

Capon accomplices

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By Josie Seeligson

Some chickens abandon their brethren to bond with their SA landlords

Most chickens hate people the way we hate Nazis and terrorists, perhaps because we crack their eggs and eat their flesh.

Through chicken wire, they squawk horrid rumors that dozens of their babes sit in Styrofoam on frigid shelves, and nearby their naked contemporaries lay in mass graves of cellophane. All wait lifelessly - *no hope* - to be cooked and eaten. They've

all heard about the old shop "Cherry St. Poultry," whose slogan was "In by 9, out by 2," the chickens plucked and processed. Mercy. As they whisper of the unspeakable atrocities committed at high quantity factories outside of town, their glaring wild eyes peer beneath red crown and wattle folds, clothes-pinned by pointed beaks like laundry of the face. *Dios Mio*. To add insult to injury, some humans engage in barbaric entertainment - dyeing shells to crack with shrill cackles or to hide in backyards for cruel children to hunt. *Ah! The poultry!*

But in the human world these are far from punishable crimes. Many San Antonio urbanites, in choosing to keep backyard chickens, simply exercise their rights. It's a little-known fact that residents within the city limits are entitled to five chickens per person, so long as the birds reside in an enclosed coop 20 feet from neighbors' abodes. At an egg a day per chicken, that's a lot of huevos rancheros.

While fear and loathing run rampant in chicken circles, traitor chickens do breed in their ranks. Patsy pullets, they emotionally fly the coop and become domestic - pets even. Most Wanted in downtown capon circles are Naomi, Jack, Peggy, Pecker, and Edna, who eat from Southtown attorney Mike Casey's hand. Casey's Naomi, a black and white Plymouth Rocker, is a two-time turncoat, belonging first to poet Naomi Shihab Nye, who sacrificed her coop to her husband Michael's photography studio. (Never had you seen such fowl photo fans, until they realized they were just being relocated down the street.) Nye bonded enough with her chickens to still visit Casey's coop, bringing greens and other table scraps, though she confides she doesn't miss the 13 rats - guilty of a taste for chicken feed - that her cat lined up by her back door.

The truly quisling kiss-ups not only eat from human hands but fraternize with them. One of Casey's favorite hens, Rose (named after his longtime friend and writer, Gemini Ink's Rosemary Catacalos), visited Casey's screened-in back porch for breakfast each morning.

click to enlarge



Mike Casey offers a handful of food to Pecker, a Rhode Island red hen. Casey, a local attorney, raises several chickens and a turkey in the back yard of his King William home. (Photo by [Mark Greenberg](#))

Rose the chicken died an untimely death, with Casey holding a boxside vigil and a heating lamp.

Another of Casey's birds would bellow to attend parties - riddled with *people*. Such chicanery. Living the high life, these better-dealing birds get all Casey's leftover food ("the ultimate recyclers," Casey calls them), roll over for egg collections, and offer piles of manure for Casey's herb garden, from which he plucks greenery to season his chickens' out-of-town relatives.

There's also jewelry maker Cynthia Collins' chicken, Mimi, who shares a bowl of Meow Mix each morning with the family cat. Mimi willfully selected their coopless Monte Vista backyard to live in, greeting their moving van like the neighborhood welcome wagon. Mimi perches above dogs on a gate near the kitchen window and clucks until someone brings her food (sometimes scrambled eggs). She struts into the house for scraps or attention, and has attacked visitors carrying sandwiches. For rent, Mimi lays one egg each morning on a backhouse shelf.

But because humans set ordinances, they can call fowl. Ceramicist Katie Pell and furniture-maker Peter Zubiato became back-handed beneficiaries of the city ordinance when their downtown friend, Gail Gladstone, was squealed on by a neighbor for keeping nine, rather than five, chickens. She employs them in her backyard chicken tractor - a portable coop that enables chickens to fertilize and turn the soil, eating bugs as they go. This soil is then ripe for gardening, and the chicken tractor moves to another spot in the yard.

Nine chickens are more effective than five, but rules are rules, and neighbors can be nasty. "You gotta walk the straight line when you've got neighbor problems," says Gladstone. To compensate, Gladstone threw in a rabbit, noting, "It's actually a chicken-bunny tractor now. They seem to get along pretty well."

Meanwhile, Pell and Zubiato took in the contraband chickens, devised a coop from antique interior doors and painted the fowl town pink. Their daughter embraced the birds as childhood friends, renamed them daily, and sometimes would "put them in a purse or something and we wouldn't know it until the purse started cheeping," says Zubiato. They weren't without their own knocks, however, and lost one chicken to a stray dog. "We were bad farmers," says Zubiato.

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As pets, chickens appeal to certain personalities, just as do cats or dogs. The network of urban chicken-keepers is tight, known to trade birds or lend a setting hen for a cold, orphaned chick. Though not the cuddliest of creatures, chickens' bonus is that they can be converted to succulent morsels (unlike dogs and cats, as far as most believe). Exotic pedigree breeders and chicken show circuits do exist, but that's another subculture entirely.

Perhaps, in the fattest city in the nation, our urbanites find comfort in the familiar aesthetics of chickens' plump, squishy midsections, amazingly propped upon two knobby twig legs that run at lightning speeds, plume intact. Their spirits are independent despite dependent circumstances; they mostly live caged, yet refuse to be herded, and the tales of fighting cocks are gruesomely true.

A chicken pecking in the backyard may also be a snapshot of simpler times, a benign brake on modernity. Urbanites keeping chickens evolved from country people keeping chickens, an order much more clear than that of the chicken and the egg - whose order of appearance will never be settled. •



Could this be your next pet, best friend, or

Chipotle Chicken Salad Tacos / Tacos de Pollo en Ensalada Enchiptlada

Adapted from Rick Bayless' *Mexico One Plate at a Time*

Makes about 4 cups, filling 12 to 16 tacos, serving 4 as a casual meal.

2 Tablespoons balsamic vinegar (no need to use your very best balsamico here)

1/3 cup olive oil, preferably extra-virgin

2 canned chipotle chiles en adobo, finely chopped

Salt

1/2 small head Napa cabbage, thinly sliced (about 2 1/2 cups)*

1 large carrot, peeled and chopped into 1/4-inch pieces*

1 small red onion, thinly sliced

1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro

1 1/2 cup coarsely shredded cooked chicken, preferably grilled, roasted, or rotisserie chicken

1 large ripe avocado, peeled, pitted, and cut into 1/2-inch cubes 1/3 cup coarsely grated Mexican queso anejo or other dry grating cheese, such as Romano or Parmesan

12 to 16 warm, fresh corn tortillas

* `Author's note: for ease, bagged pre-sliced carrots, cabbage, or coleslaw mix work well.`

The filling. In a large bowl, whisk together vinegar, olive oil, and chipotles. Season generously with salt, usually about a generous 1/4 teaspoon. Add the cabbage, carrot, onion, cilantro, and chicken. Toss everything together and let stand for 15 minutes. Taste and season with additional salt if necessary.

Finishing the dish. Scoop the filling into a wide, shallow serving bowl, dot with the cubed avocado, and dust generously with the cheese. Set on the table with the warm tortillas, and you're ready for some great roll-them-yourself tacos. •