

Pedigrees' chum. Meet the man from M&S who tests your pets' ready meals

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Like a seasoned wine taster, Simon Allison sniffs and peers at the product he is testing.

Then he samples a soupcon, noting the blend of flavours and aromas.

Only when he is completely satisfied will Marks & Spencer put the dish on the shelves - among the pet foods.

Graduate Mr Allison is a senior food technologist for Marks & Spencer with special responsibility for pet produce.



Din-dins: Food technologist Simon Allison with some of the Marks & Spencer pet foods he tests

He insists he relishes the task and has trained his palate to detect the delicacies preferred by dogs and cats - and their owners.

He said: "It is just the same as if I was working in the ready-meals department. I love my job. It is a brilliant area and eating the product is a fundamental part.

"You have to chew it a bit.

"I have trained my palate to look for materials that we will not allow in the recipe, such as tripe - pet owners react badly to the smell of tripe.

"I'm looking for a paté texture, almost to the point where you could spread it on crusty bread."

His favourite is the organic luxury chicken dinner with vegetables for cats.

"It has the taste and aroma of chicken and some of what you call the red flavours - things like heart and liver; gutsy, savoury notes.

"Then you get a mealy, green pea, pulse aroma and occasionally a sweeter note from the carrot."



Mmmm: Mr Allison samples his favourite - organic luxury chicken dinner for cats

He admits that most pet food is actually "quite bland".

"Dogs enjoy all food universally, while cats can be very choosy about what they will eat," he said. "They respond more to aroma than flavours that you would recognise.

"The more we can make the pet food like the owner's food, the more comfortable we think customers will be serving it."

Mr Allison, who has three cats, spent a decade at Marks & Spencer working on produce intended for human consumption before he moved to pet food in 2006, working at the company's head office in Paddington, West London.

But for all his love of the job, he does not swallow the pet food - saying he would put on too much weight if he ate everything he tasted.

To prevent his breath from smelling like a dog's, he keeps a glass of water on hand during tasting sessions to wash his mouth out, and chews gum when the session is over.

But a slight smell is a risk he is prepared to take.

He said: "There is no prouder moment than watching a customer pick up the product you have worked on."