

You Thought Your Cat Was Fancy?

She wanted a cat that looked like a tiger. Meet the toyger.

By Alexandra Marvar

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Not so long ago, wild cat companions were associated with glamour, class and creativity. Salvador Dalí [brought his ocelot](#) to the St. Regis. Tippi Hedren [lounged with her lions](#) in her Los Angeles living room. Josephine Baker's cheetah, collared in diamonds, strolled the Champs-Élysées. In their time, these wild creatures made chic pets.

But by the mid-1970s, a wave of awareness and wildlife protection legislation changed both the optics of owning a big cat, and the ability to legally purchase one.

Meanwhile, a cat breeder named Jean Mill was working on a more practical alternative: her leopard-spotted companion was just ten inches tall. At her cattery in Southern California, Ms. Mill invented a breed of domestic [cat](#) called the Bengal, which would offer wild cat admirers the best of both worlds: an impeccable leopard-like coat, and an indoor-cat size and demeanor.

Ms. Mill's daughter, Judy Sugden, 71, carried on her legacy. Ms. Sugden grew up observing and assisting with the Bengal breed. Despite having a degree in architecture, she realized her true calling was at the cattery. "I thought 'Well gee, I don't want to be an architect.' Really," she said, "I wanted to design a beautiful little cat."

It may seem an unusual career path but the designer cat market is a thriving one where supply rarely meets demand, and in its service, more than 40,000 registered house cat breeders around the world are devoted to supplying pet owners with Ragdoll, Sphynx and other prized breeds. (PETA has argued this clientele should instead [adopt cats from a shelter](#).)

In the 1980s, Ms. Sugden envisioned a domestic cat with a glistening orange and black striped coat, reminiscent of a tiger. It would have tiny, round ears, a wide nose and a white belly like a tiger. It would weigh just 10 pounds, but it would move across the living room as though it could take down a gazelle. It would evoke that seductive "essence of tigerness," she said.

It would be called a toyger.

Toyger Toyger, Burning Bright

Some 20 years into Ms. Sugden's experiment, in 2007, The International Cat Association (TICA) declared the toyger a championship cat breed. A toyger made the cover of [LIFE magazine](#). "There's going to be toyger fever," TICA's then-president Kay DeVilbiss told the magazine.

It's a look that says "I can survive in the jungle," according to the cat breeder, Anthony Hutcherson. Anthony Hutcherson

And indeed, the appeal of wild-looking cats has only grown in recent years, said Anthony Hutcherson, 45, a political speechwriter, Bengal cat breeder and a former protégé of Ms. Mill. "I find people want the things that make them think 'wild' right away," he said from his cattery, Jungletrax, in Southern Maryland. "High-contrast patterns, dramatic overall color, and a look and proportions of a leopard or an ocelot would have."

He recalled there used to be "tons" of ads for Persian cats in the back of Cat Fancy magazine. But the Persian's prim, manicured aesthetic is no longer en vogue. "That look doesn't say, 'I can survive in the jungle,'" Mr. Hutcherson said. "It says, 'I need somebody to open this can of cat food because there's no way this cat is catching a mouse.'"

Carole Baskin, the founder of Big Cat Rescue and a star of Netflix's "Tiger King," has [called](#) toyger owners "selfish" and [said](#) creating new breeds is "strapping a nuclear warhead to the feral cat problem." Others might argue that compared with shelter pets, designer species (the rarer of which may cost as much tens of thousands of dollars per kitten) are a different beast altogether.

As preferences evolve, Mr. Hutcherson said "the market has exploded" for Bengals, with around 2,000 breeders from Baltimore to Bucharest, and some 60,000 registered Bengals around the world. Meanwhile, Ms. Sugden estimates just 150 breeders worldwide are focused on the toyger.

Anthony Kao, 50, is among them, breeding toygers and other animals like parrots and coral species at his Urban Exotic Pets cattery in Los Angeles. "The whole point of why we have this breed is we could satisfy the human curiosity of the exotic without having an exotic," he said.

Ligers and Beefalos and Grolar Bears

For centuries, humans have been combining the favorable characteristics of one living thing with another, yielding creations from the Honeycrisp apple to the Siberian husky.

