**MY URBAN FARMING EPIC FAIL**

By Isaac Eger  
http://narrative.ly/portland-1/my-urban-farming-epic-fail/

It started as four college roommates with a hunger for farm-fresh food and a penchant for pet puns. It ended with dead ducks, grumpy goats, and one horrifically bloody mercy killing gone wrong.

Like many Portland autumn skies, the gray Sunday clouds passed over us in one great low-hanging mass. The four of us, twenty-something college roommates from all over the United States, stood in front of the home of a chicken vendor we found on Craigslist. The home was thirty minutes east of the city. I expected a rural scene with wide pasture and a red barn; instead I found a prefabricated house in a subdivision of large, empty lots. I wondered if we were in the right place. A chubby young teen answered the door.

“Are you here to see the birds?” he asked.

The boy led us around back. The backyard was half the size of a football field and packed with wooden coops that contained hundreds of chickens, ducks, quails and geese. The place smelled of vinegar and gym socks.

“Here they are,” said the boy, pointing to four birds behind a wire fence. There they were. The birds were smaller than they appeared online. Only one of them looked like a proper plump and motherly hen. The other three looked more like crows with small heads and pencils for legs. My friends and I looked at each other, trying to hide our skepticism from our young salesman. The birds cost $20 a pop.

“Well,” I said, “we came this far out.”

So the four of us — a Vermonter, a Bostonian, a Texan and me, a Floridian — placed the birds in a cardboard box in the backseat of our car and returned to Portland. Thus began our three-year odyssey as urban farmers in the Pacific Northwest.

For Portland émigrés with an 800-square-foot backyard in the Southeast Portland neighborhood of Woodstock, urban farming was the fashionable thing to do. Anywhere else in the U.S., a house full of young male college students would probably play fantasy football; we played fantasy farmer. We weren't the only ones. Portland boasts one of the most thriving backyard chicken cultures in the country.

Robert Litt started the [Urban Farm Store](http://www.urbanfarmstore.com/) in his garage on SE Powell Street six years ago. Litt was dissatisfied with the chicken feed he found in the area, so he started making his own quality feed. As word of his brand spread and demand grew, he opened a real storefront. The Urban Farm Store now has a database of between 10,000 and 15,000 customers in the Portland area, and it sells more than 100 tons of feed and more than 5,000 pullets (baby hens) per year — nearly all to backyard farmers. The store even developed its own organic soy- and corn-free feed, since many Portlanders have eliminated those ingredients from their own diets.

Obviously, backyard chicken culture is not limited to Portland. Major urban areas like Brooklyn, Los Angeles and Chicago have all experienced an increase over the last decade. It’s part of a growing nationwide urban farming movement, and the trend has less to do with poverty or hunger as it does the ecological and ethical benefits of producing your own food. But Portland is different. Portland is the kind of place where the city provides houses with compost bins, and dumpster diving is both a sexy pastime and a familiar way for the frugal to fill an empty stomach.

I wasn't immune to the pull of Portland's mystique, or the idea of urban agriculture. Yes, a sense of social and environmental responsibility inspired my roommates and me to live a greener life. But I also liked the idea of dirt under my fingernails, and having a reason to wear overalls without irony. Urban farming seemed fun and cool.

“Portland has elevated the chicken to pet status,” says Urban Farm store manager Jason Everly. Unfortunately, he added, some Portland chicken owners have no idea how to care for their animals. "Forty percent of my time is spent on the phone with people who don’t know anything about chickens,” Everly says. He could have been talking about us.

My roommates and I didn't bother to do much research before buying chickens. Technically, we were outlaws. According to Chapter 13 of the Code and Charter of the City of Portland, a resident can have backyard chickens, ducks, doves, pigeons, pygmy goats or rabbits without a permit, as long as they keep fewer than three animals total. We had four. In order to keep four or more, owners just need to pay a $31 application fee and inform any neighbors within 150 feet about their stock. According to Chris Wirth, manager of the Multnomah Code Enforcement Program, there are currently more than 800 permits for chickens in the city of Portland, up from 95 in 2009 — but that’s a fraction of the total.

