



Rat Pack

>> Follow the trail of an exterminator as he helps a Staten Island family eradicate backyard vermin

BY ARIANNE COHEN ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN CUNEO



"They were as big as cats!" says homeowner Frances Gaglione of the rats that were scuttling across her patio.

IN THE 2007 FILM *RATATOUILLE*, a likable animated rat named Remy achieves his improbable dream of opening a restaurant in the heart of Paris. (Leave it to Disney and the French to make rodents seem appealing.) Usually restaurants with rats are cringe-worthy enough, but what happens if you spot the critters setting up camp right outside your house? Fear not, homeowners: Just put your local exterminator on the case, as this family did.

THE CLIENT: Frances Gaglione, who lives with her husband and 5-year-old son in a semidetached town-house with a concrete patio in Staten Island, New York.

THE CRISIS: Four-legged furry creatures, but not the kind we want around. "They were as big as cats!" says Gaglione. "We have a sliding glass door, and at night, I would see them running by. We were trapped in our house. My neighbor had them, too. I'd hear these screams. And he's an older man with a heart condition! We'd call each other, and look outside from our upstairs windows. And I'd say to him, 'I don't think that's a cat!'" There's no delicate way to put it: Gaglione had a rat problem.

THE PRO STEPS IN: "Frances was frantic when she called, so we came over the same day," says Vincent Errante of Universal Pest Control, who's been getting rid of all kinds of unwanted household pests

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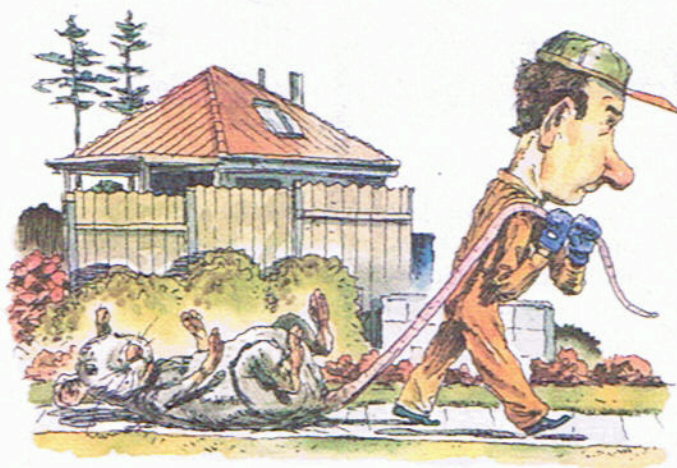
for 10 years. His first order of business was inspecting the property to identify where the rats were living and eating. "Her interior looked fine," he says. "But outside, I encountered a dead rat on her lawn. I saw garbage in a wooded area across the street, and figured that's where they came from. And I saw activity in the neighbor's yard, too."

Errante noticed other telltale signs of an infestation on Gaglione's property: droppings, gnaw marks on the concrete patio, burrowing in the patio and lawn, and gray rub marks on the side of the house, caused by the oils in the rats' skin. It was those signs that led him to the nesting area. "I followed the burrows and rub marks to the neighbor's deck. The rats were living underneath it, climbing into the neighbor's pool to drink, feeding on the bird feeder, and reproducing. It looked like it had been happening for about a month."

Case closed? Not yet. With the problem diagnosed, Errante could now eliminate the rats' food and shelter and then eradicate the colony itself. But first he told Frances to call the city government about cleaning up the wooded area across the street. "The weeds needed to be cut down, because they harbor rats and mice," he says.

Then on to Operation Rat Kill. Errante placed 24 key-operated poison bait stations 10 feet apart along the pathways the rats were using. He anchored the stations to the concrete so Gaglione's son couldn't tinker with them and accidentally get at the bait inside. Then he baited (but didn't set) six snap traps near the deck. "You have to give the rats time to get comfortable with the bait," he says. "I came back a week later to trigger the traps, and had a tremendous knockdown."

He sprinkled poison powder in their burrows, and last but not least, rat-proofed the yard by sealing the open spaces around Gaglione's exterior pipes with 1/4-inch steel hardware cloth and IPF foam, which contains a hot-pepper additive that deters rats from



The Bill

Turns out hiring Errante was the cheap part.
 Extermination: \$400 for initial rodent-proofing
 Siding replacement: \$2,000
 Landscaping (rocks, trees, labor): \$4,500
 Concrete: \$12,000
Total: \$18,900, plus \$65 per month for exterminator visits



What to Ask an Exterminator

Good exterminators won't give an estimate over the phone, so explain what's going on, agree on an inspection fee, and catch, photograph, or videotape the offenders so the pro will have an idea of what to expect.

What long-term strategy will you use? Exterminators should provide a list of chemicals they're using, and they should change them every three months because pests grow resistant.

How long till my hell is over? That depends on the scope of the problem, but don't expect an overnight fix for any type of pest. "A lot of people think we can wave a wand," says pro exterminator Vincent Errante. "It takes at least two months, and for a bad infestation, six months. That's why it's called pest management."

Will I go broke paying for constant visits? Exterminators typically come once a month in the summer and bimonthly in colder weather; many will create a schedule based on your needs. After an infestation, keep them on for a while and ask how to spot signs of trouble so you can monitor the situation on your own.

Do you have any green options? Good exterminators use chemical and nonchemical methods to keep homes pest-free. "People think they need chemicals, but a lot of times there's another solution. Mechanical and glue traps can sometimes do the job. For pantry pests, just remove the grains they're feeding on."

Are you going to inadvertently kill Fido? For homes with dogs or cats, Errante suggests avoiding snap traps or glue traps for mice and rats. "But tamper-resistant bait traps are okay," Errante says. You can also use anticoagulant-based baits, which often have a bitter additive called Bitrex to keep pets away; if your pet eats the bait, your vet can give him a shot of vitamin K₁ as an antidote.

How do I know I need you? "Rats are nocturnal, so if you see them during the day, that means they're overgrowing their nest and you've got an infestation." With bugs, a stray or two indoors isn't always a problem, but if you notice them regularly, call a pro.

gnawing their way through the barrier. He also installed vent covers to make sure no unwanted visitors could get inside.

THEAFTERMATH: Gaglione decided she wasn't taking any more chances. Once the rats were gone, she cemented over the entire backyard and bought a power sprayer to clean her son's swing set. She also installed decorative rocks, a tent, and an outdoor table. "It was very expensive, but I don't want the rats to come back," she says.

Her neighbor redesigned his property, too. "He ripped up his pool, deck, and lawn. He has only rocks and shrubs in his front yard now."

After four months of work, Gaglione's property is now rat-free. She can let her son play outside, and she's bold enough to have company over. But Errante visits monthly, because rats reproduce every 28 days. For the first three months, he replenished missing bait in the traps and closed burrows that had reopened. Now he puts wooden blocks instead of poisoned bait in the traps and watches for bite marks. ■