Such creative efforts have begotten — with no small amount of objection from animal rights activists — hybrid animals like the [beefalo](#), the [liger](#), even the [grolar bear](#) (half-grizzly, half-polar bear).

But despite the clever portmanteau, a toyger has nothing to do with a tiger — at least not beyond the nearly [96 percent of tiger DNA](#) in all domesticated cats. Because their chromosomes have evolved so differently since their species diverged 11 million years ago, breeding a wild tiger with a domesticated cat today is considered a biological impossibility.

So how do you get a domestic house cat to look like a tiger without tiger parentage? "We don't have the genes," Ms. Sugden said from her home in Los Angeles, "so we have to fake it."

To develop the Bengal, in 1963 Ms. Mill crossbred an Asian leopard cat — a five- to twelve-pound wildcat — with a carefully chosen street cat who once moused the rhinoceros pen at a zoo in Delhi. That wild ancestry is the foundation of the Bengal breed, though for the past four decades, Bengals have come, for the most part, from [breeding Bengals with Bengals](#).

Like her mother, Ms. Sugden also traveled to India, enlisting the help of local children in Kashmir to find a stray house cat with just the right markings. She named him Jammu Blu and brought him back to California where she introduced him to a prize Bengal.

In a generations-long process which she calls “squinch-by-squinch development,” she inches ever closer to the perfect toyger, enticing her best felines to mate naturally, and chasing desirable traits while monitoring for the emergence of genetic disorders.

Other premier breeders are also cultivating their own toyger lines, focused on different aspects of the breed’s evolution, and exchanging cats with one another to ensure genetic diversity.

Toyger Queen: “I wanted to design a beautiful little cat,” said Ms. Sugden. Michelle Groskopf for The New York Times

Today toyger kittens can [cost as much as \\$5,000](#) — a price comparable to that of an actual tiger on the American market. If the prices seem high, it is because these breeders must cover all the costs of an owner (litter, food, vet bills, pet insurance) multiplied many times over. Plus, to be seriously involved in the genetic evolution of a species is a serious investment.

23andMe-like [feline DNA tests](#) that help breeders (and owners) test for morphological aspects or disorders start at \$89 per feline. And to further the research, Mr. Hutcherson recently worked with a cat geneticist, Dr. Chris Kaelin at Stanford University, to clone one of his champion cats at a cost of \$25,000.

Because each cat and kitten is an investment, breeders at this level tend to vet their potential buyers as stringently as a buyer may evaluate a seller. Contracts often stipulate that the buyer must spay and neuter their cat, and that no cat will end up in a shelter. The cats even come with a lifelong unconditional return policy.

Location is a consideration, too: Cats that are considered hybrids, like the Bengal, are illegal in some places, including New York City and Hawaii. In Rhode Island, owners of toygers — because of the Bengal in their lineage — require a permit, just as owners of a pet alligator, chimpanzee or wolf would.

Mr. Kao said these laws spring from a stigma “that it’s a wild animal, and you just can’t have it.”

Even a toyger needs a break sometimes. Michelle Groskopf for The New York Times

Inching Toward Perfection

In 2018, Ms. Sugden moved back into her mother's home to be Ms. Mill's caretaker. It felt like the right time to retire from active breeding, though she couldn't give it up entirely. "I was very careful as I moved over here to send all my cats around the world to the breeders who could use each one the best, to try to spread the genes out," she said.

But Ms. Mill passed away at age 92, not long after Ms. Sugden arrived.

"Having gotten rid of almost all my great cats, am I going to quit totally and do writing? Or do something else?" she wondered.

For now, Ms. Sugden has a new litter of big-eyed toyger kittens at her cattery, EEYAA, and feels her charge is "to support the other breeders around the world and to continue to do what I'm doing." Breaking new ground always requires grunt work, she said, and together, they are "squinching" toward the perfect toyger.

"There are a lot of people in this world that don't care if there's a toyger," Ms. Sugden said. "There are a lot of things in this world no one cares about. But no one cared if there was a Mona Lisa until we had a Mona Lisa."