

Purina gets fancy with feline treats



JULY 15, 2009 -- Rocki, a cat who lives in the Nestlé Purina learning center, relaxes in the "front room" of the test home. The company recently launched its Fancy Feast Appetizers for cats brand. (Christian Gooden/P-D)

By Todd C. Frankel

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ST. LOUIS — Secrecy was a must. Inside Nestlé Purina Petcare headquarters, they used a code name: Project Trident. Plans were afoot to shake up the \$17 billion U.S. pet food industry. The goal was a new cat food. Not a meal. Not a treat.

"A game-changer," said Vincent Biroscak, senior brand manager for Fancy Feast. "A paradigm-shifter."

A team of 40 at Purina worked 3½ years to develop this new product, shape it, fine-tune it. They spent hundreds of hours on research and design. When a select group of St. Louis area cat owners last year tested the product at home, they were forced to sign nondisclosure agreements.

And then, late last month, the new product quietly began to appear on store shelves nationwide.

Fancy Feast Appetizers for cats.

An appetizer? For cats? In the worst recession since the Great Depression?

The name might inspire laughter, but Purina has high hopes for what it describes as the company's biggest new product launch this year, supported by a national ad campaign beginning next month.

"I think it's a fantastic idea, and I'm a little bit jaded about pet products," said David Lummis, a New Orleans-based pet market analyst for market research publisher Packaged Facts.

How Purina dreamed up cat appetizers — a product born of trends affecting both humans and pets — illustrates the high stakes and big bucks in the fiercely competitive world of pet food.

Pet food sales so far have proved to be recession-resistant, growing 5.5 percent last year from 2007. The U.S. pet cat population is growing too, to an estimated 83 million (67 million for dogs). But pet food has traditionally been sold in just three categories: dry food, wet food and treats. Purina is betting on something new. The question is whether Fancy Feast Appetizers can find an opening in an already crowded field of feeding options.

'MAGIC MOMENTS'

One recent day at Purina's downtown campus, Biroscak sat at an island in what resembled a modern suburban kitchen, with its stainless steel appliances and faux-marble countertops. The kitchen is part of Purina's Learning Center, a mock house used to study how consumers interact with kitty litter and pet foods. The house, wired for video and sound, also has a fake-grass lawn with a fake tree and a garage holding the back half of a minivan. Two cats, Rocki and Ava, live there full time.

"We really study every single aspect of the experience," said Kaite Flamm, a senior account executive with Purina, standing in the kitchen with Biroscak.

Studying customers also means in-home interviews and focus groups, where the idea for appetizers surfaced in early 2006.

"We really want to understand the relationship with the cat," Biroscak said.

They heard people say they wish their cats ate more real chicken and fish. Some talked about opening cans of tuna for their cats. Others talked about wanting a way to acknowledge "magic moments" — like a cat's unexpected nuzzle.

"They were telling us, 'Treats are nice, but we want something that is not quite a meal, but something to celebrate these magic moments,'" Biroscak said.

"One woman said she had a bowl of ice cream at night. 'I want something for my cat to enjoy at the same time,'" recalled Flamm.

Biroscak added, "Consumer insights are like gold nuggets."

But Purina executives were unsure how to turn those nuggets into a product.

LIKE HAUTE CUISINE

Fancy Feast is marketed as a gourmet, premium brand — from its silver chinchilla Persian cat mascot to the crystal serving dish seen in ads. The brand offers haute cuisine-worthy titles such as "Shredded Wild Salmon Fare in a Savory Broth with Garden Greens."

Consumers who buy Fancy Feast are considered to be highly devoted to their cats. In the pet industry, they are called "pet parents." Pets are part of the family.

As the line between pet and owner has blurred, the differences between their foods have faded, too. (Although that can go too far. One failed concept — not created by Purina — was a pet food that could be shared in a bowl by people and dogs.)

In early 2007, still unsure of what to name its nascent concept, Purina hosted a focus group in St. Louis. Project Trident — named for the three-pronged fishing spear because

Purina, at this point, believed its new product would feature only seafood — was under way. Six consumers were given a description: pure seafood for cats, but not a full meal. They discussed ways to express the concept, to describe it.

Someone said, "An appetizer."

Biroscak was struck as he watched the focus group from behind a one-way mirror.

"That was a 'wow' moment for us," he recalled.

It seemed like a perfect fit. People have a positive connection to the word "appetizer," Biroscak said. A sense of excitement. Appetizers taste good. And they have been growing in popularity, from tapas restaurants to boxed appetizers sold in supermarket freezer cases. There is an emotional attachment, too, a sense of celebration with appetizers.

Still, Purina considered other names, sifting through dozens, including "Pure d'oeuvres" and "Premium Portions."

They played with portion sizes. The product started out at 3 ounces, the same size as Fancy Feast meals. "Consumers told us that's too big. Why is it the same size as my main meal?" Biroscak said.

They shifted down to 2.75 ounces and finally, 2.

Packaging prototypes were refined. The appetizers come in oval tubs of clear plastic "because there is something about the oval shape that reminded people of people food," Biroscak said. And the cardboard sleeve covering the tub was recut from straight sides to S-shaped "to convey a certain feeling," he said.

The ad campaign will play on the festive aspect of appetizers, with the tag line "Celebrate the Moment."

Marketing and pet industry experts sounded impressed by the concept.

"Purina is taking advantage of consumer insights that they want to pamper their pets, spoil their pets," said Kim Whitler, a former marketing vice president at PetSmart.

"Strategically, it's interesting."

Mike Lewis, assistant marketing professor at Washington University, said it seemed like a natural extension of the humanization of pet food, such as dog treats that are shaped like sausages or steaks. "I can see this product showing up in our house," said Lewis, who has a cat named Axl.

TENDER TONGOL TUNA

In the Purina kitchen, Flamm peeled back the cover on a sea bass and shrimp appetizer. She delicately poured it onto a plate and set it on the kitchen island. Biroscak picked up the single, tiny shrimp.

"That shrimp, that is quality," he said. "This is something that you and I can eat up."

But will cats?

Purina's in-house testing drew rave reviews for the appetizer's eight varieties, which include "tender Tongol tuna," "white meat chicken" and "steamed Tilapia." Inkling of consumer reaction are just beginning to trickle in over the Internet. Kelly Hoffman of Reading, Pa., who runs a blog from the point of view (and in the voice) of her cat, Boris, wrote: "oh dis, dis iz nummy ... oh yeah."

And Laurie Ruettimann, who lives in Raleigh, N.C., wrote about her experience: "... OMG I am loved by five fat kitties."

Reached by phone, Ruettimann said she stumbled upon the product during a recent trip to Target. She was unsure exactly what it was. A meal? A snack? She bought it, though.

"It means my cats eat better than most people in the United States and in developing countries," she said, jokingly. "But I have no problem spoiling my cats."