NO WONDER THEY CALL
ME A BITCH

Ann Hodgman is a food critic for Eating Well magazine. Besides playing goalie on a women’s hockey team, she is the author of more than forty children’s books, including My Babysitter Is a Vampire, and several cookbooks. For reasons soon to be apparent, however, the following “tasteless” essay did not appear in Hodgman’s food column, “Sweet and Sour,” but in the satiric magazine Spy, for which Hodgman was a contributing editor. A spoof on taste testing, it takes a blue ribbon for disgusting description that appeals to the grosser senses.

I’ve always wondered about dog food. Is a Gaines-burger really like a hamburger? Can you fry it? Does dog food “cheese” taste like real cheese? Does Gravy Train actually make gravy in the dog’s bowl, or is that brown liquid just dissolved crumbs? And exactly what are by-products?

Having spent the better part of a week eating dog food, I’m sorry to say that I now know the answers to these questions. While my dachshund, Shortie, watched in agonies of yearning, I gagged my way through can after can of stinky, white-flecked mush and bag after bag of stinky, fat-drenched nuggets. And now I understand exactly why Shortie’s breath is so bad.

Of course, Gaines-burgers are neither mush nor nuggets. They are, rather, a miracle of beauty and packaging—or at least that’s what I thought when I was little. I used to beg my mother to get them for our dogs, but she always said they were too expensive. When I finally bought a box of cheese-flavored Gaines-burgers—after twenty years of longing—I felt deliciously wicked.
"Dogs love real beef," the back of the box proclaimed proudly. "That's why Gaines-burgers is the only beef burger for dogs with real beef and no meat by-products!" The copy was accurate; meat by-products did not appear in the list of ingredients. Poultry by-products did, though—right there next to preserved animal fat.

One Purina spokesman told me that poultry by-products consist of necks, intestines, undeveloped eggs and other "carcass remnants," but not feathers, heads, or feet. When I told him I'd been eating dog food, he said, "Oh, you're kidding! Oh, no!" (I came to share his alarm when, weeks later, a second Purina spokesman said that Gaines-burgers contain poultry heads and feet—but not undeveloped eggs.)

Up close my Gaines-burger didn't much resemble chopped beef. Rather, it looked—and felt—like a single long, extruded piece of redness that had been chopped into segments and formed into a patty. You could make one at home if you had a Play-Doh Fun Factory.

I turned on the skillet. While I waited for it to heat up I pulled out a shred of cheese-colored material and palpated it. Again, like Play-Doh, it was quite malleable. I made a little cheese bird out of it; then I counted to three and ate the bird.

There was a horrifying rush of cheddar taste, followed immediately by the dull tang of soybean flour—the main ingredient in Gaines-burgers. Next I tried a piece of red extrusion. The main difference between the meat-flavored and cheese-flavored extrusions was of texture. The "cheese" chews like fresh Play-Doh, whereas the "meat" chews like Play-Doh that's been sitting out on a rug for a couple of hours.

Frying only turned the Gaines-burger black. There was no melting, no sizzling, no warm meat smells. A cherished childhood illusion was gone. I lifted the patty into the sink, where it immediately began leaking rivulets of red dye.

As alarming as the Gaines-burgers were, their soy meal began to seem like an old friend when the time came to try some canned dog foods. I decided to try the Cycle foods first. When I opened them, I thought about how rarely I use can openers these days, and I was suddenly visited by a long-forgotten sensation of can-opener distaste. This is the kind of unsavory place can openers spend their time when you're not watching! Every time you open a can of, say, Italian plum tomatoes, you infect them with invisible particles of by-product.

I had been expecting to see the usual homogeneous scrapple inside, but each can of Cycle was packed with smooth, round, oily nuggets. As if someone at Gaines had been tipped off that a human would be tasting the stuff, the four Cycles really were different from one another. Cycle-1, for puppies, is wet and soyish. Cycle-2, for adults, glistens nastily with fat, but it's passably edible—a lot like some canned Swedish meatballs I once got in a Care package at college. Cycle-3, the "lite" one, for fatties, had no specific flavor; it just tasted like dog food. But at least it didn't make me fat.

Cycle-4, for senior dogs, had the smallest nuggets. Maybe old dogs can't open their mouths as wide. This was far sweeter than the other three Cycles—almost like baked beans. It was also the only one to contain "dried beef digest," a mysterious substance that the Purina spokesman defined as "enzymes" and my dictionary defined as "the products of digestion."

