

Breeding the Ultimate F1 - “Zeus”, The World’s Most Expensive Cat

By C. Esmond Gay – Sarez Bengals - 2004

In 2003, Sarah and I bred an exceptional F1 Bengal; one that’s probably unique in the whole world. “Sarez Zeus” has a staggering 90% wild blood and perfectly encapsulates the wild look of the Leopard Cat - yet he’s overtly friendly and just as docile as a normal domestic cat. Whilst a kitten, he became an international media sensation, partly due to his £100,000 price tag; the press and the public were mesmerised. This article explores some of the complexities of breeding this astonishing Bengal - and what made him the most expensive cat in the world...

Filial 1s (F1s) are the *direct hybrid offspring* of the *Asian Leopard Cat* and a domestic cat, and they are undisputedly the most magnificent generation of the Bengal cat. *But they are also the hardest to breed*; so great are the genetic, anatomical and the financial constraints involved in such hybridizations, that only a handful of people *in the world* have ever succeeded in breeding them. *Thus, these creatures are very rare and expensive...*



Some may be surprised at the prices that my fiancée Sarah and I ask for our rarest cats such as “Sarez Zeus”, and indeed, his £100,000 price was a significant amount of money. But in the UK F1s have always been costly - anything that’s both scarce and beautiful always is; we bought our first three 50% wild blood Bengal hybrids in the mid 1990’s, and we paid *very high prices* for them – we did so because we wanted them, and because almost no others existed in GB. So, we had to pay whatever their owner deemed fit - and we did so willingly. *Then later, we bred our own.*

Sarah and I have no set prices for any of our kittens – a few we *give away* to deserving homes, whilst the prices of others are governed by our expertise, the rarity of particular kittens, our own huge expenses including buying expensive Asian Leopard Cats, their veterinary care, the high costs of their enclosures, and other running costs of our

estate. We work tirelessly to breed the best and the most unique - felines whose beauty and characteristics are awe inspiring - *and we are immensely proud of our accomplishments.* A piece of jewellery, an antique vase or even a car number plate, can easily command the same price as “Sarez Zeus” - yet they are all *inanimate objects.* *Yes, they’re all attractive in their own rights, but none can become one’s companion, none can comfort a person nor make them laugh... and none can love.* Yet few query their huge price tags...

However, “Zeus” lives and breathes – he has energy and exuberance for life. He’s affectionate too... and he *loves*, because he has *feelings* and *emotions*... **And** he is the perfect embodiment of a Leopard... yet with an endearing, human orientated character.

But we did not set his price solely based on the intrinsic value of the above traits; *we believe that this cat is also a one off*, being probably the only F1 in the world with such high wild blood. And finally, breeding him cost us *far more* than £100,000!

And so now perhaps, the high price of this “living work of art” is more understandable.

Breeding any F1 is a challenge, but creating “Zeus” was far more complex; over a decade, Sarah and I bought and bred circa 15 Leopard Cats of various subspecies – small and beautiful ones, with black spots and rosettes upon pale backgrounds, making them ideal for hybridizing. But we do not use others such as our *Amur Leopard Cats*, because their long, coarse coats create poor quality Bengals, and so they’ve joined our *Ocelots, Servals and African Leopards* and form part of “*The Sarez Wild Cat Conservation Programme*”.

When our Leopard Cats breed, we hand rear their cubs, yet even so, most never hybridize. But in 2000, one of our cubs did finally mate some of his “harem” of Bengal females – *and thus, “Sarez Little L” became the first ever Leopard Cat to mate a domestic in Britain!*

However, Sarah and I never put all our eggs in one basket as even the chances of a *perfectly brought up* Leopard Cat hybridizing, are a slim 1 in 20. We had already met those odds, but then *a 2nd hybridized in 2003* – “*Sarez Apollo*” mated some of his Bengal females!

Two Leopard Cats hybridizing in one facility is almost unheard of throughout the world, and so Sarah and I were jubilant! These cats have gone down in Bengal history, and they are the greatest of all our achievements!

“*Little L’s*” and “*Apollo’s*” unrelated wild blood has vastly improved and strengthened the Bengal’s quite small gene pool; they and the 14+ F1 female offspring they’ve produced so far, have ensured less inbreeding, healthier cats and more pedigree lines within this breed.



But Sarah and I still wanted to do much more for the Bengal as a whole. Most late generations have stunning pelts and rosettes, but few retain the unique wild head and other features of the Asian Leopard Cat. We wanted to help to rectify this and introduce those wild characteristics into late generation Bengals, by breeding down to them using early generations with perhaps double the amount of wild blood compared to the norm.

And so in the early 2000s, via very selective breeding, “*Sarez Eppie*” was eventually born - the *first Snow Marble F2 to be bred in GB*. We needed her for this project as she not only has 25% wild blood and an amazing wild face, but she also carries *all* the colours of the Bengal – we wanted the flexibility to breed *any colour* as we bred down the generations.

We then mated “*Eppie*” to one of the Leopard Cats and created an F1 called “*Sarez Pow Wow*” who has 75% wild blood – *again, the first of her kind in Great Britain*. Finally, she was mated to the Asian Leopard Cat - *and the result was “Sarez Zeus” - an F1 Bengal with an astonishing 90% wild blood!* Initially, we had set out to breed a fertile female, but that wasn’t to be – however, a number of other F1 females with far higher than average wild blood have also been born of this same project, and are now producing numerous F2s and subsequent generations, all with startlingly beautiful Leopard-like appearances!

