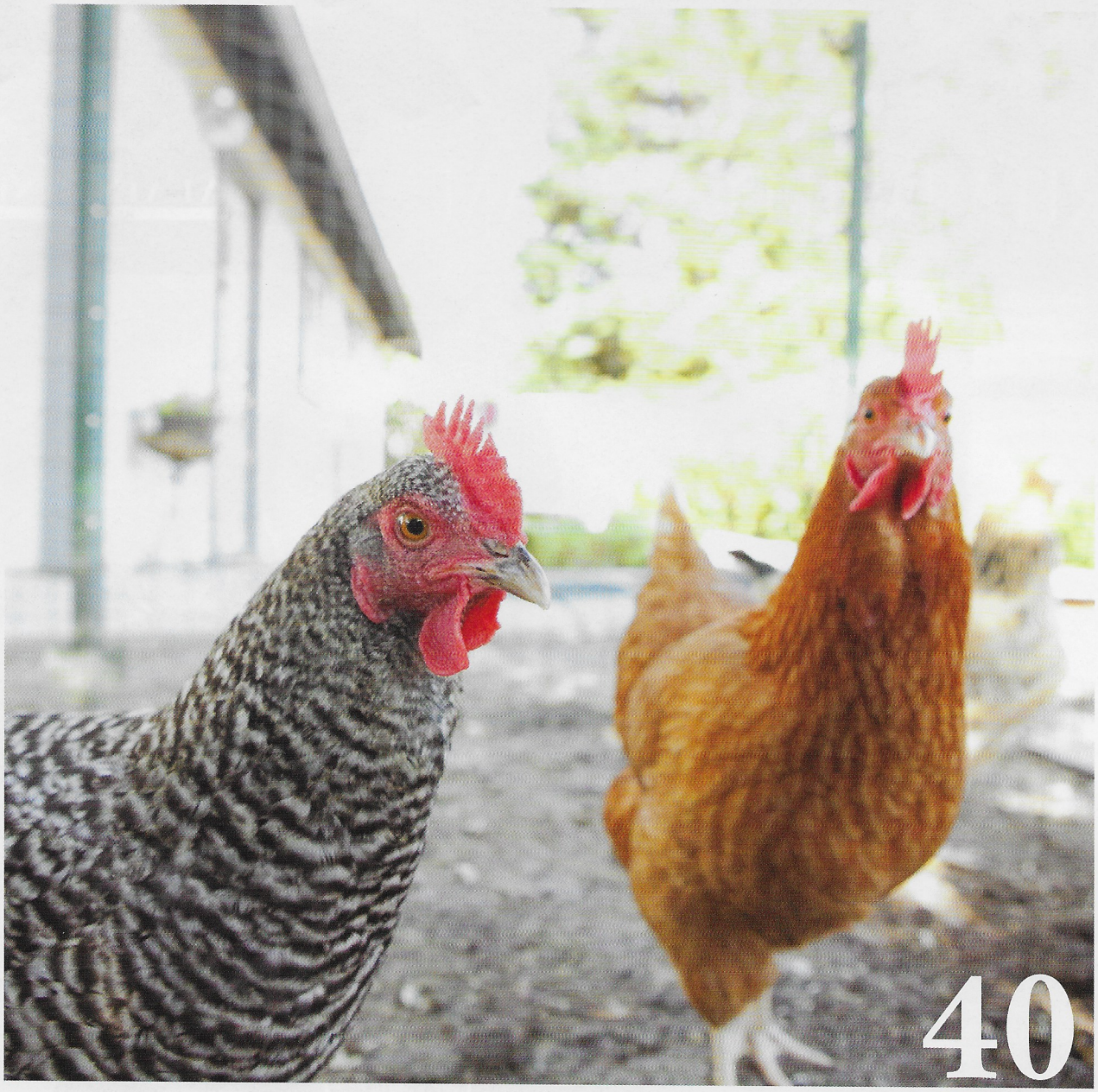

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SLISA DUNCAN

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BACKYARD BOOM Are chickens the new dog? Well not exactly, but chickens have come home to roost in the East Bay, as more and more families are making these feathered friends part of their household pet menageries.
By Andrea Firth

ON THE COVER
Photography: Lisa Duncan
Models: Diablo Ballet dancers Mayo Sugano and Rosselyn Ramirez

Backyard Chicken Boom

ARE CHICKENS THE NEW DOG?

BY ANDREA A. FIRTH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA DUNCAN

The chickens have come home to roost in the East Bay, as more and more families make these feathered friends part of their household menageries. Are chickens the new dog? Well not exactly, but backyard chicken owners will attest to the fact that hens are self-sufficient, easy pets. And let's face it, you don't have to visit the vet or "walk the chicken" and you will have plenty of fresh eggs. ➤

"We have seen a huge increase in the demand for egg-laying chickens over the past five years," says Tina Akins, co-owner with her husband Tony, of Concord Feed. Last Spring at their stores in Pleasant Hill, Concord and Dublin, the Akins sold 4,700 chicks in less than three months. "We all get excited about chicken season," says Akins. "People have already started calling about the chicks. They watch the schedule to see what's coming in and wait for their favorite breeds to be delivered." The chicks are shipped overnight, arrive less than 24-hours old—and typically sell out the same day.

John Bellandi, longtime owner of Alamo Hay & Grain Co., agrees that the demand for chickens has never been higher. Bellandi, who has been selling chickens since the East Bay suburbs were farmland, says last year was his best ever for chicken sales. During peak season from Valentine's Day to Easter, his store will sell 300 to 400 chicks a week. "It's a great family project. It's the big thing now," says Bellandi.

