Cats are infamous for their discerning personalities. This equally plays into their finicky tastes, leading many cats to scoff at any food they consider below their personal standards. The reason for this comes down to biology and evolution, since unlike humans and dogs, they do not require carbohydrates in their diet and therefore have only developed one out of the two possible sweetness receptors in their brain. However, cats have an enhanced ability to taste bitterness as these particular receptors are well developed due to an evolutionary advantage inhibiting them from ingesting potentially lethal substances. Although cats do not have the same amount of taste buds as humans, they do seem to be able to detect most flavours bar sweetness, which could be due to their strong sense of smell rather than taste.

These factors shed light on why cats tend to be fussier than dogs when it comes to feeding time. Their taste preferences directly point to their nutritional needs, as the fundamental part of a cat’s diet should be protein with little or no carbohydrates. This is why vets recommend wet meat-based cat foods and advise staying away from dry food as much as possible. Nikki and Brett, sibling duo and founders of personalised cat food brand KatKin explain the importance of respecting cats’ special nutritional needs and choosing cat food suited to their health and palate. Nikki discusses the biology behind cats’ particular tastes and how she channelled her love of cats and a marketing background into co-developing a brand proving to be a disruptor in the pet food market.

Julian: Tell us a little a bit about your professional background and the inspiration to develop KatKin?

KatKin: I come from an advertising and marketing background. I’ve always loved the fast pace, energy and creativity of working on brands as well as customers’ reactions to a brand. After studying advertising, I found out how much I loved the excitement and pace behind brand-building as well as seeing how a community can rally behind a brand with a positive mission and purpose. I believe where it fell a bit flat for me was during my time working in marketing advertising for a certain brand as there is a veil of honestly and transparency, however not all brands have or *can* have that. The experience had the right energy but it wasn’t the right brand I was working on so I didn’t feel I could properly throw myself at it and be passionate about it. I needed to feel we were making a difference on the brands I worked on. I’ve always felt like the quintessential crazy cat lady so I’ve combined this identity with my love for my previous career. I now wake up each morning feeling excited about something and realise the positive impact we have on cats’ lives. It’s something you can go home from at the end of each day and be proud of.

Julian: Did you have cats in your household growing up?

KatKin: We grew up in a home which always valued pets. We had cats, dogs, guinea pigs and rabbits. Our pets were always treated as members of the family, but the cats always had a special place.

Julian: You now have two cats. Tell us a bit about them?

Katkin: Kiki and Columbus. They’re very different cats. As I had multiple cats growing up, I realised no two cats are the same. Kiki, our eleven-year-old little oriental female is very sweet but has a bit of an edge to her. If you get her on the wrong day, she will very quickly show her little devil ears. Columbus, who I call Kiki’s brother though he’s from a different litter, is a mixed-breed cat who is very much muggy. I don’t think it’s a bad word but Kiki is almost like a dainty ballerina and Columbus is more a sturdy cat. They have very different personalities. Kiki is all over people and loves to engage with them, while Columbus is very much on his own terms. So, if you do get affection from Columbus, you should feel very lucky.

Julian: Why did you choose cats over dogs?

KatKin: As I mentioned, I grew up with both. When I was young, my best friend was a Maltese poodle called Digby. He was a rescue dog and we got him from the SPCA. I have always been close to dogs as well as cats. I think at my current stage of life, in terms of independence and freedom, Kiki and Columbus are part of the family and fit in with the routine. I believe having a dog demands a different level of commitment. So, we are more angled towards cats at the moment but I’m currently trying to convince my husband we should get a puppy very soon.

Julian: How did you start KatKin and were your own cats an inspiration for the brand?

KatKin: My brother Brett and I created KatKin. Brett was looking at his own personal health and wellbeing and really got into how products are made. He began looking at ingredients and understanding labels a bit more. He then transferred that knowledge into what he was feeding his cat, Molly. She very much influenced Brett in his desire to start KatKin due to realising the lack of nutrition in food that was available for her. Brett also understood my love for cats growing up and thought it would be the perfect opportunity for us as brother and sister to come together in a business.

Julian: Did you have to learn a lot about cat nutrition? How much research did you undertake?

