

SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Ethics of Cat Food

The U.S. Turkey Industry Serves Up a Fancy Feast

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With inflation raising the price of food and other necessities, it is now more important than ever to be conscious of how the food we eat comes to be on our plates. While we may have access to information on the lives and manufacturers of the food we consume, some of the other members of our household may not get the same treatment. Much of our pets' food comes out of a bag or a can labeled "chicken," "beef," or "turkey," but the origins of this source of sustenance often remain a mystery. This paper looks at the sociological implications of a turkey variety of wet cat food: the dangers faced by U.S. poultry workers, the function of each canned ingredient, and human rights abuses in the food system.

Introduction

When I was in elementary school during the mid- to late 2000s, the lunches served at Hawai'i public schools rotated through a monthly menu. For two dollars and twenty-five cents, students would line up along stainless steel service stations in a big cafeteria to watch lunch staff and student helpers fill up five-compartment trays of whatever was on the menu that day, complete with a carton of milk and a side of fruits and vegetables. The whole experience fulfilled the stereotype of what American public school lunches are supposed to be: dull, mysterious, and mediocre.

Fifteen years later, when I first got my cat, I fell in love instantly. She became the most important thing in my life. Having another being to take care of was a turning point in my life and forever altered the way I see the world. One day, soon after I got Chloe, I bought a variety pack of Fancy Feast wet cat food. I opened a can of the turkey, officially called "Grilled

Turkey Feast in Gravy," and was transported back to my days in elementary school. The can of turkey smelled exactly like a meal that used to be served at school, which the monthly menu called "Turkey with Gravy." It was a formless, lifeless scoop of shredded white meat swimming in a greyish brown gelatinous liquid served with a dry wheat roll and a side of canned fruit in syrup. Suddenly, I was smelling the old but startlingly familiar smells of the turkey meal, the cloud of steam from the prep area, and the wax-lined milk cartons that accompanied every lunch. I heard the bustling chatter of hundreds of children, felt the hot air circulated through the room by huge ceiling fans, saw the scuffed brown concrete under our feet.

The correlation made me question what I was feeding my cat. Her excitement at meal time is unlike that at any other time of day, and food, as it does for humans, gives her the energy to run and play and live her very important life as a housecat and my companion. I feared that I was subjecting her to the same fate to which I had been sentenced; that is,



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I was giving her overly processed food mass-produced by a corporate conglomerate and trusting that it was good for her without thinking about what actually goes into it. If I truly cared about Chloe's well-being, would I be holding her nutrition to the same infamously subpar standards that the USDA holds to public school lunch? While I considered for a while making her food myself, further research and a talk with her vet taught me that premade cat food contains essential nutrients and vitamins that are expensive and difficult to source. It made more practical, nutritional, and financial sense to continue feeding her the Fancy Feast. In this paper, I examine the food that I feed my cat, focusing specifically on the Fancy Feast brand and the turkey variety that so thoroughly captured my attention upon first sniff. This involves a look at the poultry industry in the US, cat food ingredients, and Purina as a company.

Turkey in the United States

The brand Fancy Feast is housed under Purina, a pet care company which is a subsidiary of the Nestlé corporation. According to their website, Purina sources most of its poultry and all of its turkey in the United States, including eight different states, mostly in the Midwest but as far east as Delaware and Pennsylvania.¹ Among these, Minnesota represents the country's largest turkey producer with an output of 40.5 million birds in 2021.² This accounts for 18% of the total amount of turkey produced in the US.³ Poultry consumption is on an upward trajectory and, as a more affordable alternative to beef and pork, is expected to continue to increase in popularity in the next decade.⁴ This makes the state of the turkey industry all the more consequential to consumers.

The turkey industry in the US poses a number of sociological quandaries. One of the most prominent of these concerns the health and safety of poultry workers. While the accuracy of data concerning the demographics of poultry workers may be affected by workers' fears related to immigration status, estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau characterize a

large percentage of poultry workers, 26.5%, as Latinx compared to 16.8% of U.S. workers in all industries. Additionally, of the 28.1% of foreign-born poultry processing workers, 65.2% predominantly speak Spanish, and about half, 50.1%, identify their country of origin as Mexico. At 40.1%, women are slightly underrepresented in the poultry industry compared to their role in the national workforce.⁵ It should be reiterated here that these estimates are assumed to underrepresent certain groups, specifically those who have vulnerabilities due to their immigration and citizenship statuses.