Breeding “Zeus” may sound straight forward - but it wasn’t. These and our other F1 matings, took time, were risky and delicate - as was ensuring that all the offspring remain super friendly. This process completely dominated the working, personal and financial lives of Sarah and me for many years. And as so few others have ever done similar, most don’t realise how tremendously difficult, stressful and draining it is – it is all consuming.

But it was worthwhile; everyone who set eyes on “Zeus” has been captivated! He took **“The Worlds Most Expensive Cat”** crown from our F2 **“Sarez Cato”**, a rare generation in GB in 1998, and so had been sold for £25,000. And “Zeus” also became as famous as the latter; in September 2003 alone, *he appeared in multiple worldwide newspapers and magazines and also 7 times on TV, broadcast in 35 countries!* And ignoring all the cameras and strangers around him, he behaved impeccably and played with my fiancée and young daughter, *Kitten Gay*, in front of vast audiences. *What a superb advocate for the Bengal cat;* “Zeus” proved to millions that as a high wild blood F1 can be trustworthy and loving even when in a stressful situation, then a late generation SBT must be as docile as a Rabbit!

And our other Bengals have also become brilliant ambassadors for the breed, starring on 55 TV programmes and in 100+ publications - and being so docile that they’ve even advertised Armani, Versace and Cavalli fashion in the likes of Vogue Pelle, Tatler and Country Life. This entices an eclectic mix of *celebrities* from *Lord Jeffrey Archer to Rolf Harris* to buy our kittens, drawing yet more *good* publicity to the breed.

Yet some people in the British Bengal fancy have been hostile about the early or “filial” generations, making broad and sweeping statements such as F1’s, F2’s and F3’s: “...do not exist as Bengal cats...” and that they: “...are not part of the Bengal breed in anyway...” But the *true* experts on the Bengal offer very different opinions. The following is part of a letter from *Jean Mill*, the American founder of the breed, to *Cat World Magazine*;



“I am the originator of this breed of domestic cat and have been involved from 1980 with their acceptance into various cat registries both in the USA and abroad.

The first 3 generations of Bengals ARE classified as “Foundation Bengals”. They are quiet and retiring cats, who are no more vicious or aggressive than Siamese. In the USA, Bengals of all generations are accepted by our “Department of Agriculture” and “California Fish and Game” and do not need a license.

Last fall, I visited Esmond Gay’s cattery in England and met all his cats including “Baby Gem”, “Leopardette”, “Occie”, his other breeding F1s and Leopard Cats. All his cats are beautiful Bengals or pure bred Asian Leopard Cats! It is most regrettable that the well justified fear of wolf hybrids has been fanned to include a fear of our tiny, purring early generation Bengal cats by people who have never even see one before!

Crossed with a domestic cat, the resulting F1s are independent and aloof – but are no more dangerous than traditional family cats.

Yours, Jean Mill”

It is an ignorant minority who disagree with such an expert; people who don't understand the importance of filial generations, *simply because they cannot breed them themselves.*

Some also say that early generations should never be kept as pets. Again, having lived with so many, Sarah and I beg to differ. We never sell the fertile F1 females we breed, but our well socialised sterile boys *do* make wonderful pets *to the right people.* However, we are cautious when re-homing them and don't sell to impulse buyers, nor to those we suspect may not provide a stable, permanent home for the whole of the kitten's life. We also ensure;

- 1) The prospective new owners must have some experience in small wild cats.
- 2) They build an indoor/outdoor enclosure so the cat has fresh air and human contact.
- 3) The home must have a DWA licence, meaning their council will monitor the cat too.

The interview process that our clients go through is also vigorous. Sarah and I explain what these cats are, what to expect from them and how they will behave as they get older. We watch how the visitors interact with the kittens and we question them about their own routines to ensure the cat won't be left alone for long. And we enquire why they want an early generation and not an SBT, *as we don't sell cats as status symbols!*

Due to the popularity of our babies, we are never forced to sell them due to lack of space or their ages etc - we always have many people chasing just a few kittens, and this allows us to pick and choose the perfect home. *And to this day, we've never made a mistake, despite the high number of F1s we've re-homed.*

Today, "Zeus" is as popular as he was in 2003, as one can see on the internet. Such is his beauty, that his image adorns many products ranging from posters to post cards and even car sun shades. I'm not sure whether to feel upset that his image has been used so extensively without our permission - or to feel proud that others deem our creation to be *so stunning* that they use his photos to sell their merchandise.

All Bengals are both remarkable and precious; their unique heritage has bestowed many wondrous traits and features upon them – ones that no other pedigree cat can ever attain. They truly came from the jungle - and will always retain remnants of the wild...

And the importance of filial Bengals is insurmountable – they're the quintessential generations of this breed - without them, Bengals would simply be "another spotted cat".



C. Esmond Gay

Sarez Bengals

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Dedicated to Sarez Zeus

Photos; 1, 2, 4 – F1 "Sarez Zeus", **Photo 3** - Jean Mill, Esmond Gay & Sarez kittens.

Addition 2008; Due to the extreme stress of our work with the Bengal and wild cat conservation, Sarah and I retired in 2004. We had achieved many of our goals, and so our larger felines went to wildlife parks, and our unique Bengals and Leopard Cats went to Pauline and Frank Turnock of Gayzette Bengals - they now continue with our cats and are expanding the breeding programme that we worked so hard to create.

I stay in regular contact with Pauline and Frank and offer them my full support and advice on the Bengal and wild cats. I closely follow their achievements and behind the scenes, I am there for them and for the beautiful felines that I once so proudly owned.

Being so involved with their work lessens my feelings of loss over my beloved cats...

C. Esmond Gay

Sarez Bengals