

Some say fie on fowl in the city

By Bob Young

I COME NOT to praise the urban chicken.

But rather to understand it: Chicken-rearing classes at Seattle Tilth are packed like egg cartons. Our progressive poultry politics are the envy of chicken advocates in Bremerton and Vancouver, B.C. This Pulitzer-winning paper even reported that city chickens are "sexy."

Sexy?

What the cluck?

Look, I've got no beef with chickens. They crack me up with their herky-jerky head-bobbing. And backyard eggs taste *way* better than store-bought.

But they're lice-ridden rat magnets who eat maggots and cockroaches. ("It's a very direct relationship," says my Chickens 101 instructor, between a hen's diet and the flavor of its eggs.) And keeping them is not as cheap, green, humane or neighborly as some in the Church of Chicken would have you believe.

Did I mention neighborly? Every time a hen lays an egg it squawks for a few minutes â€” a remnant of its origin in the jungles of Southeast Asia, where the call was meant to reunite a squatting hen with her flock.

The squawk registers about 63 decibels, according to researchers in Vancouver, B.C., one of several Northwest cities now debating chicken rights. That's close to the volume of a person's voice â€” if that person is Roseanne Barr in labor.

When I began this quest, my chicken knowledge was on a par with Frank Costanza's on "Seinfeld." ("*The rooster goes with the chicken. So. Who's having sex with the hen?*") I went in thinking backyard hens were a symbol of locavores gone wild, another sign of smug bumper-sticker faddism in Seattle. (Anyone remember the potbellied pig craze?)

Boy, did I get an education. I learned about homeless-chicken shelters, the link between chickens and the "creative class," and pro-chicken freedom fighters like Subcommandante Pollo.

Look closely enough, you'll even discover that backyard birds are celebrated as part of a post-feminist movement and a defiant peck at the ankles of the Man.

I'M HERE in Bremerton, Ground Zero of the chicken-resistance movement.

One of the resistance leaders, City Councilman Jim McDonald, stands bravely in a room full of chicken lovers and explains why he cast the decisive vote against allowing backyard hens in the city.

The crowd is mad, perplexed.

"I don't know how you can look a council member from another city in the eye," Eugene Brennan tells McDonald. "It makes this council look foolish."

"It's not just about chickens. It's really not," insists Erik Painter. "It's about vibrant communities that tolerate differences." Painter argues that allowing chickens would signal that Bremerton is tolerant, a key criteria in attracting a hip "creative class."

In the end, McDonald says people who want fresh organic eggs have other options: They can go to a store. But neighbors stuck with the squawks and smell "have only one choice: Put up with it or move."

The group of 30 citizens at City Hall isn't buying McDonald's rap. And they're backed by more than 500 Facebook fans, including the mysterious Subcommandante Pollo, who pops up now and then to leave mystic kernels for the cause. "The urban chicken revolution is like an egg," sayeth the subcommandante. "An egg does not hatch when it is laid. It must be incubated."

I know, it tastes like fiction.

The pro-poultry revolutionaries vow to push on with an initiative petition to override McDonald and the council. One of their slogans: "I'm pro-hen and I vote."

The petition now circulating would allow four hens per yard, regardless of lot size. That would make for easy enforcement and a nice supply of eggs (a good hen lays about 180 eggs a year). "We wanted to create something that made all citizens happy," says Patty Zwick, petition-drive leader.

But there's dissension in the ranks. The most heated debate of the evening comes from those who want more birds per yard.

"I know at least 10 chicken outlaws. They all have at least six birds," says Painter.

Zwick argues for "baby steps" in Bremerton. "I was born here and lived here 48 years. I know this community," she says.

Painter says it's time to stop the stodginess. "I've lived here 10 years," he says. "I'm sick and tired of baby steps."

The petition goes ahead with four hens.

DOWN IN Oregon's capital city, Barbara Palermo's husband has christened her the "Che Guevara of the Chicken Liberation Front" because she vows to keep fighting until oppressors in Salem City Hall legalize backyard hens.

Palermo, an animal-health technician, had four chickens on her Salem lot until a neighbor spied them and complained. Her "girls" were banished to foster care on a farm outside the city of 150,000.

Since then she's written a 58-page research paper, created a "Chicken Revolution" website (<http://www.salemchickens.com/>) complete with a hen-wearing-beret logo and a rapper poking fun at poultry-phobes.

She even made a 75-minute documentary she believes will turn the political tide. She's now being courted, she says, by candidates who want to become Salem's next mayor.

Get a farm, one disapproving neighborhood leader admonished her. But Palermo says her chickens are dear pets less troublesome than pit bulls and no different from a cockatiel except they hatch her breakfast. And that breakfast marks independence from factory farms and caged-chicken cruelty. "I'm actually a shy person," she says. "But I'm determined to get my girls back."

NORTH OF the border, Vancouver, B.C., is dealing with its own hentroversy.

As part of the mayor's plan to make Vancouver the world's greenest city, the City Council is moving through a painstaking process of allowing four hens per yard. (A recent council meeting concluded at 11:30 p.m. and included testimony from a man in a chicken costume arguing that impoverished people should get the same rights as hens.)