KatKin: KatKin’s core essence is the wellness and nutritional benefits for cats. Brett and I did not have that background as we’re not vets. So, we had to do a lot of research and find the right person to partner with in the early days. To that end, we discovered Dr Justin Smaulberg and the board of certified vet nutritionists. Dr Smaulberg is probably one out of a hundred vets in the US who could formulate the best fresh diet for cats. Brett and I knew very early in our journey that we could do this and build a brand with good food, but if we wanted the best for cats it needed to be backed by science. That’s why we brought in Justin who is a vet nutritionist, as well as Dom who is an animal science nutritionist. Together they work on formulating the nutritionally-rounded recipes we feed the cats.

Julian: How important was it to understand a cat’s sense of taste while developing the cat food?

KatKin: Taste is very much an important thing when you’re making cat food. Everyone knows a dog will eat almost anything you put in front of it, while formulating food for cats is actually very tricky in terms of palatability and taste. Cats are traditionally neophobic, meaning they don’t like change and one of the things they don’t like to change is their food. So, it’s important to introduce them to food slowly as they are very aware of what they eat. Cats also have an interesting survival and evolutionary mechanism called reluctant consumption behaviour, which I learnt about while developing KatKin. In the wild, cats would hunt for prey and if they ate food they don’t normally eat, because of their small size depending on the volume of food it could make them sick. For this reason, they’re very hesitant to change food. It translates into their behaviour as kittens, so if they see their mother eating a certain food, they become familiar with the smells, texture and taste. It then becomes something they are comfortable eating in adulthood.

Julian: What can you tell us about a cat’s sense of taste?

KatKin: Interestingly, cats don’t actually have the sweet receptor so they can eat sweets and sugars within food but cannot actually taste it. It’s the same with salt, so even though it’s a nutritional addition, it doesn’t add anything to palatability. When formulating food in terms of taste, there are three major things which cats desire. The first is high protein. They should be called little superheroes as they have a unique ability to detect whether food has a high level of protein compared to a high level of carbohydrates. If a cat is given the option of food which is healthy and good for them containing a high level of protein, they will always gravitate towards that over food containing lower protein.

The second factor is moisture. Cats don’t like to get their water from a bowl and you’ll see we have a cat water fountain downstairs in my kitchen as cats prefer the motion of a moving stream with oxygen in the water. It is very important cats are fed a high moisture diet with a high water taste..

The last consideration for taste which plays an important role is texture. It’s important to make sure cats are able to bite through meat as they aren’t herbivores with flat teeth for grinding plants. These three factors contribute to what is most important in making cat food and what to look out for in terms of taste.

Julian: Cats have a greater ability to detect bitter flavours compared to humans or dogs. Do you think their enhanced sensitivity to bitter tastes makes them pickier eaters?

KatKin: Their bitter palette is definitely more intense. They don’t like bitter food so they always steer away from that taste in their food. It’s what makes our lives more difficult as there’s so much technicality in formulating recipes for fussy cats. Similar to dogs, you get fussy dogs and unfussy dogs, but due to cats’ nature they are opposed to changing to new foods quickly due to that survival instinct. They are usually only comfortable with tastes and flavour textures they’ve been brought up with. So, it’s much easier to move a kitten rather than an adult cat onto a new food.

Julian: What do cats especially enjoy in terms of taste when it comes to their food?

KatKin: I think it’s those three factors I mentioned earlier. If you can get the moisture, texture and protein level right, I would say you are 80-90% there. It’s also about how you cook the food as cooking fresh ingredients changes how the flavours interact with each other. There are a lot of technicalities in making KatKin recipes and ensuring the end product is just as much about the nutritional benefit as it is about the palatability or taste. We are nutritionally-led which makes everything a little harder. We could make a very palatable and tasty meal, but does it have the right vitamins and minerals? Has it been cooked the right way to bring out the ingredients?

Julian: How did you come up with the name KatKin?

KatKin: For the naming process, I want to say we were locked in Brett’s lounge for two or three days. Naming is always very, very hard. We wanted something which conveyed the human-connection with cats so we spoke about the love and connection people have with them. But we also wanted transparent marketing and advertising which could be available outside of the UK. If it went to Europe, say Germany, could it easily be understood without changing the brand name? Kat can obviously be translated into different languages and the important part was the Kin at the end of the name to represent family. Kin is something you look after, who you want the best for and you will always put first.

Julian: The business model of KatKin is a completely personalised, vet-formulated cat meal delivered directly to consumer. Will your company venture into retail in the future?

