

GARDENS

The Berry family clockwise from left: Siena, Nadine, Nicholas, Chris and Mackey



## MICRO FARMING IN MARIN

Backyard chickens offer more than just fresh eggs

BY DANIEL JEWETT

PHOTO: TIM PORTER



Mario Klip with a coop recently installed in Tiburon.

**CHRIS BERRY GOT THE TIP** while at a dinner party.

“They make the best pets in the world and your kids will love them,” a friend told the Ross resident two years ago.

Not long after that Berry surprised his family not with a puppy or a kitten, but with six baby chickens. “My wife said ‘this is so cool’ and the kids instantly fell in love with them,” Berry says. “I didn’t have any experience but I thought, why not try it?”

Berry, a financial adviser by day, immediately set about converting the kids’ underutilized playhouse into a coop and followed an increasing number of Marin residents into the world of backyard chickens.

“My biggest worries were ‘will they be noisy?’ and ‘can I handle them?’” Berry says. He quickly learned that backyard chicken breeds with names like Barnevelder, Welsummer and Buff Orpington are quiet and calm and easy to handle, but that prob-

lems of disease and predators can be much more pressing.

“We lost about one a month,” he recalls. Berry did a little research and discovered that places like Rivertown Feed Store in Petaluma sell chicks (priced from \$3.99 to \$5.99 each) vaccinated against Marek’s disease, a common chicken virus, and that predator-proofing the



coop against creatures like raccoons, possums and raptors was essential. He’s had no problems since and his flock has grown to nine chickens of various breeds.

“It’s the easiest thing in the world and we get anywhere from eight to nine eggs a day,” says Berry, adding that his family, which includes three children, still sometimes needs even more. “And the eggs are so fresh, they stand up firm in the pan.

“I thought this would help teach the kids about sustainable farming,” he adds. “The kids rotate whose turn it is to go get the eggs and feed the chickens.”

Berry has become so enthused about producing his own food that he is looking into shared farming and spreads the word about chickens whenever he can. “I always recommend them to people with kids and I notice that more and more people are doing it,” Berry says.

One man who sees the rising popularity of backyard chickens on a firsthand basis is Marin coop builder Mario Klip. He has found the hobby to be a life-changing experience.

"I was a marketing director for a big company," the Mill Valley resident says. "But I quit the job and started raising chickens and my life changed significantly."

Soon the hobby became a part-time job building coops inspired by the ones he saw growing up in Holland. "I grew up with chickens; we would watch them hatch and raise them. It was a great experience," Klip says.

"I wanted to build houses that were pretty and functional," he adds. "Coops that were pleasing to the eye and beautiful in the front yard." Klip imported a few coops from Holland, made some changes, and after about five months was producing structures that can be seen at the Woolly Egg Ranch on Tennessee Valley Road or at the Bayside Garden Center in Tiburon. This is his first full year of operation.

"On the Internet, everything looks great," he says about coops buyers find online. But the wood, wire and other materials (as well as a few clever innovations) found on his coops are chosen to make them easy to clean and totally predator-proof if installed correctly, he says.

Beyond the investment in time and resources and the fact that chickens can produce around 260 eggs a year, Klip says people want to protect their chickens as valued pets.

"People become very attached," he says. "You have treats ready and they come running and want to be petted. Chickens can be quite affectionate."

Klip says he sees more and more people becoming interested in backyard chickens every day. "I get calls from all over the state but a majority of buyers are right here in Marin."

*For more about coops, call 415.888.8264 or visit [hollandhenhouses.com](http://hollandhenhouses.com). Prices range from \$459 to \$969 for unpainted coops and runs and \$50 an hour for installation. Contact your city, or the county for unincorporated areas, to check ordinances and setback requirements. Generally cities in Marin allow for flocks of up to 12 and do not permit roosters.*