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OM ADVICE



Lindsay Van Gelder



Phil's slow journey to svelte.

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COURTESY LINDSY VAN GELDER

My fat cat

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in at 24 pounds. Now he's a svelte 21, although our journey is far from over. Depending on your age and cultural tastes, you might describe him as the feline Orson Welles, or maybe the kitty John Belushi, or perhaps the tabby Notorious B.I.G. I usually call him Phat Phil. I love him, but he is basically a meat loaf with fur. That makes him adorable and lovable, but not all that healthy. [To make sure that Phil sticks around for as long as possible](#), I knew I needed to make some changes to his diet—whether or not he was fully on board with them.



COURTESY LINDSY VAN GELDER

Phil's feral past

Not to make excuses for him, but let me tell you a little about his backstory. I adopted him when he was about 6 months old. Before he came to my house, he had been feral, found with a couple of other kittens hiding in a sewer grate in a Miami neighborhood. The rescue group that

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carbs, there was nowhere to go but up. If you're a cat person (and even if you're not), you won't want to miss these [cat adoption photos that will melt your heart](#).

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COURTESY LINDSY VAN GELDER

Food!

Like many former ferals, Phil always tended to act as if he were starving to death. He wolfed down his cat food and whined for more. But as an indoor-outdoor cat, he was at least getting plenty of exercise. Outdoor life is hazardous for cats—they can be hit by cars, felled by diseases, and set upon by predators—but waistline expansion is not a major risk. All of that changed when I moved Phil and his (non-feral, non-fat) adopted sister, Tufa, across the country to a fourth-floor condo. He became a full-time foodie. Twenty-four porkishly plump pounds of feline flabulosity. In hindsight, maybe [creating a pet paradise in my backyard](#) would have been a good idea to ensure he got a little more exercise.



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Mom can't say no

Since I am the Opener of the Cans, I can only blame myself. I'm admittedly a pushover. I felt sorry for him, deprived of his lizard kingdom. I also made the same mistake I've made when I've tried to shed a few human pounds. Oh, a few slices of turkey, how much could it hurt? I was clearly in denial. I finally realized things were getting out of hand—OK, out of paw—when he outgrew his cat carrier and the new one that was the right size for him was marketed to medium-sized dogs. Here are another [9 \(more subtle\) warning signs your pet may be overweight.](#)



COURTESY LINDSY VAN GELDER

Health concerns mean it's time for a diet

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legs, and if it ever comes back, the veterinary recommendation is amputation. The vets say that tripod cats usually do quite well under those circumstances...but not if they're dragging around the equivalent of a whole other cat. While we're on the subject, don't miss these [11 warning signs of cancer in cats that every owner should know](#).



COURTESY LINDSY VAN GELDER

Shedding pounds the right way

Although Phat Phil needed to become Sylph-Like Phil, or at least Somewhat-Less-of-a-Chonkster Phil, it's dangerous for cats to lose weight too quickly. Crash diets can cause a potentially fatal

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equivalent of a 200-pound human whittling down to 150. She sent me to a website that [calculates how many calories a day a pet needs](#) in order to slenderize at a healthy pace. We were on our way.



COURTESY LINDSY VAN GELDER

You apparently need advanced algebra to count cat-food calories

Phil eats a combination of raw, freeze-dried, and canned food, and he began his diet at 271 calories a day. Have you ever tried to figure out the calories in your cat's favorite brands? Some don't say at all. Others tell you in teeny-tiny print. Or they publish it in terms that require you to go back to high school algebra and figure out, say, that if an ounce of freeze-dried chicken nuggets contains 125 calories, with a kitchen cup weighing about 1.6 ounces, and 50 nuggets fit

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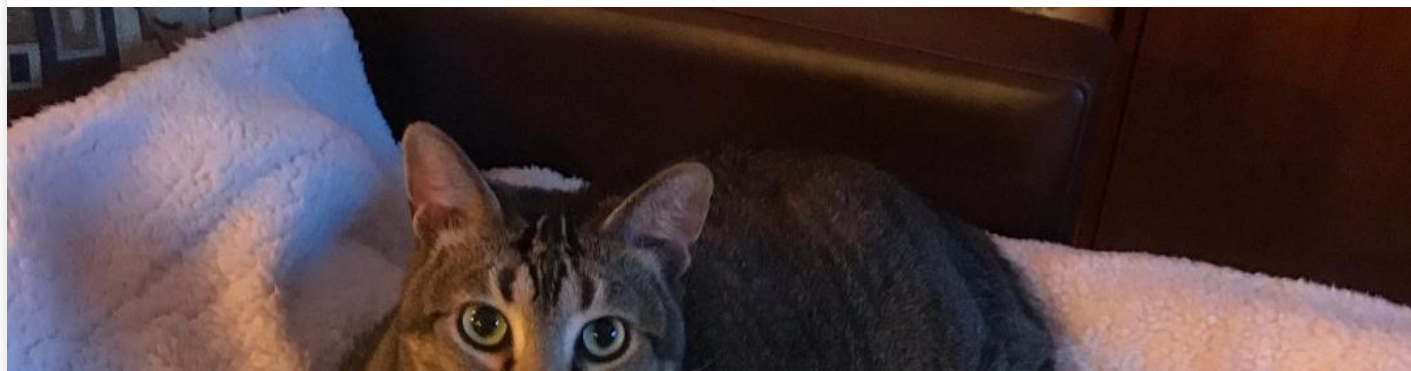


COURTESY LINDSY VAN GELDER

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Not surprisingly, a small food scale and a calculator are now fixtures in my cat-food cupboard. I also realized that there's a huge disparity in how fattening different foods are. A small pouch of [one of Phil's favorite brands](#) can range from under 50 calories to more than 100. So, one of the first things I had to do was to find a happy medium of flavors that he liked, that would fill him up, and that would stay within his calorie count. I've become the Nancy Pelosi of cat-food-ingredient calorie counting.