KatKin: I would never say no to retail. I think for us what is most important is going towards building a community - we don’t *just* want to be about the wellness and nutrition. Yes, that is our core focus leading to our mission, but we actually want to be able to connect with the community and cat owners, and the way to do that is direct to the consumer. So, we cut out the retail middleman and have those conversations with the people we are engaging with on a daily basis. This was a very important initial step to learn and receive first-hand feedback. However, I’m not opposed to going into retail. The research we collect on cats such as their weight, activity and energy level translate into the personalisation of the meals. So, being online with the ability to collect the needed information helps us with what we’re trying to accomplish in terms of feeding cats the correct nutrition for their needs. If we go into retail that is something completely different. We could look at stocking in-store and changing instructions. But for now, our model is direct to consumer.

Julian: In terms of the quality of your food, do you think it would work without compromising freshness?

KatKin: I don’t think it would compromise freshness. The way KatKin works at the moment is all ingredients are 100% fresh with real meat put into the oven, then taken out to gently steam cook. The reason we do this is to protect the integrity of our ingredients. We are science-led however we do want to harness the nutrients in the food prior to adding fresh minerals and vitamins. After the steam cooking, we gently freeze the food since preservatives are not added to make it shelf-stable. It’s the same as keeping human food in a freezer for two or three months and it’s simple as taking a KatKin meal out of the freezer to defrost in the fridge overnight before feeding it to your cat.

Julian: What are the future plans for KatKin?

KatKin: I think we were always going to start KatKin with a core food product, which makes our fresh meals vitally important. You can’t tackle cat health and wellness unless you start from the base, and that base is nutrition. You want your cat feeling well and at its best so that is where we started. We very much want to delve into other cat products so we are looking at flea treatment, de-wormers and other products which improve cats’ lives on a daily basis. We are looking at what cat owners currently use and what they want to see in the market. So, that is our focus in terms of the product road map.

In terms of what we want to see KatKin ultimately become is an all-round wellness and nutrition brand - not simply focusing on the meals but bringing together a community of cat people. At the moment, we have a joke in the office that if you’re a dog owner then you have a dog park to throw the ball around and meet different dog owners. But with cats you have a very personal relationship with them within the confines of the house with only a few lucky people training their cats to walk on a leash - I’m not one of those people. So, it’s about how we can actually build KatKin into a community to bring people together and celebrate their moments of delight and moments of sorrow. We can bring the crazy cat ladies out in a positive way as we really aren’t crazy, I simply think we don’t have anyone to speak to as there isn’t a community for cat people.

Julian: Do you think the cat food business is not as developed as the dog food business?

KatKin: I believe so. It’s probably why we say cats deserve better and are perceived as the underdogs. If you look at the rise of fresh pet food in the US and UK, the market for fresh pet food for dogs is doing really well with those businesses about two to four years ahead of KatKin, simply because their co-founders were dog-led. I also think as the market is often profit-driven there is a misconception that cats don’t love their food as much as dogs. This makes people not as willing to spend the same amount of money on cat food as they would on dog food. So, a few different factors come into play. I also think without Dr Justin Schmalberg, we wouldn’t be able to do what we’re doing at KatKin because cracking cat palatability is incredibly difficult in terms of their fussiness and unique nutritional needs. You need to find the right people to help you on that journey and it probably took us a good six to eight months in actually getting the base of KatKin right.

I also believe a lot of brands who get into the pet food industry almost have the dog on the left and cat on the right. The dog is done first and given the most attention which is why you see a lot of cat food brands which have simply adapted the vitamins and minerals from the dog food but they kept the grains and fillers in. Perhaps they slightly increased the meat content but it’s often not a fresh meat, only a meat-grain which doesn’t provide cats with the proper nutrition they need. So, if dog brand ventures into cat food, they’re dealing with a completely different target audience. At KatKin, we put cats first and they will always be at the heart of what we do. There’s enough to do in providing the correct nutritional needs for cats so there is not the necessity to get into the dog side of things.

Julian: Is there ever a reason you would get into dog food?

KatKin: Well, if I ever get a puppy, who knows! I think for now there is a lot of work to do in evolving the cat food industry. We are a disruptor in the market with a mountain to climb and the only way to climb it is by educating people, changing behaviours and getting people on our mission to put cats first.