“We only see the tip of the iceberg,” Wirth says. Short of knocking on every door in the city, there's no way to know who has more than three chickens.

Wirth and his department occasionally investigate complaints about chicken slaughter. Typically, the complaints relate to screaming birds and blood leaking onto a neighbor’s property. The amateur killing of chickens can be loud and messy. Fortunately for us, our neighbors didn't mind our rule-breaking. Instead of complaining, they followed suit and built their own, superior chicken coop.

The chicken coop marketplace is filled with shockingly high-end structures. Williams-Sonoma's Agrarian line sells an “exclusive” hand-built $1,500 coop made with “sustainably harvested western red cedar, custom-milled by a local, family-owned sawmill and delivered to the workshop via ferry.” Neiman Marcus offers a Versailles-inspired Le Petit Trianon coop that costs over $100,000. If you own this decadent unit, Neiman Marcus promises that when you “slip on your wellies” and head for the coop, you will be “greeted by the pleasant clucking of your specially chosen flock.” There, inside the world's most expensive chicken coop, the company catalog says you'll find your roost in a “living room,” or maybe in the “broody room.” If your chickens are out and about, you can just wait in the coop's library, which is “filled with chicken and gardening books for visitors of the human kind, and, of course, an elegant chandelier.”

In place of an expensive abode, we gave our chickens distinctive names: Mama San, a Rhode Island Red, and the three, indistinguishable black bantams, Stacey, Lacey and Fat Rhonda. They lived in a coop that I thought resembled Rio's favela architecture. Its sides were made from discarded pieces of wood of varying thickness, and the roof was comprised of three different slabs of corrugated metal. The entire structure stood about a foot-and-a-half tall. Despite its rickety appearance, the birds took to it when we'd usher them in at night and close the door.

To keep the girls safe, we chicken-proofed the yard's nooks and crannies with hexagonal wire. The fence mostly worked, but one of the bantams (I always blamed Fat Rhonda, though I could never truly tell) frequently slipped out and onto the street. The chases that ensued reminded me of the scene from the first “Rocky” film, where Sylvester Stallone's boxing coach, Mickey Goldmill, tells Rocky that he wants him to “chase this little chicken” because “if you can catch this thing, you can catch greased lightning.” I chased, and the loose bird dodged my attempts to capture it. She was like a feathery Barry Sanders. After long bouts of weaving and missed tackles, I'd give up, and the bantam would wander back home on its own volition.

In the beginning, mornings rewarded us for all our backyard husbandry. As the kettle warmed for the day's first pot of coffee, one of us would head out to gather eggs. Our birds typically gifted us with three to four daily. The fresh eggs clustered in one corner of the coop, and we delicately reached in and brought them inside. They felt warm in my hands. Bits of scat and loose feathers often clung to them, but I got over that quickly. Our chickens’ eggs were strong. The thick shells required a serious thwacking to open them. The yolks seldom broke in the pan. We'd fry them sunny-side up and make sure the little wet sunsets were runny as hell. In our house, overcooking a backyard egg was a sin. Maybe they were tastier than store-bought eggs, or maybe I imagined they were tastier because of my personal relationship with the birds. Either way, over breakfast, we felt like stewards of the earth, and my investment fed a mild case of burgeoning self-righteousness.

On lazy days I studied our chickens for hours, seeking some anthropomorphic qualities. They had none. Instead, their behavior was predictably pleasant. Their walk combined a high-kicking Rockette with a tiptoeing Scooby-Doo. Their necks jutted forward in sync with each step. They kicked the dirt behind them and pecked at everything and nothing. They ate and shit a lot ─ about forty-five pounds of poop per chick, per year, to be exact. To drink, they stuck their beaks in a dish, threw their heads back and swallowed the water like my roommates and I gurgled mouthwash. And unlike their noisy male counterparts, the chickens made soothing coos, constantly mumbling among one another, though their wide eyes made them seem forever on edge. It didn't take long for me to understand that chickens are not intelligent creatures. That made sense, since they sometimes ran around without a head. Take the famous story of Miracle Mike.

