

To Dismay of Inspectors, Prowling Cats Keep Rodents on the Run at City Delis



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Holly scares the rodents away at home, a deli in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

By KATE HAMMER
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Across the city, delis and bodegas are a familiar and vital part of the streetscape, modest places where customers can pick up necessities, a container of milk, a can of soup, a loaf of bread.

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Richard Perry/The New York Times

Oreo roams at a deli in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

Amid the goods found in the stores, there is one thing that many owners and employees say they cannot do without: their cats. And it goes beyond cuddly companionship. These cats are workers, tireless and enthusiastic hunters of unwanted vermin, and they typically do a far better job than exterminators and poisons.

When a bodega cat is on the prowl, workers say, rats and mice vanish.

That is the case at a narrow corner store in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where a gray long-haired tabby named Halloween goes on regular patrols when she is not lounging on a plaid bed tucked behind dusty rows of

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Schweppes ginger ale and empty cardboard boxes.

"In the morning she is lazy, it is her nap time," said Urszula Jawor, 49, the deli's manager, a Polish immigrant who smiled with motherly pride at Halloween, adding that the cat was named for the day she wandered in off the street and claimed the Bedford Avenue store as her home.

"But in the afternoon she is busy," Ms. Jawor said. "She spends hours stalking the mice and the rats."

To store owners, the services of cats are indispensable in a city where the rodent problem is serious enough to be documented in a still popular two-minute video clip on YouTube from late February (youtube.com/watch?v=suOU37w2tws) of rats running amok in a KFC/Taco Bell in Greenwich Village. Store-dwelling cats are so common that there is a Web site, workingclasscats.com, dedicated to telling their tales.

But as efficient as the cats may be, their presence in stores can lead to legal trouble. The city's health code and state law forbid animals in places where food or beverages are sold for human consumption. Fines range from \$300 for a first offense to \$2,000 or higher for subsequent offenses.

"Any animal around food presents a food contamination threat," said Robert M. Corrigan, a rodentologist and research scientist for the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. "And so that means anything from animal pieces and parts to hair and excrement could end up in food, and that alone, of course, is a violation of the health code."

Mr. Corrigan did concede that some studies have shown that the smell of cats in an enclosed area will keep mice away. But he does not endorse cats as a form of pest control because, he explained, the bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites and nematodes carried by rats may infect humans by secondary transfer through a cat.

Still, many store owners keep cats despite the law, mainly because other options have failed and the fine for rodent feces is also \$300. "It's hard for bodega owners because they're not supposed to have a cat, but they're also not supposed to have rats," said José Fernández, the president of the Bodega Association of the United States.

Luis Martinez, 42, has managed his brother's grocery in East New York, Brooklyn, for two years. At first, despite weekly visits from an exterminator, the store's inventory was ravaged constantly by nibbling vermin.

"Every night I had to put the bread in the freezer," he said, pointing at shelves filled with bread and hamburger buns. "I was losing too much inventory. The chips and the Lipton soups all had holes in them."

Then, last winter, a friend brought Mr. Martinez a marmalade kitten in need of a home. Mr. Martinez, who was skeptical of how one slinky kitten could fend off an army of hungry rats, set up a litter box in the back of the store, put down an old fleece jacket and named the kitten Junior.

Within two weeks, Mr. Martinez said, "a miracle."

"Before you'd see giant rats running in off the streets into the store, but since Junior, no more," he said.

Junior sometimes brings Mr. Martinez mouse carcasses as gifts, which he said bothers him less than the smell that permeates his store when the exterminator's victims die and



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rot under a freezer.

In October, a health inspector fined Mr. Martinez \$300 and warned him that if Junior was still there by the time of the next inspection he would be fined \$2,000.

“He wants me to get rid of the cat, but the rats will take over if I do,” Mr. Martinez said. “I need the cat, and the cat needs a home.”

Because stores do not get advance notification of an inspection, Mr. Martinez is trying to keep Junior in his office as much as possible. Many bodega owners reason that a cat is less of a health threat than an army of nibbling rats. “If cats live in homes and apartments where people have food, a cat shouldn’t be a threat in a store if it’s well maintained,” Mr. Fernández said.

Some animal rescue groups, like the Spay and Neuter Intervention Project, support the legalization and regulation of store cats so that owners would be required to provide basic veterinary care and to spay or neuter their animals.

At a corner store in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, Andre Duran, one of the owners, said he had kept a cat for six years and had never been fined.

“That’s Oreo,” he said, as he lifted a tiny black cat with white paws into his arms and carried her like a football. “No one’s ever complained about cat hair in their sandwiches, and if she weren’t here, you bet there’d be bigger problems than hair.”

As a line formed at Mr. Duran’s cash register and he excused himself to take orders, Oreo’s ears perked up and she slunk away toward the back of the store. She was, perhaps, in pursuit of something.

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