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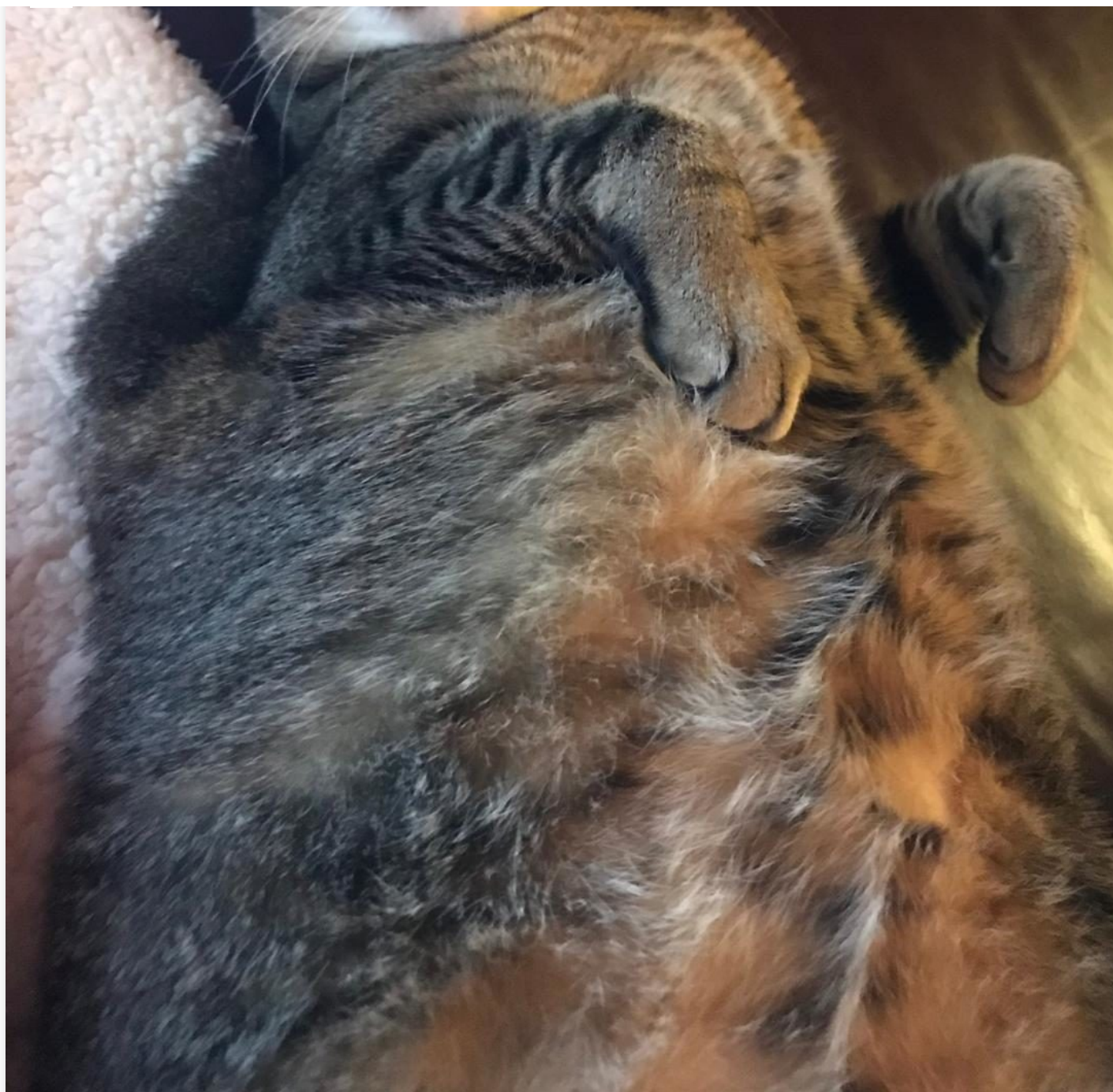
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Old habits die hard

And hooray! After more than a year, he's down to 21 pounds—20 and change on a good day—and his daily calorie count has been reduced to 250. But it's an ongoing struggle. He's a hardened, cagey, sneaky food thief. I feed his sister on a high counter that he can't reach, but he regards the dining-room table as the 50-yard line (i.e., fair turf). Just this morning, I got distracted for a moment and realized he (who had already chowed down breakfast) had sprinted off with a piece of my smoked salmon. While some human foods are A-OK for your kitty, you should [never feed your pet these 11 foods](#).



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COURTESY LINDSY VAN GELDER

And the battle continues

He wheedles. And nags. He starts lobbying for dinner at about 1 p.m, sometimes rising up on his hind legs and tapping me on the shoulder with his front paw as I sit at my computer. (If he had a watch, he'd be pointing at it.) Resisting his pleas takes more self-control on my part than I've had to muster since I was in the back seat of a Chevvy in high school. But I persevere. And any month

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