In terms of economics and labor theory, poultry work is considered "peripheral labor."⁶ That is, workers are offered little pay, job security, and training, and few, if any, opportunities for promotion or unionization. In contrast to "core" workers, peripheral laborers are trained minimally and given few opportunities for advancement. This affords them little power in the workforce and makes them expendable to the poultry firms for which they work, leading to high turnover rates. This deskilling and reduction in training is a key component of the growth in popularity of this peripheral labor structure as companies have little motivation to improve worker wages, benefits, or retention, leaving workers unprotected.

Alexander⁷ recognizes the transnational nature of the poultry industry as another component of peripheral labor. Migrant workers provide a required element of this system: "an unending supply of new workers ready to take vacant jobs." In addition, immigrant workers are more willing to accept substandard working conditions, wages, and benefits because the conditions and compensation in their country of origin are "significantly worse." Undocumented workers are particularly vulnerable to labor abuse because, in addition to being fired or socially ostracized, possible retaliation to complaints against their employers may also include the risk of deportation and reports to immigration authorities.

The physical safety risks faced by poultry workers are not negligible. Workers in the meat and poultry industry suffer some of the highest rates of injury in any industry. Laborers work with heavy machinery and sharp equipment in environments full of trip hazards and dangerous chemicals. Injuries range from cuts and scrapes to strains from repetitive motion,

1 Pet Food Ingredient Traceability Map. (2021). Purina. Retrieved May 4, 2023, from <https://www.purina.com/ingredients/pet-food-traceability-map>

2 Economic Research Service. Turkey Sector: Background & Statistics. (April 18, 2023). U.S. Department of Agriculture. Retrieved May 4, 2023, from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/newsroom/trending-topics/turkey-sector-background-statistics/>

3 Ye, S. Minnesota Poultry Industry Profile. (2022). Minnesota Department of Agriculture. <https://www.mda.state.mn.us/sites/default/files/inline-files/Minnesota%20Poultry%20Profile%202022-update.pdf>

4 Henriksen, J. (2023). Food insecurity—a global challenge for poultry. *WATT Poultry International*, January 2023, 28–29. https://www.poultryinternational-digital.com/poultryinternational/january_2023/MobilePagedReplica.action?pm=2&folio=28#pg30

5 Stuesse, A., & Dollar, N. T. (2020, September 24). *Who are America's meat and poultry workers?* Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/blog/meat-and-poultry-worker-demographics/>

6 Alexander, C. S. (2012). Explaining peripheral labor: A poultry industry case study. *Berkeley Journal of Employment & Labor Law*, 33(2), 353–399.

7 Alexander, C. S. (2012). Explaining peripheral labor: A poultry industry case study. *Berkeley Journal of Employment & Labor Law*, 33(2), 353–399.

to more serious fractures and amputations, and even death.⁸ Risks are posed in every stage of the process, from preslaughter to processing to packing.⁹ An ethnographic study of a Tyson chicken plant in Arkansas¹⁰ reveals that the women workers in the plant, who make up about a third of the employees, are relegated to “on-line” jobs which do not involve heavy lifting but are considered the “worst in the plant” due to their dangerously repetitive nature. Furthermore, the positions which are the most physically demanding and dangerous, those on the floor, are held predominantly by Spanish-speaking immigrants, who stand in contrast to the white, college-educated managers who are not exposed to the same risks.

However, these safety hazards are not the only risks faced by poultry workers. Turkey industry laborers are also exposed to a number of diseases that put both their short-term and long-term health at risk. Most notable of these is avian influenza, or bird flu. In 2015, the turkey industry in the Upper Midwest was severely impacted by an outbreak of avian influenza.¹¹ Despite overwhelming evidence of both the likelihood of an avian influenza pandemic¹² and the susceptibility of poultry workers to such a pandemic,¹³ adequate measures were not taken to prevent the outbreak, which resulted in the deaths of 50 million birds and a loss of jobs across the industry, even within one of the biggest turkey production companies in the country, Jennie-O.¹⁴ While humans are unlikely to contract avian influenza, the threat of infection still looms, as does the threat of job loss,

while the nation continues to feel the effects of the more recent 2022–23 avian influenza outbreak.¹⁵

