



# Places to Meet Cute

The opening of America's first cat café in 2014 sparked an adoption-friendly trend.

BY KATY STEINMETZ



**I**N 2014, DOZENS OF OAKLAND RESIDENTS QUEUED UP TO partake of a new phenomenon that brought together cats and drip coffee. The founders of Cat Town café, a hybrid drinkery and “cat zone,” held a grand opening for the nation’s first permanent cat café—a furry fantasy others had tried to realize only to be derailed by funding problems and pesky health codes.

“The cat café, to us, is fun schtick on top of a serious rescue operation,” said Adam “Catman” Myatt, a photographer who cofounded Cat Town with Ann Dunn, on the occasion of its precedent-setting opening. Disheartened by the cramped, scarring conditions at local animal services, Dunn started a nonprofit foster program in 2010 to help whiskery creatures find homes. That operation, Cat Town, became the springboard for the spot in downtown Oakland, where customers frolicked with adoptable felines while munching bagels.

“This is kind of my dream vision of what Cat Town would be like,” said Julie Sammons, an employee at nearby University of California, Berkeley, as she stroked one cat in her lap and another sprawled preciously on a burlap cat bed beside her.

The success of this café turned out to be inspirational, showing that what had been popular in Asia could work in the United States. The planet’s first cat café had opened in Taiwan in 1998 and then took



*NEKO in Seattle was inspired by the owner's visits to cat cafés in Asia, where the phenomenon first took root.*





further seed in Japan before coming here. Although Cat Town has since modified its facility and now focuses on cat adoption while subletting the café space to a new operator, many others have followed the example of their operation. There are currently 198 cat cafés operating in the United States, according to a listing on the website of the Mew Haven Cat Cafe in New Haven, Connecticut. States in which cat cafés are the most plentiful include California (20), Florida (17), New York (14), Pennsylvania (14), and North Carolina (12), but they can be found all across the country. Many have adorable names such as Don't Stress Meowt in Oklahoma City; Give Purrs a Chance in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia; and the Tippy Tabby in New Market, New Hampshire. The coast-to-coast wave all began at this spot in Oakland.

On opening day for Cat Town, some locals came out of curiosity, others a devout appreciation of little purr boxes. Many admired the mission behind the venture and just as many lauded the decor, murals, and elaborate cat houses that placed the café firmly

in the Bay Area. Two graffiti artists, known as Derp and T, painted one wall with images of boats in front of the Bay Bridge, and cats wove through miniature reproductions of the historic Tribune Tower and twin federal towers that make up Oakland's skyline.

"This is much nicer than I expected," said Ellen Breeden, a teacher in Oakland, "not as creepy as the ones in Japan I've seen on the Internet." When asked what brought her out for opening day, Breeden had a simple response: "I love cats." Others were slightly more specific in their praise of the animals. "They're soft and furry," said bookkeeper Marilyn Standley. "And they cover their poop."

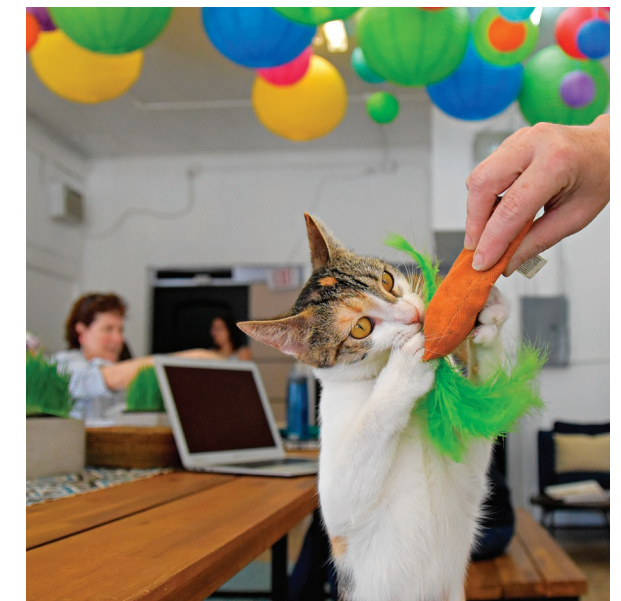
To keep the building up to code, the cat zone and café had to be separated by a corridor with closed doors on either end. The ventilation system was built so that air only comes from the café into the cat zone, and not vice versa. Employees who worked in the café and those working in the cat zone could not mix, and Cat Town even has separate bathrooms—for those who have, and have not, entered the zone of cats. Dunn says getting through the red tape wasn't



that hard, and neither was getting funding. After she and Myatt hit on the idea in December 2013, they quickly raised funds through donations and a successful Kickstarter campaign.

Not long after the café opened, animals were already flying out of the cat zone into loving homes. And some visitors who had come with no intention of adopting a cat were starting to have ideas, even despite lovers' allergies. Though no live camera for the cat zone had been set up by the grand opening, employees said that they were considering giving the world a view of Cat Town. Many homeless cats, Dunn says, just need to be in a comfortable environment so that potential adopters can see them thriving rather than huddled in a corner of a metal box. "He literally grew up in a cage," Dunn said, pointing to a playful tabby named Cooper, who found new owners right off the bat. "Though you'd never know it."

Many of the cat-human relationships being forged there were going to last quite a bit longer than a cup of coffee. It was clearly an idea whose time had come. □



America's first cat café, which opened in 2014 (top), doubled the size of its adoption center in 2017 (opposite). Above: Dancing Cat adoption lounge, where people can bring laptops and work, in San Jose, California.