Kathryn and Caedmon Bear started raising chickens six years ago when their daughter Abby was in preschool and son Soren had just started grade school. Kathryn and the kids were introduced to the idea of raising chickens "in the burbs" when visiting friends who kept a coop in their backyard. Having grown up in the urban environs of Berkeley, Kathryn was intrigued. "I liked the idea of having pets that produced something you could use or eat."

"Fresh eggs really do taste better," says Caedmon, who eats cooked eggs for breakfast three to four times a week. But a consistent supply of fresh eggs was not the Bears' only motivation for raising hens. They both liked the idea of raising a pet that helped them to explore some of the basic lessons of life with their children. "I enjoy observing the rhythms of nature," says Caedmon. "It's good for the kids to be able to witness the cycles of birth, life and death."

Lafayette-based backyard chicken expert, John Kiefer, has been raising chickens for 45 years. He too has experienced the new wave of interest in suburban chicken rearing. People regularly tap Kiefer for advice about chickens, so he started hosting chicken workshops each spring. He has taught over 500 suburbanites everything they need to know about raising happy chickens so they can have fresh eggs each morning.

GETTING STARTED

The ideal time to get chicks is in early spring which gives them time to grow big and strong over the warm summer months. Brooding, or baby, chicks initially need an artificial environment—a warm shelter with food and water. The Bears kept their first batch of brooding chicks, two Delawares they named Delilah and Dizzy, and a Production Red called Roxanne, under a warm lamp in a box in the living room for about a month until the chicks graduated to the garage and ultimately a backyard coop. Kathryn says the antics of baby chicks created hours of fun for the kids. ➤

BREEDS

Before you head out to buy your baby chicks, it's important to master some chicken vocabulary: pullet, rooster, and bantam. "Pullets are young domestic hens, which are 90% accurately sexed, and the best way to go to avoid a rooster," says Tina Akins. Male chickens, or roosters, are typically not desirable for a backyard coop due to their noise and potential for a quickly expanding the flock. Bantams are small birds of a variety of breeds. While bantams are beautiful and exotic looking with wild colors, feathers on their feet, and tufts on top, these birds are not sexed explains Akins. So you may be rolling the dice with a bantam purchase.

"What you're looking for in a good backyard breed is a friendly bird and a good egg-layer," says Akins. She recommends Araucanas and Buff Orpingtons, which are among the friendliest. Ameraucanas lay eggs with blue, minty-green-colored shells; large breed chickens like the Black Australorp and the Jersey Giant are both friendly and productive. There are many varieties to choose from, so it's worth doing some research. Concord Feed will have over 35 different varieties for sale over the course of the season.

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"Just like people, chickens have their own personalities," says Catherine Gardner, who has raised chickens for over 15 years. "Some hens are more broody than others, and will spend hours sitting on their own eggs and every other hens' eggs too. And occasionally, it can be difficult to introduce a new chicken into the group," she explains, "but there is a pecking order in every flock, and in the end they work it out." Gardner says she raises hens for the great eggs, the great soil amendment, and a bit of entertainment. "I like the way the hens walk around and interact in the yard," says Gardner. "I find watching them is really relaxing."

VITAL STATISTICS

One of the great things about chickens is that they basically pay for themselves. Chicks cost $2 to $3 a piece and a monthly bag of feed (about $18) is more than offset by what a few dozen organic eggs would cost at the grocery store. "Chickens lay eggs daily to every other day depending on the breed, and the more free-range access a chicken has, the longer and more productive the chicken will be," says Bellandi of Alamo Hay & Grain. A typical life span is five to eight years while production starts to drop off by year four. Many breeds stop or lay fewer eggs in colder, darker months, but by the late spring and summer months young chickens typically generate a bumper crop of eggs. And when the chickens are producing, you will hear it. Caedmon Bear says that his chickens give a celebratory squawk each time one lays an egg—this is known as "egg song."

PREDATORS

Here in the semi-rural world of the East Bay, mountain lions, opossums, raccoons, fox, and coyotes are all potential chicken predators. Pet dogs and cats are usually not a problem if they have been introduced to the chickens during brooding, but a neighbor's dog may be problematic. Coops should be secure with the chickens housed off the ground, and the chicken run should be fenced. If you live near open space, you may find it necessary to cover the run due to the danger posed by red tail hawks.

COOPS

Much like real estate in the East Bay, chicken coops vary in size, design, and splendor. But all coops require the same common elements, and many chicken owners opt for function over form. Caedmon Bear built a new coop for his hens about four years ago recycling wood from an old closet door. He and Kathryn sketched out the design for their barn-red coop which includes an elevated place for the chickens to roost, an automatic water supply, a few nesting boxes, and a door that can be locked to keep our the coop raiders.

Chicken expert John Keifer recommends that hens have a minimum of five square feet each to range. When roaming outside, chickens should have access to feed, water, and the shade of the coop to escape the heat. And he warns that they should not be left out during the day without someone at home due to the risk for predators. By dusk, chickens should be put in the coop with the doors secured tightly.

"Raising chickens has been a really fun adventure for all of us and educational too" says Kathryn Bear. For the school science fair, the Bear's daughter Abby decided to find out how long it takes for a chicken to lay an egg. She spent a week with a stopwatch in hand observing the birds as they parked themselves in the nesting boxes. Having tackled that chicken question, maybe next she will work on, "which came first the chicken or the egg?" ■