In 1945, on a small farm in Fruita, Colorado, Lloyd Olsen slaughtered chickens for a family dinner. Olsen knew that his mother-in-law liked neck meat, so he wanted to leave as much of it for her as possible. He raised his cleaver and chopped the head off of a five-month old cockerel, or young rooster. The headless bird ran around for a moment, as headless chickens often do, but instead of falling over dead, the bird gathered itself and went on being a chicken. It pecked for food and preened itself, with great futility. It even tried to crow but could only muster a gurgling noise. Olsen didn't have the heart to finish the job; instead, the bird became a sideshow character named Miracle Mike the Headless Chicken and was flown to fairs as far away as England. Olsen kept Mike alive for eighteen months with an eyedropper that he used to feed Mike through his neck, and to remove the mucus build-up that eventually suffocated him.

The medical explanation for the headless chicken has to do with the bird's skeletal anatomy. Chicken skulls have two large openings for the eyes that subsequently place the brain at a forty-five-degree angle. By leaving as much neck for his gizzard-loving mother-in-law, Olsen inadvertently left the bird's brainstem intact. This allowed Miracle Mike's basic motor functions to continue working as if it had a brain.

Personally, I had trouble developing an intimate relationship with a creature that can live without a head. Yes, our chickens gave us delicious eggs, and they ate our kitchen scraps and made us feel like less-wasteful members of society. But something was missing. And perhaps because everybody and their cousin had chickens back then, we wanted to separate ourselves from the masses. So we bought four ducks.

I still liked our hens, but the ducks were better. Their colorful names reflected our preference. There was the speedy black duck, Usain Bolt. There was a smaller, light brown duck with flecks of black at the end of her feathers, who we named Fidel Castro's Beard. We named the elegant brown duck Benazir Bhutto, in honor of the late Pakistani prime minister and political activist. And then there was Einstein, the favorite, an inconspicuous white duck in all ways except for the frizzy white tufts that adorned the crown of his head. The Vermonter bought a kiddie-pool for the ducks to swim in. Our Bostonian roommate sang Leonard Cohen to them as they swam. They did as they pleased and always kept close to each other. They were even less interested in us than the chickens were. They'd never let us pick them up or even touch them, but they were much more spirited and independent, and the chickens suffered for it. Playfully intelligent, the ducks would harass the hens by biting their tails. Ducks are extremely messy, and they'd crap in the water dispenser, further stressing the chickens.

The stressed chickens stopped laying. The ducks gave us eggs, which were tastier and larger, but laid with less frequency. Soon we realized they were more pets than animals of utility, which made what happened next all the more unfortunate.

I'd heard that coyotes cruised the neighborhood and that raccoons scavenged garbage. But we made no extra effort to protect our flock. Then, one rainy morning, my roommates and I woke to find our roost massacred. Chicken and duck carcasses were strewn about the wet ground, their little necks broken and their livers gored. Wet and bloodied feathers mixed with earth. Only Fidel survived the assassination. She sat in silence. We could see the flesh of her neck from the clawed attack. The house fell silent. The mood grew somber. We discussed the situation: What kind of animal might be capable of killing six birds in one sitting? Raccoons? Possum? Coyotes? We weren't skilled trackers. We had no way of knowing,

The previous night, we'd agreed to have brunch. It was unclear if anyone had an appetite, or if, out of respect for the dead, no one mentioned it. But I was hungry and needed some levity, so I spoke up. “Guys, I know everyone is bummed out. It really is a tragic event. But we can't just sit around and be sad all day; the ducks would want for us to be happy, just like they were until they met their unfortunate end. Maybe we should go out and get some brunch.” I paused. No one responded. I continued. “So, if anyone would like to join me, I know this really great Chinese place that serves a fantastic Peking duck.” The joke did not go over well. The atmosphere got tense, and I thought it best to leave.

While I was eating, my roommates did the dirty work of collecting and burying our poor birds’ limp bodies in the cold, soaked dirt. It was poor judgment on my part, like my comic timing. As a group, we also failed to predict the obvious and fortify our yard, because whatever predator killed our birds came back for poor Fidel a few days later. Besides the equipment, empty coop and occasional loose feather, our backyard was empty.

