a perfect world, say many vegans, we wouldn't have this problem. We never should have domesticated cats, they say, but now we've just got to make the best of a bad situation. A vegan diet might not be an ideal feline

diet, but many cat owners see it as the only way they can live with peace at heart, knowing that they're consistent in their beliefs.

"People are all hung up on meat as a natural thing," says Jed Gillen, author of *Obligate Carnivore*, a book that details Gillen's journey to veganism and his decision to raise his own cats on a vegan diet.

I met up with Jed Gillen at the World Vegetarian Day Celebration at the Hall of Flowers in San Francisco, where he sold "Vegans Kick Ass" T-shirts, vegan cheese-flavored snacks, and vegan condiments (Made without casein, a milk protein.)

"Nothing about a cat's life is natural," says Gillen. "It's eating stuff that comes in a little bowl, it's living in your house, you're giving it vaccinations. But people cling to meat as something natural. In the wild, when does a cat eat a cow? In the wild, cats eat rodents, birds and insects. Why do we think cows are equivalent to insects?"

Even Gillen admits that vegan food is far from a perfect solution.

"For cats, I don't believe the vegan food is as good as real meat," said Gillen, leading a group discussion on vegan cats in a small side room at the World Vegetarian Day celebration. "I'm arguing that the cat's going to live a normal life span and be healthy on a vegan diet. Maybe your cat will live one year less. That's a sacrifice, but look at the huge benefit for all those other animals."

Of course, a human can understand the issues involved, but a cat doesn't know anything about factory farming or animal cruelty. Would it be right to make that choice for the cat?

Writes Gillen: "To overrule a dietary preference that is based on [a cat's] extremely limited understanding of the issues and instead select a food for them that is more in alignment with what you know to be ethical is not "forcing" anything on them anymore than parents of human children

routinely "force" them to brush their teeth or to not play in traffic. To make a choice as complex as which food to buy, an issue which carries ethical concerns that they couldn't possibly begin to understand, is one of our jobs. Not only is this kind of thing not contradictory to good parenting, it is an inherent part of it!"

At the discussion, some weren't convinced that was enough. "It kills me everyday that I have to feed my cat meat," said Berkeley vegan Isobel Schneider. "I'd love to be convinced otherwise, but for the long term health of the cat it seems he should be eating meat. I love my cat so much that I've been willing to be a hypocrite."

Back in Mountain View, Mussi's eating his dinner. Kuba became a vegan almost overnight two years ago, after hearing a lecture at the Earth Day convention in Berkeley on the suffering of factory farm-raised animals. Mussi took a little longer to convert. For six months, Kuba mixed increasing doses of vegan cat food with Mussi's regular dinner until he was completely meat-free. It was a slow process, as Kuba struggled to find the right combination of vegetable tastes that would win Mussi over. He cooked different recipes from James Peden's *Vegetarian Cats and Dogs*, plying Mussi with exotic combinations of rice, oats and garbanzo beans. Ultimately, he discovered Mussi's favorite dish, lentils and tofu. "It was a trial and error thing," said Kuba. "Every cat is different, and they can be finicky. It's like cooking for a member of the family. It's simple to switch a cat if you do it with patience and love."

Mussi doesn't like to be disturbed while he's eating; even at the ripe old age of 16, he's every bit as protective of his food as his ancestors might have been over vanquished prey. In the backyard, four bushy-tailed squirrels scamper up to the screen door, chattering loudly. Kuba slides the screen door open and tosses a handful of peanuts into the yard, where the squirrels swarm over them. Mussi ignores their insistent chattering.

"He doesn't chase them anymore," says Kuba. "Part of it is just that he's older, but I think his new diet might also have something to do with it."

And I think he just sees how I interact with the squirrels, how I treat them with respect."

But what if Mussi refused to eat tofu? What if, despite everything, Mussi simply demanded meat? "I'd probably have put him back on regular food," says Kuba, shrugging. "I don't want him to starve."

Michael Rosen-Molina is a student at the UC Berkeley School of Journalism.