The absence of documented cases of human contraction of avian influenza should not be considered an indication that humans will never contract the virus. In 1986, Minnesota turkey workers experienced an outbreak of psittacosis, a bacterial infection previously thought to affect only birds. The illness was thought to spread through airborne secretions of the birds’ organs and feces. Not only were the workers who were exposed to these elements infected with psittacosis, but the illness also occurred among those who worked at a “further processing” plant, who do not interact with organs and feces.¹⁶ Psittacosis causes birds to become depressed, ruffled, and anorexic; in humans, it causes flu-like symptoms, including fever, chills, headache, and, in some cases, pneumonia, which has the potential to be deadly. Poultry workers remain at risk of avian diseases and require adequate safety measures to mitigate these risks.

Other diseases of concern to poultry workers are avian leukosis/sarcoma viruses (ALSV), reticuloendotheliosis viruses (REV), and Marek’s disease virus (MDV), all of which are known to cause cancer in chickens and turkeys. A 20-year-long study between 1969 and 1990 involving poultry workers in Missouri found that workers exposed to these diseases were at increased risk of lung, pancreatic, kidney, and cervical cancers as well as respiratory diseases.¹⁷ The study also notes an insufficient amount of research on the topic of avian diseases’ effects on human health, particularly those known to cause cancer. As turkey workers are regularly exposed to poultry birds that may become infected, this lack of information poses a health risk. Some of this risk could be eliminated by providing workers with personal protective equipment; however, this provision is often overlooked by employers. A North Carolina study¹⁸ found that, while most forms of PPE which defend against physical risks, such as hand protection, protective clothing, and hear-

8 U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2005). *Workplace safety and health: Safety in the meat and poultry industry, while improving, could be further strengthened*. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-05-96>

9 Cervantes López, E. (2023). Poultry processing plant changes help staff, raise output. *WATT Poultry International*, March 2023, 38–39. https://www.poultryinternational-digital.com/poultryinternational/march_2023/MobilePagedReplica.action?pm=2&folio=38#pg40

10 Striffler, S. (2010). Inside a poultry processing plant: An ethnographic portrait. *Labor History*, 43(3), 305–313.

11 Wells, S. J., Kromm, M. M., VanBeusekom, E. T., Sorley, E. J., Sundaram, M. E., VanderWaal, K., Bowers, J. W. J., Papinaho, P. A., Osterholm, M. T., & Bender, J. (2017). Epidemiologic investigation of Highly Pathogenic H5N2 Avian Influenza among Upper Midwest U.S. turkey farms, 2015. *Avian Diseases*, 61(2), 198–204.

12 Kayali, G., Ortiz, E. J., Chorazy, M. L., & Gray, G. C. (2010). Evidence of previous avian influenza infection among US turkey workers. *Zoonoses and Public Health*, 57(4), 265–272.

13 Gray, G. C., Trampel, D. W., & Roth, J. A. (2007). Pandemic influenza planning: Shouldn’t swine and poultry workers be included? *Vaccine*, 25(22), 4376–4381.

14 Huffstutter, P., & Polansek, T. (2015, May 6). *U.S. boosts bird flu emergency funds as Hormel cuts jobs*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-birdflu-funds-exclusive/exclusive-u-s-boosts-bird-flu-emergency-funds-as-hormel-cuts-jobs-idUSKBN0NQrVZ20150506>

15 Chappell, B. (2022, December 2). *What we know about the deadliest U.S. bird flu outbreak in history*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/02/1140076426/what-we-know-about-the-deadliest-u-s-bird-flu-outbreak-in-history>

16 Hedberg, K., White, K. E., Forfang, J. C., Korlath, J. A., Friendshuh, K. A. J., Hedberg, C. W., MacDonald, K. L., & Osterholm, M. T. (1989). An outbreak of psittacosis in Minnesota turkey industry workers: Implications for modes of transmission and control. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 130(3), 569–577.

17 Netto, G. F., & Johnson, E. S. (2003). Mortality in workers in poultry slaughtering/processing plants: The Missouri poultry cohort study. *Occupational & Environmental Medicine*, 60(10), 784–788.

