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## The Return of the Suburban Chicken

By Sophie Braccini



Lamorinda has a long tradition of ranching and raising farm animals. One of them is the proud chicken, that great provider of eggs, chicken manure and ultimately, in some cases, chicken soup. After falling out of favor due to land subdivision and the growing popularity of canned chicken broth, the chicken is coming back strong on the wings of sustainable living, recycling and most of all eating local, home grown food. Eating eggs freshly laid in your own back yard is about the only way of getting garden-grown animal protein, short of trapping a flock of turkeys or a herd of wild pigs wandering by (this is NOT recommended).

However, we are not all equal when it comes to getting fresh "home-grown" eggs and local codes regulate the raising of poultry in our three communities.

In Lafayette and Moraga chickens are classified as livestock, meaning that the land requirements are the same as for those owning a cow. The prerequisite is a property of at least 40,000 square feet (almost an acre), while Orinda requires only half that space because lucky Orindan chickens fall into the same category as other small animals such as rabbits and minks.

However, Gallus Domesticus lovers are not stopped by regulation and our investigation has revealed a large underground chicken society. They are ordinary citizens from all avenues of life, usually families with children who decided to raise hens for the eggs and educational purpose. Many didn't even know about existing regulations when they acquired their feathered friends. "My neighbors have parrots or dogs, we didn't think that chickens would be any different," said one of them. The difference dates back to a time when chickens were raised for meat and sometimes slaughtered on site. "Now," the chickens owners argue, "we have them just for the eggs and when they do not produce any more we keep them as pets."

In Moraga, part of this illicit group of chicken owners is now hoping to "get out of the coop;" petitions are starting to circulate to modify regulations, and studies are being conducted. Last October, a resident who appreciates the usefulness of chickens but does not own any sent a letter to the Town Council requesting it put

on its agenda a revision of the chicken ordinance.

The stock-pot is starting to boil and action will certainly ensue.

In 1918, Michael & Louisa Larch paid ten \$100 gold coins for their 3-acre farm according to title documents. As the farm business expanded, Michael sold his eggs and meat in east Oakland by taking his horse-drawn wagon over the winding back roads to the 35th Avenue area of Oakland.

Today the owners of Larkfield farm, the Fadelli family, own more than 1 acre of the original Larch property on Larch Avenue and they continue to raise chickens. "They are wonderful pets," says Teri Fadelli, mother of 4 children and proud owner of 3 chickens, "they are very easy to care for once they are established."

Jackie Mann, who lives on 40 acres in Lafayette, says exactly the same thing. "We can go on vacation for a few days and all we need is for someone to collect the eggs our 8 hens lay every day."

Both women emphasize the need for a covered fenced area where the chickens will be protected from the numerous local predators, raccoons, foxes, eagles, coyotes and even rats.

People who have chickens on smaller lots do it for the same reasons and share the same enthusiasm. "Chickens are very sociable animals," said "Mark" who raises 3 chickens on 1/3 of an acre, "our son built a chicken coop according to instructions we found on a web site and the chickens roost there every night." The rest of the time, the chickens roam the 10 X 4 feet enclosure they have built for them. They too eat the eggs, give the kitchen scraps to the chickens and put the manure in their compost pile.

"I collect the manure a few times a month," said Teri Fadelli. She is so happy to live on a property that used to be a chicken farm, "everything I plant here thrives," she says.

Michelle Chan of 4H warns about a few things that people need to watch for when raising chickens. "You need to keep the animals' water clean and fresh," she says, "make sure you put wire under the coop, and not only chicken wire, something sturdy otherwise raccoons can go through it." She recommends plenty of room for chickens to dig and take a dust-bath.

Chan is not particularly concerned with diseases, "chickens are like any other pets, they need to be watched and if one gets sick it needs to be taken care of." 4H teaches children to care for the animals and also participates in shows and exhibitions. Chan sees chickens as wonderful pets and a great opportunity for children to experience the cycle of food.

Sustainable Lafayette co-founder Steve Richard is a supporter of chickens as well. "This is a great way to create your own food," says Richard, who has been playing with the idea of getting chickens himself but has not taken that step yet, "farming has a long history in Lamorinda and with the rising interest in eating locally grown food it seems that the number of people interested in chickens is increasing."

Interest in chickens is growing in the media as well, with a site like [urbanchicken.net](http://urbanchicken.net), or the recent ABC 7 (KGO) television news story that featured Moraga's former Mayor Lynda Deschambault, who was forced to remove her chickens from her property, or "The New Coop de Ville" article in the Newsweek of November 24th featuring urban raised chickens in cities such as New York, South Portland, Ann Arbor and Ft. Collins.

What comes first, the chicken or the ordinance? In Lamorinda, the story is probably just beginning.

Reach the reporter at: [sophie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sophie@lamorindaweekly.com)

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