

GEAR

USED & ABUSED

Want to know how the goods on sale really perform? We put them through their paces so you can sort the good from the bad...

CLOVERLEAF ABSOLUTE PELLET FOODS

Reviewed by: Gabor Horvath

Prices: 150g pouches - £6-£8; 350g pouches - £10-£15; Nano shrimp (75g) - £6.65; Egg layer starter (50g) - £4.49

More info: cloverleaf.uk.net

Buying food for my fish used to be an easy task. Forty years ago, I had a choice of live Tubifex, air-dried *Daphnia* or a mixed flake food from the then only Hungarian manufacturer. If I popped over the border to Czechoslovakia I could buy some 'top quality' foods from a well-known German manufacturer, but even those were general one-size-fits-all mixtures.

An aquarist today is spoilt by choices: there are rows upon rows of tubs, bags, pots, packets and buckets of hundreds of different fares even in the smallest of shops. It might even be easy to think that every niche of the market is covered and there's no room for a newcomer. The guys at Cloverleaf thought differently and went for the gaps nobody knew existed.

While many might associate the brand with their successful and award winning blanketweed treatment, if you've followed them in the past you'll know that Cloverleaf isn't a one-trick pony and is capable of pulling some surprising products out of its hat.

That's why I was looking forward to seeing their latest offerings at the Aqua Telford show. Based on the previous shows I expected to see

some new hardware, but to my surprise the Cloverleaf stand was full of very sleek looking pouches of foods and medications. The only hardware was a special microscope, but that, as well as the associated medications, will be the subject of later reviews.

Seal for freshness

For now, I'm focusing on the foods. What instantly grabbed my attention was the packaging. I'm used to getting most of my foods in tubs, so having them in resealable bags was a relative novelty. The pouches are decorative and the colourful graphics give you the key to what's inside. And that's where Cloverleaf made a difference.

In a regular food range, you will find staples for community fish, something for vegetarian fish and something for non-vegetarians. Browsing the pictures on the Absolute food range, none of them depicted the usual suspects — common angelfish, neon tetra, guppy — preferred by many brands. Instead of them the Cloverleaf





packaging fronts snakehead, stingray, arowana, altum angel, axolotl, shrimp and turtle among many favourites of cichlid and monster fish keepers.

It was a good indication of the intentions of Cloverleaf: go after the gaps in the market and produce something that nobody else does (or only a very few do). As I'm always interested in trying new foods, and as I keep some creatures belonging to those niche markets, I was looking forward to receiving a selection from the Absolute range.

When the box arrived, I realised the first advantage of using pouches instead of tubs: you can pack more of them tighter into a box, as there is no waste of space between the bags. It makes them more environmentally friendly, too.

Time to taste

After admiring the packaging and taking some product shots it was time to "taste" the foods. It took a bit of time to open the pouches (they're sealed tightly), but when I poured out some samples I saw that Cloverleaf followed a Ford T-model-esq philosophy: you can have any colour or shape you choose, so long as it's a brown pellet.

With the exception of the fry- and shrimp-specific foods, the Absolute food range consists of pellets of various sizes from 0.5-9mm. The largest size in my sample pack was the 4.5mm diameter Cichlid Growth food. It was the only floating one in the lot, so looked a perfect candidate to feed my surface dwelling *Pantodon*. As they're still juveniles I had to crush the hard pellets (not an easy task) but the reception was good, my fish were happy. I found every pellet in the range to be quite hard, but once in

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ANALYTICAL COMPONENTS



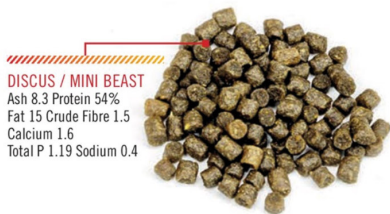
EGG LAYER STARTER
Ash 8.4 Protein 45% Fat 11
Crude Fibre 1.3 Calcium 2.5
Total P 2.11 Sodium 0.6



NANO SHRIMP
Ash 8.3 Protein 42% Fat 9
Crude Fibre 1.0 Calcium 2.3
Total P 1.26 Sodium 0.4



MINI CICHLID
Ash 8.6 Protein 45% Fat 7
Crude Fibre 2.4 Calcium 1.4
Total P 1.21 Sodium 0.2



DISCUS / MINI BEAST
Ash 8.3 Protein 54%
Fat 15 Crude Fibre 1.5
Calcium 1.6
Total P 1.19 Sodium 0.4



CICHLID GROWTH
Ash 5.9, Protein 38%,
Fat 8, Crude Fibre 2.6,
Calcium 1.0, Total P 0.83,
Sodium 0.2

the water they soften up relatively quickly. The hardness could be an issue with fussy eater fish, as if they don't like it on the first try they may not give it another go. Luckily all my fish are adventurous, so they had no problems with following up and collecting the bits from the bottom.

Out of the tested lot the Dwarf Cichlid food has the strongest smell and it also feels greasy, but my rams didn't mind it. Although the 2mm pellet size was a bit large to them they kept chewing it until they managed to get it down. Perhaps the size of the Betta pellets (1.5mm) would be better to cater for the needs of juvenile dwarf cichlids, too.

I quickly noted that the Discus and the Mini Beast foods looked and smelled identical. There's a simple explanation: they are exactly the same, but for marketing reasons Cloverleaf have targeted two very distinct genres at the same time. Both discus and small predator keepers need very similar high

protein foods, but I doubt that there's a single discus keeper who would buy a dedicated predator food for their fish and vice versa. In today's over-specialised world where everyone wants a separate solution (or product) for every single problem, providing fishkeepers with tailor-made (or rather cleverly adapted) fish foods is the right approach, especially if the product is good.

And the Absolute foods are very good. I talked to other aquarists using the range and they all praised these pellets for being nutritious, yet low-polluting. The specialist lines work well, too. My shrimp went crazy for the Nano Shrimp food without a moment hesitation. The Vampire crabs were also very grateful for their meal, cleaning up the Crustacean Pellets in no time.

Smaller mouths

Being a prolific fish breeder I was especially curious about the Fry food, as I would like to cut back on

the use of newly hatched *Artemia* (the eggs are getting increasingly expensive). The small (0.2-0.5mm) grain size of the egg-layer food is similar in size to baby brine shrimp, meaning that it should be suitable for any fry that would usually eat those. I tested the theory with my 10-day old rainbow fish and tetra fry and they accepted the Cloverleaf food without any issues.

VERDICT

The Absolute foods did really well in my tests. If you are a hardcore or obstinate flake-feeder you won't find a suitable food in the range, but if you're after a quality pellet for your creatures give the Cloverleaf foods a try. You won't be disappointed.

EASE OF USE: ★★★★★
FEATURES: ★★★★★
VALUE: ★★★★★
OVERALL: ★★★★★