



Testing... Testing...

Acclaimed children's author Morris Glitzman experiments with pet food.

What you are about to read is not for the squeamish or faint-hearted. My kids are definitely not squeamish or faint-hearted, but even they were shocked when they saw what I was doing in the kitchen.

'Yuk,' they said. 'Is that cat food you're eating?'

I looked up from the cat bowl. The kids were staring at me, horrified. I didn't want to appal them more by talking with my mouth full, so I just nodded.

'Oh my God,' they said, eyes wide with panic. 'What's happened? Are we poor? Has the bottom fallen out of kids book writing? Have interpol discovered where you got the idea for your forthcoming series of books about an orphaned boy who goes to wizard school?'

I shook my head, swallowed and explained. 'It's a gesture of moral reconciliation,' I said. 'We humans test heaps of our stuff on animals, so I reckon they should be allowed to test their stuff on us. The pets agree.'

I bent down so the cats could check if my flea collar was giving me a rash. I could tell from their expression they thought it was.

'We humans do terrible things to animals in the name of product testing,' I said. 'I've seen rabbits blinded from having to open those little airline sachets of salad dressing. Mice that can barely walk after being forced to stand on so-called heat-resistant frying pan handles. And I don't want to think about all those poor caged budgies lowered into wine cellars with corkscrews to see if the volatile reds are safe to drink.'

The kids looked at me levelly. 'Dad,' they said. 'This is guilt, isn't it?'

I sighed and burped. How animals stomach those worm tablets I really don't know.

'OK,' I said. 'It's true. I am guilty. My favourite canned sandwich tuna, the one with chilli and spring water and spanish onion and positive ions, how could I have eaten it for all these years and not realised it's tested on dolphins?'

The kids rolled their eyes and I could see they didn't know either.

'I just want to make amends,' I said. 'Redress the balance. So much of what we do is unfair to animals. We eat way more of them than they do of us. Just because we're the dominant species, doesn't mean we have to be pigs about it.'

'Fair enough,' said the kids. 'You've got a point.' They peered at the cat food. 'Even so, that must be revolting.'

'Actually,' I replied, 'it's not bad. Better than the dog food I had yesterday. And streets ahead of the fish food I had this morning. That was revolting. Turned my tongue green. This is very up-market cat food. Braised Choice Timbale Of Ocean Trouts.'

I took another mouthful.

'Hmmm,' said the kids, studying the label on the can. 'Says here it's 2% ocean trout, 98% non-specific animal by-products and reconstituted gravy (generic).'

I swallowed and put my fork down. Suddenly I felt nauseous and I was pretty sure it wasn't the worm tablets.

'If it's any consolation,' said the kids, 'the label on your favourite sandwich tuna says pretty much the same.'

I didn't eat anything for the next few days, and by the time I was able to return to the kitchen, I'd formulated a whole new plan for inter-species moral justice.

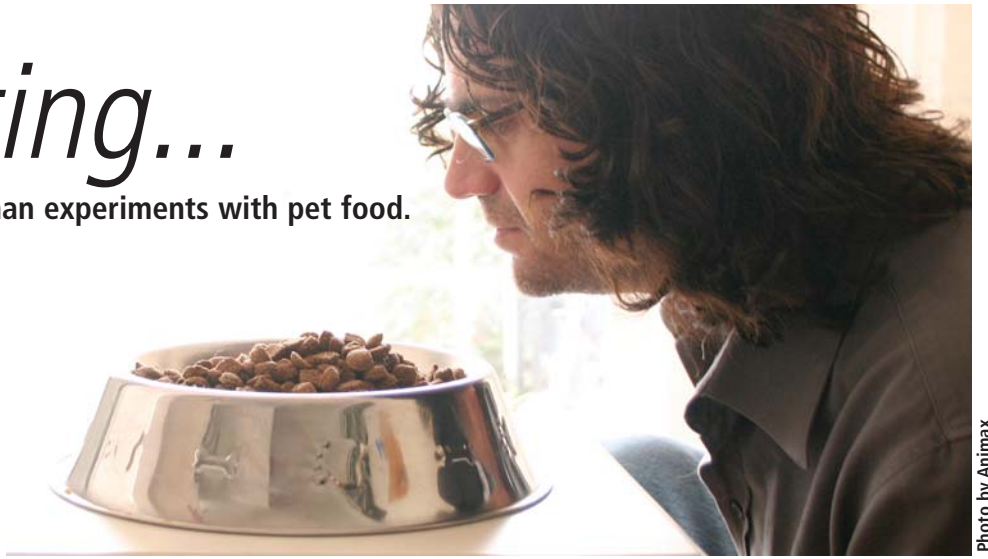


Photo by Animax

'Product-testing,' I said to the assembled pets. 'But product-testing with a difference.'

To illustrate my point, I dipped a wooden spoon into an exquisite sweet satay sauce I'd just gone to a lot of trouble to create. Homemade palm sugar. Organic coconut milk. Fresh roasted peanuts instead of the ones you slip into your back pocket when you're leaving the bar. Oh, and Mars Bars of course.

I was sure Cuisine would kill to publish a recipe that flirted so daringly with the traditional and the avant-garde and the yin/yang contrasts of sugar and salt. (I didn't have any actual palm sugar so I just gripped a few lumps in my hand for an hour.) But first I had to satisfy Cuisine's rigorous policy and test the results.

'Here,' I said to the cats. 'Taste this. From now on, the only products tested on animals in this house will be the products of my culinary skills.'

The cats sniffed the sauce and backed away. The dog whimpered when I offered the spoon to him. All the goldfish hid behind the little ceramic fishfingers in their bowl.

The same thing happened with the next dozen new recipes I created.

'I don't get it,' I said to the kids. 'I'm trying to involve these animals in product testing with dignity and low-cholesterol and they're just not interested.'

'Perhaps you're using too much salt,' said the kids. I looked at them, deeply hurt. 'We're not saying you're a bad cook,' they went on. 'But you have to admit, you do like salt.' They picked up a plate. 'Why don't you try doing this one with a bit less salt?' they suggested. I sighed. They would have to choose my signature dish, Sweet And Sour Deep Fried Salt.

I redid all my new recipes without a trace of salt. The pets still whimpered and hid and rang the RSPCA.

I was about to give up when the kids demonstrated as they have so often in the past that all you need to solve a problem is a bit of lateral thinking and a brain unaffected by thirty years of volatile reds. They came up with an idea for inter-species moral reconciliation that was truly inspired.

The animals loved it too, though that was mostly because they'd never taken a human down to the shops on a lead before. And for me the experience wasn't as physically uncomfortable as I'd feared once my trousers wore through and the skin started to toughen on my knees.

There was a lovely moment outside the local hamburger joint. Dogs, cats and kids all sharing a couple of double meat Whoppers with the lot, hold the salt.

I would have joined them but I couldn't get my muzzle off.



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