Next on the menu was a can of Kal Kan Pedigree with Chunky Chicken. Chunky chicken? There were chunks in the can, certainly—big, purplish-brown chunks. I forked one out (by now I was becoming more callous) and found that while it had no discernible chicken flavor, it wasn't bad except for its texture—like meat loaf with ground-up chicken bones.

In the world of canned dog food, a smooth consistency is a sign of low quality—lots of cereal. A lumpy, frightening, bloody, stringy horror is a sign of high quality—lots of meat. Nowhere in the world of wet dog foods was this demonstrated better than in the fanciest I tried—Kal Kan's Pedigree Select Dinners. These came not in a can but in a tiny foil packet with a picture of an imperious Yorkie. When I pulled open the container, juice spurted all over my hand, and the first chunk I speared was trailing a long gray vein. I shrieked and went instead for a plain chunk, which I was able to swallow only after taking a break to read some suddenly fascinating office equipment catalogues. Once again, though, it tasted no more alarming than, say, canned hash.

Still, how pleasant it was to turn to dry dog food! Gravy Train was the first I tried, and I'm happy to report that it really does make a "thick, rich, real beef gravy" when you mix it with water. Thick and rich, anyway. Except for a lingering rancid-fat flavor, the gravy wasn't beefy, but it tasted primarily like tap water, it wasn't nauseating either.
My poor dachshund just gets plain old Purina Dog Chow, but Purina also makes a dry food called Butcher's Blend that comes in Beef, Bacon & Chicken flavor. Here we see dog food's arcane semiotics at its best: a red triangle with a T stamped into it is supposed to suggest beef; a tan curl, chicken; and a brown S, a piece of bacon. Only dogs understand these messages. But Butcher's Blend does have an endearing slogan: "Great Meaty Tastes—without bothering the Butcher!" You know, I wanted to buy some meat, but I just couldn't bring myself to bother the butcher...

Purina O.N.E. ("Optimum Nutritional Effectiveness") is targeted at people who are unlikely ever to worry about bothering a tradesperson. "We chose chicken as a primary ingredient in Purina O.N.E. for several reasons," the long, long essay on the back of the bag announces. Chief among these reasons, I'd guess, is the fact that chicken appeals to people who are—you know—like us. Although our dogs do nothing but spend eighteen-hour days alone in the apartment, we still want them to be premium dogs. We want them to cut down on red meat, too. We also want dog food that comes in a bag with an attractive design, a subtle typeface, and no kitschy pictures of slobbering golden retrievers.

Besides that, we want a list of the Nutritional Benefits of our dog food—and we get it on O.N.E. One thing I especially like about this list is its constant references to a dog's "hair coat," as in "Beef tallow is good for the dog's skin and hair coat." (On the other hand, beef tallow merely provides palatability, while the dried beef digest in Cycle provides palatability enhancement.)

I have to say it, but O.N.E. was pretty palatable. Maybe that's because it has 100 percent more fat than, say, Butcher's Blend. Or maybe I'd been duped by the packaging; that's been known to happen before.

As with people food, dog snacks taste much better than dog meals. They're better looking too. Take Milk-Bone Flavor Snacks. The loving-hands-at-home prose describing each flavor is colorful; the writers practically choke on their own exuberance. Of bacon they say, "It's so good, your dog will think it's hot off the frying pan." Of liver: "The only taste your dog wants more than liver—is even more liver!" Of poultry: "All those farm fresh flavors deliciously mixed in one biscuit. Your dog will bark with delight!" And of vegetable: "Gardens of taste! Specially blended to give your dog that vegetable flavor he wants—but can rarely get!"

Well, I may be a sucker, but advertising this emphatic just doesn't convince me. I lined up all seven flavors of Milk-Bone Flavor Snacks on the floor. Unless my dog's palate is a lot more sensitive than mine—and considering that she steals dirty diapers out of the trash and eats them, I loath to think it is—she doesn't detect any more difference in the seven flavors than I did when I tried them.

I much preferred Bonz, the hard-baked, bone-shaped snack stuffed with simmulated marrow. I liked the bone part, that is; it tasted almost exactly like the cornmeal it was made of. The mock marrow inside was a bit more problematic: in addition to looking like the sludge that collects in the treads of my running shoes, it was bursting with tiny hairs.

I'm sure you have a few dog food questions of your own. To save us time, I've answered them in advance.

Q. Are those little cans of Mighty Dog actually branded with the sizzling word BEEF, the way they show in the commercials?

