

Uncover the Mystery Ingredients in Cat Food

Cat foods come in a range of flavors, formulas and types. Learn how to decipher the labels and choose the right food for your cat.

By Lisa Kobs

Dry: This food is made in a machine called an extruder, the same machine that makes breakfast cereal.

"The extruder combines a pressure cooker with a meat grinder," Dr. Carey says. "The food goes into the extruder wet and is pushed along by a screw that lies in the center much like a meat grinder. A steam jacket that acts like a pressure cooker and cooks the food as it is moved along surrounds the machine.

"When it comes to the exit, there are two plates it is pushed through. One plate is still, and one is revolving. The moving plate slices the food as it is pushed through, and the shape of the plate determines the different shapes and sizes. A difference in pressure from inside and outside the machine causes the food to expand and puff up."

Food can then be sprayed with tasty fat and flavor blends to make it more appealing before it is dried and packaged. Co-extrusion sends out two flavors/colors of food at the same time, one inside the other. This process forms products with filled centers.

Semimoist: This food is manufactured using a principle called intermediate moisture technology. Semimoist foods stay soft because of higher levels of water; the technology keeps them from spoiling.

Water in the food is controlled by using ingredients that chemically bind it so bacteria cannot use it. Added preservatives prevent spoilage. The result is a soft and chewy product, much like canned food, that can be stored safely on the shelf. Extruders and co-extruders again form the shapes. Semimoist food can even be made to look as though it is layered with marbled fat.

So How Does It Taste? Commercial pet foods have tested and proven flavor appeal, Hawley says. "It's important to feed your cat things it likes or it will just walk away from its bowl. Remember, if the cat won't eat, it's not getting any of the nutritional benefit. And cats' reputation for being finicky eaters is certainly well deserved. On some occasions the same cat may like a particular food most of the time, but on a given day it suddenly may not," Hawley says.