

It's a Matter of Class

Do you think a pedigreed cat is out of your price range? Think again.

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You've seen them peering out at you from glossy magazine pages: the Abyssinian, whose almond-shaped eyes and regal figure conjure images from ancient Egyptian artistry; the Havana Brown, with its radiant chestnut-colored coat, reminiscent of fine Cuban cigars; and the hairless Sphynx, whose pink wrinkled skin and enormous ears beg to be petted.

Pedigreed cats make an exquisite parade, and, as everyone knows, they can be expensive. Or are they? For the cat lover who dreams of someday owning one of these beauties, it can be possible, and affordable, to bring one home. First you need to understand the difference between a show- and a pet-quality cat.

A pedigreed cat's aesthetic quality is defined by a written standard for each breed. How closely a cat conforms to this standard can add up to award-winning points in a judging ring, as well as its overall value in terms of everyday dollars and cents. But a distinct deviation from these ideal traits in overall coat color or pattern, eye color, number of toes or even temperament can cause a cat to lose status and value at cat shows and become what is called a pet-quality or pet-class cat. Such cats won't fare well in the show ring but will likely exhibit much of their breed's looks and personality.

"A [Sphynx] kitten born with too-fuzzy feet is not show quality and will drop its value," says Sphynx breeder Michelle Atwell of Apaws Cattery in Battle Ground, Wash. "But anything can be a pet-quality cat, anything you want to love." The difference, Atwell says, is the cats she sells as pets will be spayed and neutered first. This translates into an attainable cat for many people who are eager to provide a caring home for a pedigreed house cat but can't pay a show-cat price.

A good place to learn about pedigrees and look for a pet-quality cat is at a cat show. Many cat magazines list upcoming show dates and locations, or you can search the Internet for "cat registry" Web sites, which often list shows a year in advance. Most shows are held on weekends and are annualized to a general location.

For a cat show novice, selecting the right kitten from more than 40 registered breeds, especially when seeing them all in one place for the first time, can be a dizzying experience. When it comes to making that selection, there's more for you to consider than just a pretty face.