The Vancouver Sun found the council's 32-page report on backyard hens stuffed with "sobering chicken facts."

Such as: Chickens need a certain amount of space or else they get stressed, even cannibalistic; chickens can't be kept on balconies because they need dirt-baths to ward off lice and mites; salmonella is more common in chicks than full-grown hens; and a rooster's crow hits almost 100 decibels, equivalent to the noise of a gas mower from three feet away.

The report does conclude, though, that, according to the British Columbia Center for Disease Control, the risk of spreading avian flu through backyard hens appears "mild."

This brings relief because six years ago a flu outbreak in B.C. led to the death of 17 million birds.

But the report warns of a different problem: Trendy people buying cute, fuzzy chicks, then dumping them when they get tired of the care required.

So the report recommends that taxpayers spend \$20,000 to build a shelter for homeless chickens. "Yes, we're talking chicken abandonment," the Sun mused.

The Vancouver Humane Society doesn't think it's a laughing matter.

"We worry it's going to be more of a fad," says Leanne McConnachie, the society's director of farm-animal programs.

A coalition of animal sanctuaries in the U.S. recently expressed the same concern, saying they'd been inundated with calls to take in hens and roosters.

McConnachie finds some pro-chicken arguments flimsy.

Take the refrain that backyard eggs are inexpensive, even an antidote to the recession. True, organic, free-range eggs cost up to \$6 per carton and a good backyard hen will produce eggs that run about \$1.25 per dozen based on the cost of chicken feed. But that's before you factor in a coop (the popular Eglu brand starts at \$495), vet care and daily labor. "I can eat a lot of (store-bought) eggs for that cost," she says.

The council's claim that chickens would reduce Vancouver's carbon footprint strikes her as just plain funny.

James McWilliams is author of "Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly." He says you need to look at the full life cycle of food — including all the energy that goes into its production — to assess its environmental impact.

A Texas State University professor, he's not aware of any study that looks specifically at backyard hens.

"I'd be real skeptical," McWilliams says of Vancouver's claim. "Life-cycle analyses can take years to complete and would require serious measurements I doubt the City Council did."

He's right, says Tom Hammel, author of Vancouver's chicken report. There was no study, just an assumption that locally produced food reduces transportation emissions.

Here in Seattle, Don Jordan, director of the city's animal shelter, says chickens are not much of a problem. Complaints about hens are rare, and the shelter gets only about one a month concerning roosters. Abandonment is not a big deal, either, Jordan says; the shelter gets about 20 to 30 chickens a year, most of which are sent to farms outside Seattle.

Folks who get chickens here tend to be responsible and educated, he explains. "It's not an impulse decision, whereas sometimes adopting a dog or cat can be an emotional choice."

LAURA WATSON and LeRoy Shelton first added four hens to their 7,500-square-foot lot in Seattle's Broadview neighborhood two years ago. Actually, they got three hens and a fourth, Sophia, turned out to be Sophocles, a rooster who was returned to a farm in Stanwood.

Watson and Shelton are frank about the task of keeping chickens. "I tell it like it is," he says. "It's like having pets. Do your research because it's not a simple thing."

Or cheap. Building a raccoon-proof coop cost the couple almost \$1,000, prompting Shelton to needle Watson about her "10-dollar eggs." But he buys the chickens all kinds of treats, including low-nitrate cold cuts. (Chickens need a certain amount of protein; that's one reason they eat maggots, and chicken feed often includes dried poultry waste.)

"Only the best for my chickens," says Watson, who cleans the coop once a week because she's "very sensitive about not having smells for the neighbors."

It's worth it, she says. Her hens supply entertainment, guilt-free eggs and excellent fertilizer. "Our neighbors can't wait for us to go away," she says, "so they can feed the chickens."

Jennie Grant is Seattle's premier advocate for backyard farms. Almost single-handedly she got the city to legalize backyard goats. She also keeps bees and chickens in the back of her 4,100-square-foot lot in Madrona.

"The chickens came first," Grant says, without a trace of irony, a quality evident in her letters advising first lady Michelle Obama and Mayor Mike McGinn to adopt goats. ("I have a hard time picking vegetables," the mayor says. "Taking care of chickens is not within my bandwidth.")

Grant's blog (<http://www.goatjusticeleague.org/>) is refreshingly candid about the challenges of urban farming.

She details her battle with rats invading her chicken coop. She writes poignantly about the death of her pregnant goat Brownie. She's honest about the shortcomings of "chicken-sexing" and people who find themselves with roosters they never wanted (nine of her first 15 chicks were male). Then there's illicit rooster-dumping.

A friend, she says, abandoned his rooster on the Burke-Gilman Trail hoping it would fall in with a wild flock of chickens. Her sister furtively dropped hers at a recycling station. And every year or so, roosters "mysteriously" appear at Woodland Park Zoo.

Grant, a real-estate copywriter, doesn't want to live on a country farm. "It would be too lonely," she says. "And this is all I can handle."

For getting into this, she blames Martha Stewart.

