

# The New Coop de Ville

**The craze for urban poultry farming.**

**Jessica Bennett**  
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For Brooklyn real-estate agent Maria Mackin, the obsession started five years ago, on a trip to Pennsylvania Amish country. She, her husband and three children—now 17, 13 and 11—sat down for brunch at a local bed-and-breakfast, and suddenly the chef realized she'd run out of eggs. "She said, 'Oh goodness! I'll have to go out to the garden and get some more,'" Mackin recalls. "She cooked them up and they were delicious." Mackin and her husband, Declan Walsh, looked at each other, and it didn't take long for the idea to register: Could we have chickens too? They finished their brunch and convinced the bed-and-breakfast owner, a Mennonite celery farmer, to sell them four chickens. They packed them in a little nest in the back of their Plymouth Voyager minivan and headed back to Brooklyn.

The family has been raising chickens ever since, in the backyard of their brick townhouse in an urban waterfront neighborhood called Red Hook. Every Easter, Mackin orders a new round of chicks, now from a catalog that ships the newborns in a ventilated box while they are still feeding from their yolks. When they are grown, she offers up their eggs—and occasionally extra chickens, when she decides she's got too many—to friends and neighbors, and sells a portion to a local bistro, which touts the neighborhood poultry on its Web site. She gives the chicken manure—a high-quality fertilizer—to a local community garden in exchange for hay, which she uses to pad the chickens' wire-fenced coop. Occasionally, she kills and cooks up a chicken for dinner—though, she says, her chickens are egg layers and aren't particularly tasty. "We joke and call ourselves the Red Hook Poultry Association," says the former social worker, who at one time housed 27 chicks inside her kitchen—for six weeks. "Sometimes people are like, 'This is really kind of weird!'"

As it turns out, Mackin is hardly an anomaly, in New York or any other urban center. Over the past few years, urban dwellers driven by the local-food movement, in cities from Seattle to Albuquerque, have flocked to the idea of small-scale backyard chicken farming—mostly for eggs, not meat—as a way of taking part in home-grown agriculture. This past year alone, grass-roots organizations in Missoula, Mont.; South Portland, Maine; Ann Arbor, Mich.; and Ft. Collins, Colo., have successfully lobbied to overturn city ordinances outlawing backyard poultry farming, defined in these cities as egg farming, not slaughter. Ann Arbor now allows residents to own up to four chickens (with neighbors' consent), while the other three cities have six-chicken limits, subject to various spacing and nuisance regulations.

That quick growth in popularity has some people worried about noise, odor and public health, particularly in regard to avian flu. A few years back in Salt Lake City—which does not allow for backyard poultry farming—authorities had to impound 47 hens, 34 chicks and 10 eggs from a residential home after neighbors complained about incessant clucking and a wretched stench, along with wandering chickens and feathers scattered throughout the neighborhood. "The smell got to be unbelievable," one neighbor told the local news. Meanwhile, in countries from Thailand to Australia, where bird flu has spread in the past, government officials have threatened to ban free-range chickens for fear they are contributing to outbreaks. (In British Columbia, where officials estimated earlier this year that there are as many as 8,000 chicken flocks, an avian flu outbreak four years forced the slaughter of more than 17 million birds.)

But avian flu has not shown up in wild birds, domestic poultry or people in the United States. And, as the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute (an environmental research group) pointed out in a [report last month](#), experts including the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production have said that if we do see it, it'll be more likely to be found in factory-farmed poultry

than backyard chickens. As GRAIN, an international sustainable agriculture group, concluded in a 2006 report: "When it comes to bird flu, diverse small-scale poultry farming is the solution, not the problem."

Many urban farmers are taking that motto to heart. In New York, where chickens (but not roosters, whose loud crowing can disturb neighbors) are allowed in limitless quantities, there are at least 30 community gardens raising them for eggs, and a City Chicken Project run by a local nonprofit that aims to educate the community about their benefits. In Madison, Wis., where members of a grass-roots chicken movement, the Chicken Underground, successfully overturned a residential chicken ban four years ago, there are now 81 registered chicken owners, according to the city's animal-services department. "There's definitely a growing movement," says 33-year-old Rob Ludlow, the Bay Area operator of [BackyardChickens.com](http://BackyardChickens.com) and the owner of five chickens of his own. "A lot of people really do call it an addiction. Chickens are fun, they have a lot of personality. I think people are starting to see that they're really easy pets—and they actually produce something in return."

Because chickens can be considered both livestock and pet, farming them for eggs—or keeping them as pets—is unregulated in major cities like New York and Los Angeles. But it isn't legal everywhere. According to one recent examination by urban-agriculture expert Jennifer Blecha, just 65 percent of major cities allow chickenkeeping, while 40 percent allow for one or more roosters. (Hens don't need roosters to lay unfertilized eggs.)

