
BARNYARD TO BACKYARD

Fresh eggs, happy hens.
No farm needed.

Story and photographs by
Janet Kornblum for USA TODAY

IT'S 7:15 A.M. ON A WEDNESDAY, AND THE steel skies of San Francisco's Mission District are just blushing pink. A trash truck rumbles nearby. A man hoses down the sidewalk in front of a corner cafe where a few work-from-home dot-commers are just settling in in front of their lattes and laptops. A woman clicks by in heels, off to work. ¶ And in an empty lot behind a gray Victorian, Melissa Morris cradles Peaches, a warm, cooing Buff Orpington hen, in her arms.

MELISSA MORRIS,
a high school teacher,
has transformed her
suburban backyard
into a micro-sized
chicken farm.



“She’s so soft,” says Morris, as the other 12 chickens coo, cluck, and spear the ground for grubs, worms, and maybe some cereal that someone has tossed over the fence for the flock.

Morris and her household are part of a growing national trend.

Chickens are not just for dinner anymore. Nor are they banished to the dwindling rural corners of America. Increasingly, chickens—more specifically, hens—are showing up in backyards across the country, giving city folk and suburban families alike a taste of the country, the rhythms of nature, and, of course, fresh eggs.

Which are, if you ask anyone who has tasted one, better than those you buy from the store.

For Morris, who teaches farming at a local high school and was raised on a cattle ranch in Texas, chickens add an element that is otherwise missing from city life, especially in this semi-industrial neighborhood of tightly clustered homes and businesses.

“It’s nice to hear them and to have something to care for in the morning,” she says.

The chickens have also changed her life in other ways.

They’ve given her an introduction to her neighbors in this traditionally family-oriented Latino neighborhood that is now also filled with hipsters, yuppies, and people of every ethnic flavor.

One recent weekend, Morris and one of her housemates, Mary Davis, were working in the garden. They asked the neighbor kids playing soccer if they wanted to see the chickens. The kids said yes, and just as Morris suggested getting permission from their parents, the sister and brother gingerly

pushed an opening in the fence and squeezed through. “I was like, ‘Clearly, you guys have done this before,’” Melissa laughs.

She has lots of stories like this. There is the woman across the way who reports that she used to regularly find eggs on her roof. Turns out that some animal was stealing eggs and then stashing them on her roof.

In spite of this, those who live in the chicken house, as the Florida Street home has come to be known, have never gotten complaints from neighbors. In fact, it’s been quite the opposite.

The chickens serve as a sort of neighborhood nerve center. On a recent crisp Sunday afternoon, a family, still in their Sunday best, came over to the fence and called to the chickens, who came running over. Later on, a man on a walk with his baby paused to say hello and point out the colorful birds.

Even on cold, gray mornings, there are always babies and dogs admiring, cooing to, and feeding the feathered creatures.

“It’s like a neighborhood landmark,” says Davis. “People with their kids will go by there every day to go look at the chickens and feed them.”

Tracking the trend

Andy Schneider first got into chickens when he was in college. He kept them as pets, just for fun. Then about a decade ago, he and his wife decided to get chickens again. They were ahead of the trend, and chickens were still viewed as more at home in a barnyard than a backyard. “People looked at us like we were weird,” the Atlanta-based author and radio show host recalls.



1. Melissa Morris keeps 12 chickens in her Mission Hills yard. 2. Morris and her housemates put out extra eggs to sell to the neighbors for \$3–5 per dozen. 3. The house has affectionately come to be known as the chicken house of Florida Street.



A QUESTION OF EATING

FOR RADIO HOST AND AUTHOR ANDY SCHNEIDER, raising chickens also means eating chickens. He raises some birds specifically to eat, as chickens allowed to roam make for tough meat.

For other chicken owners, eating chicken—whether their own birds or store-bought chicken—can be a touchy subject.

Melosa Granda, who has been raising chickens on Florida Street in San Francisco’s Mission District since 2007, will eat chicken when offered but doesn’t seek it out on her own. Housemate Melissa Morris, on the other hand, no longer eats any meat. “When I first went vegetarian, it was because of chickens,” she says.

Daryn Kagan, who raises backyard chickens in Atlanta, still eats chicken. But she no longer buys and cooks whole chickens from the market. They look too much like the chickens pecking in the grass outside her back door. “I have to completely separate it in my mind,” she says.

To Kagan, and to many people who raise chickens, the birds are more than entertaining feathered beasts. They’re pets. They may not sit up and beg. They may not snuggle next to you in bed at night. But they are warm little animals that provide a sense of peace and accomplishment.

“I just love animals,” Kagan says. “So keeping chickens is another animal experience. And it’s fun to actually have an animal that gives you something back, besides dog poop,” she laughs. “You’re taking care of them. They’re taking care of you.”



“Nobody in America is further than maybe three generations, tops, from getting food from their own backyard.”

ANDY SCHNEIDER, AUTHOR AND RADIO HOST

Over the years, that started to change. Neighbors started coming to their house to ask about raising their own chickens.

Most of the people inquiring were soccer moms in minivans, Schneider says. “I asked them why they wanted to get started with backyard poultry. The first answer was always education.”

They told him, “My kids think eggs come from the grocery store. They think that broccoli comes from a truck. So I want to educate them.”

“When I come out, two of my chickens come running up to me. They hit the brakes with their little feet and then they put their wings out because they want me to scratch their backs.”

CHICKEN OWNER DARYN KAGAN

Today people raise chickens for a variety of reasons, ranging from the love of animals to the love of fresh eggs, and from wanting to get back to nature to teaching their kids about food.