Like the parent who hastily buys a cuter puppy to replace the dog that was run over by the mailman, we replaced the ducks — with goats.

Now, I was totally against this. But our newest roommate, who was also the new girlfriend of the Vermonter, was persistent. She sent us adorable pictures of baby goats and recipes for making our own cheese. The house committed to all of the responsibilities that come with large animals, but still, I protested. If we couldn't even keep chickens alive, how were we going to deal with goats? But the group overruled me, and they built an impressive shed-sized barn out of five-ply and two-by-fours, into which they trotted not one, but two goats.

It was a mother and her kid — a package deal. The kid was a cute. It had auburn fur and white spots and a spunky energy, and like all miniature things, it was inherently adorable. Continuing our bizarre naming tradition, we called her JonBenét Ramsey. Mama Goat had thick grey fur and was over 200 pounds and intimidating, so we just called her Mama Goat.

Only the Vermonter had previous milking experience. Some of us weren't even breastfed as children. It took a lot of tugging and YouTubing to get the milk out of those swollen udders, but in the end, it was only me and the Vermonter who could manage. You'd grab one or both teats with your thumb and forefinger. Then you'd pinch the teat at its base where it connects to the udder, kind of like when you're holding the end of an untied water balloon. Then, you'd roll your fingers in descending order, and presto! Warm and creamy goat's milk. Between the challenge of squeezing and the metallic rumble of the aluminum bucket, keeping goats made me feel like a real farmer.

My mother didn't approve of us drinking raw milk. On the phone, she told me it was reckless, and it might have been. Unpasteurized milk can contain harmful bacteria like E. coli, Listeria, Salmonella and Cryptosporidium. In 2012, three Portland-area children were hospitalized with E. coli infections from drinking raw milk from a farm in Clackamas County.

To protect the public from bacteria, twenty states have banned the sale of raw milk, and thirteen have restricted purchases. Retail distribution of raw goat's milk is permitted in Oregon, but you can get unpasteurized sheep or cow’s milk by directly purchasing it from an Oregon farm. Still, my roommates and I went on drinking it. We made goat-milk lattes and homemade goat cheese and poured goat milk over late-night bowls of Cap'N Crunch. Although I didn't go deep into the science, I believed that certain bacteria and nutrients in unpasteurized milk helped with my digestion. Cow’s milk always gave me unpleasant after-effects. The goat milk had no consequences. None of my roommates got physically sick either, but we did start to lose our minds.

Turns out goats require significant attention. When deprived of it and kept in a relatively small yard, they began to bleat incessantly and would stare through the back windows with their devilish, flattened eyeballs. It was creepy and annoying, but it was our fault because we hadn't done our research, so the goats didn't get what they needed, and we got more than we bargained for.

To give them exercise, we once took them on a walk with leashes to a nearby park. Fifty feet ahead of us, a mother was pushing her baby in a carriage. Our mama goat got excited and lunged at the woman's baby, her udders swinging back and forth. It took all our might to stop her, and after apologizing to the frightened woman profusely, we slunk back to the house and decided we couldn’t walk goats on leashes. But we were only able to offer them 800 square feet of backyard.

That couldn’t solve the problem we'd created. When the Bostonian broke his tibia and fibula in a basketball game, he was immobilized for more than three weeks; unfortunately for him, his upstairs room faced the backyard. The goats, normally home alone throughout the day, somehow sensed that someone was present. So they bleated at the Bostonian for hours on end. Their shrill cries sounded exactly like a candy-fiending little boy shouting “Mom!” in a supermarket. In constant pain, the bedridden Bostonian couldn't escape. No earplugs would muffle the sound. If he tried to drown them out with music, they only seemed to bleat louder. There was one moment when he looked to his bedside table and his month's supply of codeine. *I could end it*, he thought. *I could end it all right now*.

