



First the chicken, then the egg



When was the last time you tasted a really good egg?
Chances are it was fresh from a healthy, happy and free-roaming chicken
– the kind you might find in your own backyard.

In the current global food market, the source of your food and the treatment it has received on its journey to our supermarket shelves is often obscured. A little digging beneath the surface often reveals violations of animal rights, the use of potentially harmful antibiotics or hormones and transportation mileage that makes your humble mango seem more like a carbon grenade.

Increasingly, consumers are demanding transparency about the foods they eat and purchase. While this trend, known as 'food vetting', is bringing traceability and improvements to the production process, the result can sometimes mean expensive products.

For city dwellers, chicken ownership is a popular alternative, offering significantly reduced costs, traceability and the best part – an assurance of fresh and delicious eggs. As such, the 'urban chicken movement' is the result of a push towards increasingly self-reliant and sustainable local food economies.

Rentachook in Sydney and BookAChook in Melbourne are two companies providing city dwellers with try-before-you-buy chicken packages. The idea is that you can rent chickens and a coop for a number of weeks and if you like it, buy it. The trial basis and ease of access they provide have overcome significant mental and financial obstacles and chicken-trialling city folk are enthusiastically taking the next step into fully fledged chicken ownership.

Dave Ingham started Rentachook in 2001 as a hobby. Now a healthy business employing six people, Dave runs Rentachook for three days a week while still working part-time as an environmental consultant.

"I'm a bit of an evangelist, I know", says Dave, speaking of his beloved poultry. "I like working with them and I like getting paid to do it," he says.

Dave estimates his business has sold upwards of 3,000 coops with chickens, and has provided an additional 3,000 households with chickens since its inception. His try-before-you-buy business model has 90 per cent of chicken renters making the transition to ownership.

"It is one of those rare, genuinely innovative ideas that supplies a need," he says. "Customers come up to me and say: 'I have thought about having chickens for years, but I haven't gone the whole hog to set it up for fear that I wouldn't

like it. When I found out about your business I thought... fantastic!"

In Dave's opinion, the benefits of urban chicken ownership are numerous. The eggs taste delicious: "It really is quite a revelation for some people," he says. Chickens are also biomechanical recycling machines that will turn any scraps you feed them into fertile garden manure. "In a week they can go through 10 to 15 kilos of putrescible waste that would have ended up in landfill," explains Dave. Food mileage is another consideration: "There are no petroleum products used in walking to the backyard coop"; they make great pets: "The kids love 'em"; and finally, they cost almost nothing to keep.

Adding to the sustainability of the enterprise, the coops Dave constructs are all assessed against rigid sustainability criteria, from the choice of NSW grown, milled and processed timber, through to the use of tin and recycled pram wheels.

BookAChook, which started in Melbourne in 2006, is run on the same premise. The company supplies week-to-week or monthly rental packages, 75 per cent of which result in a sale. The packages are popular with childcare centres, schools and families with young children; and the rented incubators, science-fiction-style contraptions in which fertile eggs hatch, prove to be quite the educational tool.

Rentachook and BookAChook's websites are filled with educational tips and rental packages come with one-on-one training, information booklets and phone assistance; but beware, their enthusiasm for sustainability, community and homegrown goodness is highly contagious. **ENI**



DID YOU KNOW?
Chickens were first domesticated in Thailand some 8,000 to 10,000 years ago, but didn't appear in Western Europe until 1000 BC.



>> HOW IT WORKS

RENTACHOOK, SYDNEY:

Pay \$100 plus a \$280 deposit for two chickens, an eco-coop and food. If after six weeks you like it, you keep the chickens and coop, and Rentachook keeps the deposit. 0409 246 651 www.rentachook.com.au

BOOKACHOOK, MELBOURNE:

Pay \$55 a week or \$165 a month for two hens and a flat-roofed coop, food and more. Renters who buy get 20% off poultry package sale prices (\$695-\$750) or an additional chook free. 0425 785 233 www.bookachook.com

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Standard chickens usually lay one egg per day, although Bantams lay less frequently and the eggs are smaller.

Never have just one chicken because it will get lonely. Try and introduce new chickens two at a time to prevent bullying from resident chickens.

There are several different breeds, but it's best to stick to one. Bantams are well suited to city life as they are small and less destructive than bigger birds.

Eggs that come from free-range chickens are often far tastier than eggs you buy in the supermarket. The yolk is usually a richer, more vibrant yellow; many studies indicate they have better nutritional value.

Feed your chickens every morning with a mixture of commercial chickenfeed and kitchen scraps. Avoid feeding them anything that is high in fat or salt, or that is spoiled.

Check with your local council: some have restrictions on the number you can keep, and most do not allow roosters because of the noise.