

And a Chicken in Every Yard

Posted by [Katie Rabinowicz](#) in [farm to table](#), [grow your own](#), [politics](#) on December 19, 2008 at 5:14 pm



“Chantel” asks that she remain anonymous but I can identify her chickens - Goldie, Ayr and Sally - and I can post their mug shots. Her hens are illegal and worth a \$240 fine if the City’s bylaw officers knew about them living in the backyard of her Forest Hill home.

Chantel proudly speaks of her ‘girls’, boasting that Sally’s plumage could make her a show chicken. She introduces me to her 2 teen-aged sons; strong boys fed on omelets and crepes made from the eggs gathered from her hens. They’re safer and more nutritious than any store-bought eggs, she says.

She serves me tea and homemade chocolate chip cookies and I decide that Chantel is a model of good citizenship, living in the shadow of an outdated bylaw.

Across town in a small backyard filled with handmade bikes, container tomato plants, and a chicken coop built from an old Ikea futon, Steven Gray, an engineer, laments the 2 chickens he had to give up due to the bylaw. He hopes it will change so he can again enjoy the entertaining company of the birds and reap the rewards of his work; delicious free-range eggs made by “happy chickens”.

Their backyards are part of a patchwork of animal husbandry and food production (known as urban agriculture) spread across Toronto. There’s a backyard in Scarborough filled with Chinese herbs and long squash grown by a Chinese immigrant; a community garden of callaloo; okra and yams run by the [Afri-Can Food Basket](#); a year-round vegetable greenhouse run by [FoodShare](#); and beehives and a herb garden on the roof of the [Royal York Hotel](#). With more protection and expansion of land for urban agriculture through measures like zoning, farmland trusts, and tax incentives to keep farmers on the land, Toronto could grow to include aquaculture in greenhouses like Village Farms in Buffalo, NY which supplies Toronto with fish. Sheep and goats raised for milk and meat could find a home in our parkland or even in a highrise building, like the proposed Farm City, designed for living and farming.



Steven fed his chickens food scraps to reduce his household food waste. He agrees with Chantel that chickens are quiet, don't smell, and that any threat of disease, like bird flu, comes from factory farms, not backyards. The eggs are cheap and plentiful, a selling point for urban agriculture in low income areas ignored by food retail chains. The close proximity of the eggs to urban consumers reduces food miles and the distance from food created by retail centralization and the global food market which has resulted in the loss of small-scale farms, local farming skills, biodiversity and control over local food systems. By producing their own eggs or growing their own veggies, local farmers are challenging this global system of production and distribution, acting not as consumers in the market but as citizens struggling to control it to ensure that their food is affordable, healthy, sustainable and culturally and biologically diverse. If the by-law is ever repealed, Steven looks forward to producing speckled and blue eggs which he can use to teach his daughter about where her food comes from.



But before Torontonians start sawing up their Ikea furniture to make a coop, they might want to wait until chickens are legal.

Chickens were, in fact, legal and common among Portuguese and Italian immigrants until the 1980's when health concerns prompted the current bylaw permitting only cats, dogs, rabbits and pigeons (the latter for sport only, though some reportedly end up on the bbq). The bylaw, and its notion of acceptable household animals and use of urban space, is now being challenged by urbanites who want to use their backyards, vacant lots and rooftops as green space to grow local, sustainable food. Chantel has a petition with over 700 signatures on her [Toronto Chickens website](#), pushing for the legalization of backyard chickens already permitted in many cities across Canada and the US. Yo Utano, a York University student studying the issue, discusses a future bylaw for Toronto which might address issues like coop size, the number and treatment of birds and the safe consumption of eggs.

Tim Lang, professor at Thames Valley University, is hopeful that through democratic debate spanning sectors, cultures and incomes, consumers will be able to identify the concerns of fellow consumers, food workers, future generations and other species in order to build mutually supportive international networks of local food systems. In Toronto, we've begun with some healthy chicken debate and some patchwork greenery. Hopefully it will grow into an integrated local food system uniting a community that breaks bread together and maybe even some eggs.