We were ill-equipped goat stewards. We admit that. Since we were young and hungry, we formulated the most self-serving and simple plan we could: butcher the goats for Thanksgiving. To me, JonBenét looked tasty. Mama looked chewy and gamey. But this was just bravado. We couldn't do it. We wouldn't even know where to cut on their throats, let alone how to carve up their carcasses. Instead, we found saviors at an animal sanctuary who vowed to take good care of Mama and JonBenét, though I suppose they could have eaten them for Thanksgiving as well. When the sanctuary staff picked up our girls, they said they had never seen such overfed and fat goats. I couldn’t help but feel vindicated because I knew that the goats were a bad idea in the first place. Still, there was some shame in our inability to take care of sentient and social animals. They deserved better. It wasn’t the goats’ fault that they were caught up in the crossfire of house politics.

We took comfort knowing that we weren't the only city dwellers desperate to get rid of goats and poultry they shouldn't have bought in the first place. Many people in the Portland area fail at raising fowl and livestock. The plight of these unwanted animals moved Kit Collins and her husband, John, to create [Out to Pasture Sanctuary](http://www.outtopasturesanctuary.org/) ten years ago.



“Do what you can with what you got,” Kit Collins says. The Collins live in Estacada, a small town thirty miles southeast of Portland. Set on some extra acreage, their all-volunteer, nonprofit sanctuary costs the couple $1,000 a month in food, plus vet bills and hay. In September, Out to Pasture housed more than 150 animals, including thirty chickens and ducks, twenty-two pigs (eighteen were potbellies that people no longer wanted and the other four were regular pigs that someone mistook for potbellies), twenty-five cats, two dogs, ten goats, a sheep, a donkey, a couple of llamas and more than fifty roosters. There are so many unwanted roosters that the sanctuary was no longer accepting them this fall.

“I’ve been getting three calls a week because of roosters,” Kit said. Due to their loud cock-a-doodling, roosters are illegal in Portland, and can incur a $200 fine. What upsets Kit, especially about the recent backyard chicken fad, is that, in his words, “half the chickens are born roosters. People don’t realize. It’s just so frustrating to see people buy on a whim. If you’re going to take an animal, it’s a lifelong commitment.”

So what to do with the other half? For most baby roosters, life ends once their sex is determined. Most stores order their chicks a year in advance from hatcheries. In order to establish sex, some hatcheries “sex link” the chicks — a breeding system in which males and females come out as different colors — so future roosters are immediately removed. The other, more accurate, way of sorting the pullets from cockerels is something called “vent sexing.” To do this, a vent sexer must examine what is called the vent, a part of the anatomy where both the eggs and poop exit. Only females have vents. Apparently, this method is ninety percent accurate, and a vent sexer spends over eight hours looking at chicks’ anuses. Depending on the policy of the hatchery, the unwanted cockerels are disposed of with CO2 gas or fed to raptors. Before this, we never considered the end of a baby rooster’s industrial life. We didn't think much. We just plowed on.

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Undeterred by our previous failings or Kit Collins’s comments, we purchased a new flock. The house welcomed Joan of Arc, Bizarro Joan of Arc, Madonna, Mohamed Bouazizi and Roberta F. Kennedy. These new chickens were great layers. “We're seasoned urban farmers now,” I thought, imagining myself squinting into the distance with a blade of wheat in my mouth. That was until one evening when we found Joan of Arc with a broken neck. She was walking around the garden enclosure, dragging her limp head by her side. She tried to act normally, to play it cool and hang with the rest of the roost, but a void in the pecking order had opened, and the rest of the chickens pecked callously at her and shooed her away.

We knew we had to help her. We couldn't take her to a vet, unable to imagine such a thing as a chicken neck brace. We decided on a mercy killing. But who would do it? When the question arose, most of us kept silent. My experience with killing was limited to filleting fish. No one seemed able. Then, the most recent addition to our abode, a twenty-three-year-old outdoorswoman from Houston, stood up.

“I'll do it,” she said.

“Do you know how?” I asked.