A. You should know by now that that kind of thing never happens.

Q. Does chicken-flavored dog food taste like chicken-flavored cat food?

A. To my surprise, chicken cat food was actually a little better—more chunky. It tasted like inferior canned pâté.

Q. Was there any dog food that you just couldn't bring yourself to try?

A. Alas, it was a can of Mighty Dog called Prime Entree with Bone Marrow. The meat was dark, dark brown, and it was surrounded by gelatin that was almost black. I knew I would die if I tasted it, so I put it outside for the raccoons.

For Discussion

1. Ann Hodgman's discourse on dog food may be tongue in cheek (or is it lump in throat?), but as DESCRIPTIVE writing do you agree that it is truly disgusting? Which do you find more effectively nauseating, her description of the tastes and textures of dry dog food or canned?

2. Must Hodgman's "research" is done in her own laboratory kitchen. Where else does she go for information? Do you think her studies qualify her to speak expertly on the subject? How about vividly?

3. How do you suppose Hodgman knows what Play-Doh chews like after it's
been “sitting out on a rug for a couple of hours”—that is, as opposed to fresh Play-Doh (8)?

4. What childhood fantasy does Hodgman fulfill by writing this essay? How does the reality COMPARE with the fantasy?

5. Do you find Hodgman’s title in bad taste? Why or why not? How about her entire essay?

6. Q. Why are you asking these unnecessary questions? A: Somebody has to honor those who do basic research in a new field. What question would you ask about this piece?

Strategies and Structures

1. “When I pulled open the container, juice spurted all over my hand, and the first chunk I speared was trailing a long gray vein” (14). Can you see, smell, and taste it? Please cite other horrifying examples of Hodgman’s DESCRIPTIVE skills and her direct appeal (if that’s the right word) to the senses.

2. Notice the major shift that occurs when the description moves from canned dog food to dry. Where does the shift occur? Why does she find the change so “pleasant”? When does she shift again—to snacks?

3. Why do you suppose Hodgman never tells us why she is describing the ingredients, tastes, and textures of dog food with such scrupulous accuracy and objectivity? What might her reasons be?

4. Why do you think Hodgman shifts to a question-and-answer format at the end of her essay?

5. Hodgman is a professional food critic. What concrete and specific words from her professional vocabulary does she use?

6. What is the dominant impression created by Hodgman’s description of Bonz in paragraph 22?

7. Hodgman not only describes herself at work in her laboratory kitchen, she ANALYZES the process of doing basic food research there. Besides tasting, what are some of the other steps in the process (see Chapter 5)?

Words and Figures of Speech

1. Hodgman refers to “some suddenly fascinating office equipment catalogues” that divert her from tasting Kal Kan’s best (14). Is this IRONY?

2. How does your dictionary DEFINE “dried beef digests” (12)? Where else does Hodgman use the technical language of the industry she is SATIRIZING?

3. Hodgman says her Gaines-burger, when fried and flipped into the sink, “began leaking rivulets of red dye” (9). Is this scientific detachment or HYPERBOLE?

4. The opposite of intentional exaggeration is UNDERSTATEMENT. In Hodgman’s ANALYSIS of the simulated marrow in Bonz, would “problematic” qualify as an example (22)?

5. Hodgman says Kal Kan Pedigree with Chunky Chicken tasted “like meat loaf with ground up chicken bones” (13). Is this a SIMILE, or do you suppose the chicken could be literally chunky because of the bones? Or is Hodgman actually talking about meat loaf and only likening the Kal Kan to it? If so, do you think she should change her meat loaf recipe?

For Writing

1. While Hodgman gags her way through sample after sample of premium dog food, her dachshund, Shortie, looks on “in agonies of yearning” (2). DESCRIE the “data” in Hodgman’s taste experiment from Shortie’s POINT OF VIEW. How might Gaines-burgers and Kal Kan Pedigree with Chunky Chicken taste to him? Is Hodgman right to say that Shortie cannot distinguish among the seven flavors of Milk-Bone Flavor Snacks? What would Shortie’s palate tell us?

2. Conduct a program of research similar to Hodgman’s but in the field of junk food. Write an unbiased description of your findings. Or, if you prefer, forget the taste tests, and follow Hodgman’s lead in ANALYZING the claims of food advertisers. Choose a category of food products—gummy worms, breath mints, canned soup, frozen pizza, breakfast cereal, cookies—and study the packaging carefully. Write an essay in which you describe how the manufacturers of your samples typically describe their products.