

'Toronto Chicken' gains allies

Bylaw conflict; Forest Hill woman fights to keep her hens

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Laura Berman for Edible Toronto magazine

The lady known as Toronto Chicken is sitting on her Forest Hill patio. She sips tea made from organic mint she pulled from her garden. She remarks at the beauty of her three pet hens who run around her backyard. She watches them with affection as they peck and occasionally poop, all in complete contradiction of the city's municipal code.

"They really have a pecking order, you know," she says, as Clucky steals granola crumbs from the one called "Silly Sally."

These fowls have made Toronto Chicken an outlaw, but she has found herself leading a movement to make Toronto safe for chicken-keepers. She is pushing city council to revoke the 1999 by-law that prohibits her pets, and she has gained an important ally. Last week, Councillor Joe Mihevc told the Post he will support a review of that by-law, to allow chickens for egg use, after visiting Clucky, Sally, and Hybie in Toronto Chicken's yard.

"I visited the chickens," he said. "And do you know what? It was OK. It's an example of someone who's doing it right."

The mother of two teenage boys is slender and casually stylish. She lives in an expansive and well-kept area of Forest Hill. She says she simply wants her family to eat organic and locally.

"My background is in the food industry, so I can look at a label and say, 'OK, if that label says citric acid, then the ingredient comes from China,' " she says. "The more I looked at it the more I realized just how far removed we are from our food source."

And so began the transition of her property from a home to a sustainable living and growing space. She replaced her grass with herbs and vegetables. And when she noticed that those items tasted a lot better than ones that came from the store, her garden expanded. Soon strawberries, corn, squash, garlic, and beans were sprouting alongside a spread of fragrant herbs.

Then came the chickens.

"I started to meet some farmers up north, and I would buy eggs from them when I could. I also started talking with people from Everdale Environmental Learning Centre [in Hillsburgh], and one of the people that worked there said I could take some chickens if I could catch them."

Toronto Chicken and her family learned the only way to make a chicken move where you want it to -- "you have to corner them." It's a tactic they now employ every time they need their hens to be herded into their outdoor coop called the Eglu, which protects them from night-time predators.

She says the eggs that each of them deposit in a communal nest every 26 hours or so taste better than store-bought: their yolks are more orange, their whites are more solid, and have a third less cholesterol. It was all delicious omelette breakfasts and fresh eggs for baking, until the other shoe dropped.

"I can't remember when I found out, but one day someone said to me, 'Do you realize that's not legal?' And I thought, 'I wonder why, and should it be?'"

Toronto's Animal Control says no. Items on their list of concerns include the stink, the mess and the welfare of the chickens. But as Clucky, Hybie and Sally peck at clover in Toronto Chicken's backyard, there is no unpleasant odour or disarray of any kind. In fact, as Toronto Chicken sips her tea, Sally the hen takes an elaborate shake in her dust bath to clean up.

Toronto Chicken says even the homeowners in her wealthy neighbourhood appear supportive.

"I never knew the people that live behind me, but one day the fellow came over to the fence and said, 'My wife thinks she sees chickens.' And I said, 'Huh? I dunno. I dunno!' But then we started to talk, and he asked me, 'Do you get eggs,' and, 'How often do you get an egg?' and 'What do you have to do to take care of them?' And now, every time they're out there they come to the fence and they talk. It really opened communication."

And so Toronto Chicken organized supporters to put together information packages for city councillors, and keeps amassing e-signatures on the Internet petition she will present to council, and aims to make Toronto history.

CHICKEN FACTS

Five things you may not know about the average chicken

1. A chicken does not need a rooster in order to produce eggs.
2. Chickens do not smell bad, only their poop does.
3. Chickens that live outdoors are not a high-risk for bird flu.

4. Chickens do not have the sense to come in out of the rain.

5. Chickens eat lawn-damaging insects and weeds in their daily pecking regime.

Source: Toronto Chicken