18 Arcury, T. A., Grzywacz, J. G., Anderson, A. M., Mora D. C., Carrillo, L., Chen, H., & Quandt, S. A. (2012). Employer, use of personal protective equipment, and work safety climate: Latino poultry processing workers. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 56(2), 180–188.

ing protection, are used universally by poultry workers and generally provided by the company at no cost, workers were required to purchase other types of PPE, such as dust masks and eye protection. In addition to calling attention to a lack of enforcement of OSHA guidelines among those in the poultry industry, this also makes information on human exposure to bird flu all the more essential to the health and safety of turkey workers.

Ingredients in Fancy Feast

Turkey is only one of several components that make up this particular variety of cat food. The ingredient list is as follows:

Turkey, turkey broth, wheat gluten, meat by-products, liver, fish, corn starch-modified, soy flour, glycine, salt, tricalcium phosphate, natural flavor

Printed on the can's label beside the list of ingredients, minerals, and vitamins, is a simple claim: "every ingredient has a purpose."

Cats are obligate carnivores, which means they primarily eat meat. As a cat owner, I am advised to keep my cat's diet as close as possible to the diet she would be eating in the wild. It is also suggested to feed a cat something it can reasonably kill; this leaves beef, lamb, and pork out of the picture, but chicken and turkey are acceptable. While cornstarch and glycine are likely not on the menu of wild cats, meat by-products are the organs of animals, which, according to Purina's website,¹⁹ are full of protein and are the first thing a cat would normally eat in the wild. Other ingredients provide fiber (wheat gluten), iron (liver), and essential minerals (tricalcium phosphate) that help support a cat's health while cornstarch and salt make the food palatable. All of the ingredients found in this tin can of turkey and gravy, then, is essentially a deconstructed version of a turkey itself: the meat, the bones, and the innards.

On the other hand, the question of whether these ingredients comprise a diet fit for an obligate carnivore requires a multi-faceted approach to cat food. High-end cat food brands, such as Tiki Cat,²⁰ boast the lack of some of these ingredients in their own products. Corn and wheat, for example, have been controversial filler ingredients in cat foods. The chemical composition of corn gluten provides significantly less nutritional value than that of meat or chicken, containing less essential nutrients like calcium and phosphorus and having

lower digestibility.²¹ In addition, wheat represents a common allergen for cats and is known for triggering adverse reactions along with corn, soy, and dairy products.²² Considering the low nutritional value of corn and wheat, cat owners must weigh the risk of feeding their pets food products, such as Fancy Feast, containing these ingredients.

The meat by-products found in cat food, for another example, are the parts of animals such as beef and lamb that are not considered fit for human consumption, mainly internal organs. While Purina's claim that organs such as the liver and kidneys offer a rich source of protein is upheld in studies suggesting the use of meat by-products as a protein source even for humans,²³ most of what makes up the meat by-product component of commercial cat foods is mechanically deboned meat (MDM). Cats display low rates of preference for MDM compared to the liver, kidney, and other organs of lamb and beef.²⁴ Palatability is an important factor in consumer choices, particularly when the product is targeted at cats, a notoriously picky audience. The blanket term "meat by-products" used in the Fancy Feast ingredient list, and especially its distinction from the ingredient "liver," almost surely means that the ingredient is composed primarily of the less savory MDM as opposed to the more nutritious and palatable organs.

Abuse in the Supply Chain

Purina also claims to practice responsible sourcing; that is, using ingredients and materials that are sustainable, ethical, and of high quality, and holding their suppliers to the same standards. Most of the language used to describe the process of choosing suppliers is vague ("high standards," "ethical and responsible employment," "overall ethics that align with Purina

21 Funaba, M., Oka, Y., Kobayashi, S., Kaneko, M., Yamamoto, H., Namikawa, K., Iriki, T., Hatano, Y., Abe, M. (2005). Evaluation of meat meal, chicken meal, and corn gluten meal as dietary sources of protein in dry cat food. *Canadian Journal of Veterinarian Research*, 69(4), 299–304.

22 Mueller, R. S., Olivry, T., & Prélaud, P. (2016). Critically appraised topic on adverse food reactions of companion animals (2): Common food allergen sources in dogs and cats. *BMC Veterinary Research*, 12(9).

23 Borrajo, P., Pateiro, M., Barba, F. J., Mora, L., Franco, D., Toldrá, F., & Lorenzo, J. M. (2019). Antioxidant and antimicrobial activity of peptides extracted from meat by-products: A review. *Food Analytical Methods*, 12, 2401–2415.