Chicken slaughter, meanwhile, tends to fall under a separate (and generally stricter) set of regulations, though they're not always enforced. Most cities that allow chicken farming limit the number to four or six per household, so many urban farmers aren't raising enough chickens to slaughter and sell anyway—though they may cook up a meal or two at home. If they want to slaughter more, there are mobile slaughterhouses in places like Washington state that will do the dirty work for you: USDA-approved refrigerated trucks will pull right up to your doorstep.

Chicken farmers are finding each other on sites like [TheCityChicken.com](http://TheCityChicken.com), [UrbanChickens.org](http://UrbanChickens.org) and [MadCityChickens.com](http://MadCityChickens.com). [BackyardChickens.com](http://BackyardChickens.com) logs some 6 million page views each month and has some 18,000 members in its forum, where community members share colorful stories (giving a chicken CPR), photos (from a California chicken show), even look to each other for comfort. "I am worried that non-BYC people won't understand why a 34-year-old woman would cry over a \$7 chicken," writes a Stockton, N.J., woman, whose chicken was killed by a hawk.

Over at [UrbanChickens.org](http://UrbanChickens.org), which launched this year, founder K. T. LaBadie, a master's student in community planning, provides updates on city ordinances, info about local chicken-farming classes and coop tours and has been contacted by activists hoping to overturn chicken bans around the nation. In Albuquerque, where she lives with her husband and four chickens—Gloria, Switters, Buffy and Omelet—residents can keep 15 chickens and one rooster, subject to noise ordinances, as well as slaughter the chickens for food. In July, LaBadie wrote in detail of her first killing: she and her husband hung the bird by its legs, slit its throat, plucked its feathers and put it on ice. Then they slow-cooked it for 20 hours. "It's not pretty, it's kinda messy, and it's a little smelly," she writes. "But it's quite real."

Meanwhile, at [MadCityChickens.com](http://MadCityChickens.com), the Web site created by the Madison Chicken Underground, chat-line operator Dennis Harrison-Noonan has turned his chicken love into a mini-business: he's sold 2,000 design kits for his custom-made playhouse chicken coop, which retails for \$35. "It's really not that crazy to think that people are doing this," says Owen Taylor, the urban livestock coordinator at Just Food, which operates the New York Chicken Project. "Most of the world keeps chickens, and they've been doing so for thousands of years."

Historically, he's right. During the first and second world wars, the government even encouraged urban farming by way of backyard "Victory Gardens" in an effort to lessen the pressure on the public food supply. (Until 1859, there were 50,000 hogs living in Manhattan, according to Blecha.) "It's really only been over the last 50 years or so that we've gotten the idea that modernity and success and urban spaces don't involve these productive animals," Blecha says.

There are a host of reasons for the growing trend. "Locavores" hope to avoid the carbon emissions and energy consumption that come with transporting food. Chicken owners and poultry experts say eggs from backyard chickens are tastier and can be more nutritious, with higher levels of supplements like omega-3 fatty acids. Their production cost is cheap: you can buy chickens for as little as a couple of dollars, and three hens will likely average about two eggs a day. You can also use their waste to help revitalize a garden. "There've been recalls on everything from beef to spinach, and I think people want to have peace of mind knowing their

food is coming from a very trusted source," says LaBadie. "As gas prices go up, and people realize how food is connected to oil and transportation, they are bound to realize they can get a higher quality product cheaper if they get it locally."

Keeping a chicken is relatively easy, too—assuming you don't get too attached. (That's a talk Mackin says she had with her kids early: these chickens aren't pets.) They'll eat virtually anything—"pork products, string cheese, even Chinese takeout," she laughs—and they feed on bugs and pests that can ruin a garden. They can withstand harsh weather conditions. (In one oft-told tale, a Maine woman lost her chicken in a blizzard and found it, a day later, frozen solid with its feet stuck straight in the air. She thawed it and administered CPR. The chicken made a full recovery.) And much like New Yorkers, not much bothers chickens grown in urban environments. "[Those] raised in a really controlled environment like factory farms are very fragile, both physically and emotionally," says Blecha, who lives in St. Paul, Minn., with her partner and six chickens. "My chickens, I mow the lawn a foot away from them and they don't even look up from their pecking."

But even urban chickens, who can live more than five years, can die easily: from predators like dogs or possums, catching a cold or sometimes for no apparent reason at all. Once, one of Mackin's chicks got stuck in a glue trap. She drowned it, to put it out of its misery. "That was really sad," she says. (Mackin doesn't name her chickens, for that very reason.)

But the overall experience seems to be positive for everyone. "We have people calling weekly to say, 'This is really cool'," says Patrick Comfert, a spokesman for Madison's animal-services department, where the chicken ban was reversed in 2004. "Chicken people love it, the neighbors don't care, we have no complaints." Minneapolis enthusiast Albert Bourgeois sums up the appeal. "Chickens are really fun pets," he says. His flock is named Cheney, Condi, Dragon, Fannie and Freddie. The next one, he says, will be Obama.

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