"She kind of made it attractive and hip," Grant says of Stewart, who first boasted of her hens' pastel-colored eggs in 1982. "I think Martha is the main force behind the popularity of chickens here."

Writer Susan Orlean argued the same in a New Yorker article last year called "The It Bird."

Orlean says Stewart has led a "post-feminist reclamation" of domestic arts such as canning, quilting and hen-raising. Keeping backyard birds also fits neatly with the popularity of high-protein and locavore, or 100-mile, diets.

"If you were trying to design a product that satisfied the social preoccupations of the moment, you couldn't have done better than to come up with a hen," Orlean wrote.

Orlean recently appeared on Stewart's TV show with a hen on her lap. Chickens are "good for the soul," declared Orlean, who lives north of New York City on a 100-acre spread.

BACK IN SEATTLE, I'm gardening in my 4,000-square-foot lot, just four blocks from the notorious Seattle Motor Inn on Aurora Avenue. It's silent except for the soothing trill of songbirds.

Until, that is, serenity is shattered by cackling chickens, not next door, not across the street, but a block away.

Unlike my neighbors who are quick to quiet their barking dogs, my neighbors with chickens can't tell them to stop squawking.

And what happens when your hens stop laying after a couple years and you have barren pets and a fresh-egg habit to feed?

Grant writes in her blog that she killed two old chickens, Katie and Judith, who were no longer laying good eggs. This infuriated her 9-year-old son, Spencer. But as Grant says, "if you're going to have a farm that's sustainable you can't run a geriatric-hen ward."

And if we take the local-diet movement seriously, why stop at the three chickens now allowed on a 5,000-square-foot lot in Seattle?

Rest assured, your Seattle City Council is poised to lead the region into further sustainability. City officials have written legislation that would allow eight hens per yard.

And really, why stop at chickens? Why not have goats for milk and rabbits or turkeys for meat â€" slaughtered in-city to lighten that carbon footprint?

Grant thinks rabbits will be the next backyard-farming trend. She's not alone. The New York Times ran a story earlier this year about a rabbit-killing seminar held by Novella Carpenter, who wrote the book "Farm City." Rabbits "are the new chickens," Carpenter confirms. Her method of execution involves breaking bunny necks with a broomstick.

I know one thing: I'm not going down that rabbit hole. I'm with the mayor on this one. I don't even have the bandwidth for chickens. I'm hoping my neighbors don't, either.

Bob Young is a Pacific Northwest magazine staff writer. Alan Berner is a Seattle Times staff photographer.

ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Laura Watson cradles Cecelia, one of her four hens, outside their \$1,000 raccoon-proof coop in Seattle. All four birds are named after Watson's female ancestors, fitting because some see urban chickens as a post-feminist movement. Certainly, owning chickens in the city has become popular, but the trend is raising a few hackles.



ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Named "Roberta Mutant Fluffball," this chicken, of the fluffy Silkie breed, won Seattle Titl's prettiest bird competition last year. "She's a tragic figure like many ex-beauty queens," says Jennie Grant, her owner. Grant's other hens harassed Roberta, and she hid under stairs all day until Grant let her roam in the garden.



ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Chicken 101 classes at Seattle Tilth are packed. Instructor Paul Farley stresses the chicken's origins in Southeast Asia, where the omnivores got nourishment by digging up the jungle floor for insects and other protein. That's why these "mini-bulldozers," as Farley calls them, can destroy yards and gardens.

ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Backyard eggs are often deeper in color than the store-bought variety and much tastier. There's a direct link between what chickens eat and the flavor of their eggs, says Chickens 101 instructor



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Laura Watson and LeRoy Shelton of Seattle feed their chickens treats including grapes, spinach and low-nitrate cold cuts.



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A pro-chicken signature-gathering effort at the Bremerton ferry dock is aided by Mark Smith and his 8-year-old son, Julian. They're trying to convince city officials to allow up to four hens in Bremerton backyards. One of their slogans: "I'm pro-hen and I vote."



ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Do chickens have personalities? "Absolutely," says Laura Watson. Cecelia is the "boss" of her three other chickens and "herds them like a rooster." Despite her red comb — usually found on roosters — Cecelia is all hen.



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Snowflake, one of Jennie Grant's goats, likes to climb the stairs behind her house in Madrona. Every morning Grant milks Snowflake. She named one of Snowflake's kids Richard Conlin (aka "Little Richard") in tribute to the Seattle City Council president. Grant says Mayor Mike McGinn could "soften his image" by getting a couple of goats.

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Almost single-handedly Jennie Grant got backyard goats legalized in Seattle. City officials are now poised to increase the number of hens allowed on a 5,000-square foot lot from three to eight. Good news for Grant's son, Spencer, 9, who was upset when his mom killed two hens who had stopped laying eggs.



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Seattle chicken-owners seem to be educated and responsible, says Don Jordan, head of the city's animal shelter, which gets about 25 chickens a year. "It's not an impulse decision, whereas sometimes adopting a dog or cat can be an emotional choice."



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An average hen will lay about 180 eggs per year. They are most productive in their first year and inefficient by their fourth year. Generally, chickens lay more eggs in spring and summer when days are warmer and longer.



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