24 Watson, P., Thomas, D., Hoggard, A., Parker, M., & Schreurs, N. (2020). Investigating the palatability of lamb and beef components used in the production of pet food for cats. *Animals*, 10(4), 558.

19 Dog and Cat Food Ingredients. (n.d.). Purina. Retrieved May 4, 2023, from <https://www.purina.com/ingredients>

20 Why Feed Tiki Pets? (n.d.). Tiki Pets. Retrieved Aug. 7, 2023, from <https://tikipets.com/why-feed-tiki/>

values”),²⁵ but the actions taken in support of these claims are more concrete.

In 2014, parent company Nestlé voluntarily launched an investigation into reports that forced labor in the Thailand fishing industry was being used to supply ingredients for its Purina Fancy Feast brand. The report confirmed the labor abuse, in which migrant workers from neighboring Myanmar and Cambodia, some children, were forced into indentured servitude after migrating to Thailand. They suffered dangerous and deadly working conditions on fishing vessels in what they were told would be refuge from poverty. These findings are unique; multinational corporations (MNCs) are often obliged to investigate similar allegations of abuse but “rarely share negative findings.”²⁶ In admitting to their involvement in forced labor, Nestlé demonstrated a commitment to eliminating the practice from its supply chain. Wesley et al.²⁷ uses Nestlé’s handling of the Thailand slave and child labor case as a model for corporate social responsibility. Following the investigation and an eventual lawsuit, Nestlé was part of a group of companies implicated in the suit to form the Seafood Task Force that works to regulate and identify abuses within the global seafood industry. Despite several laws in Thailand prohibiting slavery and child labor, the report uncovered fundamental corruption in the Thai military and law enforcement as well as systemic issues related to poverty that allowed these abuses to occur. The importance of the role of MNCs in “filling institutional voids” is underlined in the Thai seafood case. Nestlé’s creation of the Seafood Task Force illustrates the increasing importance

of MNCs and the potential of corporations to act as advocates and watchdogs in the absence of substantial government efforts to prevent human rights abuses.

Conclusion

As fish is an ingredient listed on the can of turkey-based cat food, the abuses of labor in Thailand hit close to home for me. If we expect corporations to be held accountable for their responsibility to society, then it may be true that we as consumers must also exercise our power by purchasing ethically sourced food, both for ourselves and for the furry, feathered, and scaled members of our families. Globalization has brought about deep bonds between nations and societies that were previously disconnected. The successes of each nation are reflected in others; conversely, the abuses and fundamental weaknesses that exist in any community directly affect their counterparts. Flaws continue to plague the U.S. turkey industry, and labor abuses remain a complex problem in all parts of the world.

The food system has much work to do in efforts to make more transparent the sources of food and the means of getting food to our tables and food mats as well as to raise the ethical standards of food production processes. While the responsibility falls on consumers to shape a more just future for our family’s food, complications in the food supply chains make it difficult to contend with the ethics and sociological implications of these choices. The quality, nutritional value, and ethics of cat food, like most products, can be measured against the same scale: price. Cat food that is even more responsibly sourced than Fancy Feast, that uses even less unnecessary fillers, and that is made of even higher-quality ingredients can be almost three times as expensive and hard to find in grocery stores. Inaccessibility removes choice. Looking back at my public school cafeteria experiences as a child, of my working-class family and those around me, I realize that my decision is comparable to the one made by my mother when deciding that I would eat school lunch every day; that is, it is the best choice I know to make within my physical and financial means. In the end, I will continue to feed my cat Fancy Feast not because it is the best but because it is the best that I can afford.

25 Responsible Sourcing. (n.d.). Purina. Retrieved May 4, 2023, from <https://www.purina.com/nutrition/sourcing>

26 Mendoza, M. (2015, November 23). *Nestle confirms labor abuse among its Thai seafood suppliers*. Associated Press. <https://www.ap.org/explore/seafood-from-slaves/nestle-confirms-labor-abuse-among-its-thai-seafood-suppliers.html>

27 Wesley, D., Dau, L. A., & Moore, E. M. (2019). Filling Institutional Voids in Thailand: the Case of Nestlé and the Seafood Coalition. In O. Osuji, F. N. Ngwu, & D. Jamali (Eds.), *Corporate Social Responsibility in Developing and Emerging Markets: Institutions, Actors and Sustainable Development*, (pp. 232–257). Cambridge University Press.