

True love: backyard hens and the egg factor



The recent Helmsman Poultry Auction at the Warrnambool Showgrounds attracted some serious chook fans, including the Crazy Chicken Lady whose identity is revealed below.

Words and photos by Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] W
[/dropcap]hat is it about the humble backyard hen that makes normally clear-headed people so clucky?

It often starts out innocently enough: a family decides to rescue a few chickens from an egg farm, or buy some pullets from the poultry auction, but within weeks -if not days – there is a transformation.

Facebook updates start to appear about feather growth and egg shapes, together with snaps of lovingly made chicken coops and, in the ultimate sign that the chickens now rule the

roost, a list of their names and developing personality traits.

Even US author **Alice Walker** (*The Color Purple*) has fallen under their spell, producing a 2012 memoir in which each of her hens rates a mention in the title: *"The Chicken Chronicles: Sitting with the Angels Who Have Returned with My Memories: Glorious, Rufus, Gertrude Stein, Splendor, Hortensia, Agnes of God, the Gladyses, & Babe: A Memoir"*. Now that's a title!

Eric Walsh, from Purnim, understands the appeal and, 12 months ago, joined the flock of those charmed by chickens and confesses he now owns "too many" hens, guinea fowl and quails.

"You can spend half an hour watching chickens and it changes your whole attitude," he explains.

"It takes you from work-mode to relaxed-mode in a flash. You just have to make sure that you scrape your boots before you go back inside or the stress *returns* in a flash," he laughs.



Self-confessed chicken fan Chris Dance, from

Camperdown, who free ranges more than 150 chickens on her property...and yes, she does talk to them when rounding them up.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] E
[/dropcap]ric was among the capacity crowd at last week's Helmsman Poultry Auction at the Warrnambool Showgrounds hosted by the [Warrnambool and District Poultry Club](#) which attracted a record 232 pen count.

Among those also squeezed between the cages of Isa Browns, Plymouth Rocks, Barnevelders silky bantams and swizzles, was a mythical Crazy Chicken Lady – in this case also known as **Chris Dance**, from Camperdown – who has more than 150 chickens free ranging on her 1400 acre property.

"It's in my blood. My father was the crazy duck man and I am now the crazy chicken lady," she smiles, adding that she bought her specially printed polo shirt online.

"And yes, I do talk to my chickens. I have a good old talk to them while I am rounding them up for bed at night."



The humble hen is finding its way into the hearts –

and homes – of people around the south-west.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] 0
[/dropcap]f course you don't need to have 150 chickens to fall under their spell: the fastest growing group of poultry fans are those who buy three, four or five to suit an urban setting.

"A lot of people are going back to the days of having chickens in their backyard," says poultry club committee member **Jackie Harry**, who also runs [a poultry breeding business](#) that specialises in Barnevelders, Wyandottes and French Wheaten Marans.

"They make such rewarding pets, are easy to look after, and kids can be involved in collecting the eggs, which not only teaches them where food comes from, but about the lifecycle," Jackie explains.



Michael Duggan, from West-End Hens in Warrnambool, sees chickens as livestock but has a strong appreciation for those who love the birds as pets.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] M
[/dropcap]ichael Duggan, who on the back of demand recently transformed his Warrnambool business from reptiles and poultry supplies to purely poultry specialists ([West-End Hens](#)), believes the egg factor is critical.

“Chooks are a pet that keeps giving,” he says, “they give something back for the time and money that is put in”.

Michael adds that chickens are also little workhorses around a garden, pecking at bugs and aerating the compost, but there is no denying that many owners grow to love them simply for being chooks.

“I have five chickens and I see them as livestock, but I know a lot of people see them differently – they pick up their chickens and cuddle them – and they just love watching their chickens go about their day,” he says.

[box] **Michael’s answers to five quick questions about chickens:**

1. Is there always a pecking order in a hen house? Yes, and some people try to intervene. It is best to let them sort it out.

2. Best breeds for laying? Isa Browns, Hyliners and Australorps

3. Best chickens for children? Silky bantams

4. What is the average life span of a chicken? Four to eight years and they can lay eggs for their entire lives.

5. Do all roosters crow? Yes, eventually, and this is why they are not permitted in suburbia, but you can always buy a cock collar*. (*A story for another day.)

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[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] T
[/dropcap]his deep affection extends to caring for hens that were once housed in commercial egg farms – part of the response to an increased awareness of animal welfare – and a preparedness to spend money on chickens who fall ill or who no longer produce eggs.

“I think a lot of people buy chickens because they want eggs, but then it changes and, even if they stop laying, they end up keeping them for other reasons and become very attached to them as pets,” Michael says.



Who could resist this face? One of the day-old chicks at Michael Duggan's business.

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