“Of course. Just get me a knife and a cutting board.” She took Joan of Arc in her arms, comforting her with soft words and the gentle bounce you give to babies. I handed her a kitchen knife and lay the cutting board on top of a table outside. Quickly, she put the forsaken bird on the block and put the blade to her neck. This event was the most traumatizing part of our urban farm experiment. Joan of Arc's beheading was less the clean lethal stroke of a guillotine and more like cutting a tomato with a blunt knife. Rather than raising the blade and striking with one quick blow, the Texan pressed her palm down on the blunt edge of the knife. She tried her best, but her ability was limited. Joan of Arc's neck crunched, but her head did not separate. That took some sawing with a knife that, in hindsight, should have been sharpened. Our bird deserved better, but there was no turning back at that point. Finally, with the butchering complete, the now headless corpse began to violently shake. Our roommate held our bird by the legs as her wings flapped and blood spurted in all directions for a very long thirty seconds. Then I saw the head. Joan of Arc’s eyes protruded and her tongue, which I didn't even know chickens had, stuck out the side of her beak. Her mouth opened and closed like some animatronic Jim Henson nightmare puppet gasping for air. I didn't know how anyone would have the appetite to eat the bird.

We meant for Joan of Arc’s end to be merciful, but we took it as an opportunity to learn how to properly butcher a chicken – which exists, of course, but Portland’s abundant vegan and animal activist groups can make that difficult.

The year before Joan of Arc's death, one of my college classmates, Gabe Holt, planned to use school funds to teach a student-led class on properly slaughtering and preparing a chicken for consumption. Provocatively titled Chokin' the Chicken, Gabe's class invited controversy. The title was adolescent and probably regrettable, but the class's contents were legitimate. One student protested and demanded Gabe cancel his course. When he ignored her pleas, she responded by contacting the Portland branch of the Animal Defense League. The ADL rallied members and like-minds with a mass email claiming they would “be bearing witness and protesting the Reed College chicken slaughter starting at 11:00 a.m. Please come around 10:30 if you are interested in letting Gabriel Holt know that his murderous lifestyle will not be tolerated as a college course. Let's let the public know what is going on and let Gabriel know that he can not murder without consequence.”

The student who hoped to stop the course also gave the Portland ADL Gabe's full name, address and contact information. Leading up to the class, Gabe started receiving threatening online messages from people who were enraged at the idea of someone killing a chicken for consumption. A sample:

*“You somehow think your life matters more than theirs? I disagree. Unlike you, I am capable of looking past the differences to see who is really there. And in your case, you who would dismiss the lives of others because they are not like you, well you can rot. I choose to fight for the chickens. They are better than you are.”*

*“Yours would be the same voices telling me how ‘unimportant’ lynchings were a century ago. You would be asking why we don't protest something more ‘important’ if we gave a shit about slavery. You'd be denigrating those who fought for the rights of women to be treated as equals, or those who fought against the Nazis in the 1930s. That's just who you are. Sad”*

In light of the passionate opposition, Gabe canceled the course. But on the Sunday morning when the course was originally scheduled, Gabe woke to find that someone had broken into his backyard in Southeast Portland and stolen his chickens. What made this even more upsetting was that those were not the chickens Gabe was planning to slaughter; those were his egg-laying birds. He had contacted a farm that sold old hens for slaughtering, but he canceled the purchase when the course was abandoned. Gabe never identified the thieves, who surely saw themselves not as thieves but emancipators, but he hoped that the birds were not “released into the wild” as they wouldn't have lasted a day on the mean streets of Portland.

Eventually, my roommates and I all graduated college and made our way back east. We left the birds in the care of the new residents. Every few months or so I’d get word that another bird had passed, cause of death unknown. I felt sad. Not like my dog died sad, or even some formerly-relevant-celebrity-death sad. What I felt was closer to the grief one feels when your favorite dive bar gets foreclosed. It felt like the end of an era.

Now, across the continent in Brooklyn, the only creatures I shepherd are bedbugs and mice. For the former, I have no sympathy; for the latter, I attempt to humanely catch and remove them, only to fail and develop a bloodlust for killing the sneaky rodents.

Still, when I stare out the window of my New York apartment, I see a tiny plot of unused land and think, “I could totally put a beehive in that corner right there.”

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