Nobody really knows how many people keep backyard chickens, Schneider says, but it's clear they're becoming more popular. “At this point they've become crazy popular, especially over the past five years.”

Learning the ropes

While former CNN anchor Daryn Kagan, who raises backyard chickens in Atlanta, loves the eggs, she didn't start raising backyard chickens because of them. She just wanted more animals.

“I got chickens for the first time in June 2010, and I was already an animal person. I had a dog and a

three-legged cat, and I had been hearing about raising chickens. I started reading about it and just decided to dive in,” Kagan says.

But unlike any dog or cat she's ever had, Kagan says chickens pretty much take care of themselves. “They are less work than any other animal I've ever had,” says Kagan. “You open the little coop door in the morning, and they walk around the backyard in an area all day and actually follow the sun, so they put themselves to bed at night. So pretty much all you have to do is collect the eggs and clean up the coop once a week.”

It's true. Over at the chicken house on Florida Street, someone always opens the door of the coop when the sun rises. And someone closes it at night.

Punishment for failing to close the coop at night is swift and vicious: Raccoons, hawks, and other predators are happy to dine on wandering chickens. That's why many people never name their chickens.

But it's hard to resist. Chickens can be surprisingly entertaining.

“They're funny, and they're inquisitive,” Kagan says. “Each chicken has a different personality. When I come out, two of my chickens come running up to me. They hit the brakes with their little feet and then they put their wings out because they want me to scratch their backs. You scratch their backs and they're like ‘Oh yeah, right there.’ And their little tail moves over, like they're saying, ‘Can you get over here? And can you get over there?’”

Making a case

While chicken owners emphasize how easy it is to keep chickens, neighbors and local governments are not always so welcoming of the idea, at least in the beginning.

As the trend of backyard chickens has caught on across



the country, communities have had to deal with the legality of having backyard birds. Each local government determines how many and what kind of birds they allow people to keep. Most cities do not allow roosters for the obvious reason: They crow.

Government leaders have had to learn about chickens along with the rest of the population. In many cases, that includes unlearning some common misconceptions.

In every City Hall battle, neighbors inevitably worry about their property values being diminished, Schneider says. But he's never seen any proof that chickens diminish value. “It's a moot point,” he says.

Another common concern is that chickens are a gateway animal that leads to other barnyard animals, such as horses, cows, and pigs.

“Show me one city in America that now has a cow problem because you allow chickens,” says the fast-talking Schneider.

Reaping the rewards

Owning chickens, especially in a city, can bring people a peacefulness and connection to nature that they can't necessarily get from yoga, meditation, or retreats.

Davis was originally drawn to the Florida Street house because it had a garden. While she loves living in the city, a house with a garden seemed like a good way to add a little bit of nature into her life.

The chickens were a bonus.

“It's just really grounding to have something alive that's going through cycles,” she says. “I feel like the chickens add to that whole idea that you're attached to the earth.”

Melosa Granda says that gardening and raising chickens make her feel closer to the place she was raised, the island of Kawai, Hawaii. She has been raising chickens in that

Florida Street house since 2007.

“The satisfaction of just going into the backyard and picking up a warm egg and making French toast with it that very morning is very delightful,” she says. “But I also think one gets a lot out of nurturing and taking care of animals. It's therapeutic to see that your chickens are happy and healthy and to know that you've had something to do with that.”

“They're also very amusing animals,” she adds. “They're fun to just sit and watch and wonder what's going on in their little heads. There's a lot of socializing between them and a pecking order.”

They don't call it a pecking order for nothing. The chicken at the bottom of it gets—as one might guess—pecked. Right now, for instance, the chicken house is trying to figure out how to deal with a problem in that pecking order.

One black-and-white chicken roaming the yard has developed patches of red on her back, clear evidence of being bullied by her fellow hens. The house is experimenting with removing the dominant bird and the victim to see if the pecking order changes.

It's all part of the natural order. And whether it is dealing with something as complex as the pecking order, feeding the chickens on a regular schedule, harvesting their eggs, or simply enjoying their company around the backyard, it really brings a sense of well being, says Schneider.

“People will often say—I've heard it many times—chickens seem very therapeutic for them. You come home from work, sit on the back patio, let the chickens out, and just watch them scratch around a little bit and interact with each other,” Schneider says.

RESOURCES Want to start your own backyard flock? These websites will get you started: mypetchicken.com, backyardchickens.com, chickenwhisperer.net

SHARING THE WEALTH

DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS, the abundant daylight gives rise to more egg laying, as chicken rhythms are tied to the sun and so chickens lay less in the shorter winter months.

When they have extra eggs, chicken lovers know that there's nothing quite like bringing a gift of fresh eggs to a neighbor or a friend.

“Whenever I go to someone's house for dinner, I don't bring a bottle of wine. I bring a dozen fresh eggs,” says Daryn Kagan, who raises backyard chickens in Atlanta. “And it makes me very popular.”

A group of housemates who raise chickens in San Francisco's Mission District put the surplus eggs on their porch to sell to neighbors. The neighbors know when the rainbow flag is showing, there are fresh eggs, sometimes still warm to the touch. The housemates ask for contributions of \$3 to \$5 a dozen and leave a can out for payments. They've never been ripped off of eggs or money.

Recently, a friend told Melissa Morris that she should be charging \$9 a dozen. But Morris and her housemates keep the prices low. They simply want to cover the cost of raising the chickens—and share the bounty with the local neighbors. It helps foster goodwill. And the payments just about cover the cost of feed.

