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This Canadian Family Bought 10 Chickens To Feed And Educate Their Kids

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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The Archambault family eats a lot of eggs.

“We go through four dozen eggs per week, just for breakfast,” says Amy, mother of three children aged 14, 12 and 10. “It’s the best way to fuel my athletes in the morning,” she says, quickly summarizing the family’s athletic itinerary: competitive swimming (daughter); rock-climbing (son); and cycling (husband plus another daughter).

Amy competed in the International Triathlon World Championships a few years back and leads (suddenly online) fitness classes from home.

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A few weeks ago, Amy made a decision: her family needed chickens. “It’s \$12.60 for a chicken. Each chicken lays one egg a day for a year,” she says. “When we take into account the cost of the chicken feed and the cost of the chickens, they pay for themselves in three weeks.” But what began as a decision to save money on protein soon evolved into a core component of the children’s pandemic-induced home-school curriculum.

From day one, Amy included her kids in the process. She drove her pickup truck from her rural home outside Waterdown (Ontario) to a chicken-seller in Elmira. “I obviously had no clue what I was doing because I was the only person who showed up with her kids.”

"But what began as a decision to save money on protein soon evolved into a core component of the children’s pandemic-induced home-school curriculum."

They put the chickens into banker’s boxes and kept them in the cab of the truck on the way home so they wouldn’t get swept from the truck bed by the wind on the highway. Her husband, Pete, built a chicken coop, complete with perches and nesting boxes, from scrap wood they had lying around. “They’re super low maintenance,” says Amy, which is handy because they’re not exactly seasoned farmers. “What kinds of chicken are they?” I ask at one point. “They’re brown,” she quips. At one point I use the word “ornery” to describe what I imagined full-grown chickens to be like.

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(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/food/view/cooking-with-kids-how-to-make-your-own-pasta#Recipe>).

“They’re surprisingly sweet,” says Amy. “It’s nice to have your morning tea and watch the chickens run around.” At least one family member has been caught singing to them.

The work that is required in topping up feed, cleaning the coop and gathering eggs is split up amongst the children. Alice, Amy’s eldest, has taken to her role as a chicken-keeper. She was the first to name a chicken: Houdini. “We put her in the pen and she flew right out,” says Amy, “it’s surprising how far a chicken can fly.” The others eventually earned their names too: Hollandaise, Scramble, Betty...

"She was the first to name a chicken: Houdini."

Egg-collecting, cooking, and the biology of avian menstruation have become a cornerstone of Amy's home-school curriculum over the past four months. "The thickness of the shells is a sign of the chicken's health," she says, flipping into teacher mode.

Letting the chickens run around their pen outside the coop allows them to eat insects. Toss in some vegetable scraps from the dinner table and you've got a solid egg. "You can't just knock the shell and expect it to crack. You've really got to break it apart," she says with obvious pride. "The yolks are dark and yellow. They're really dense and have a thicker consistency. And they taste sooo good!"

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(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/six-by-sixteen-healthy-eating-2020>).

Using the eggs and the vegetables from their modest patch may have begun as an exercise in budgeting, but Amy hopes to instil in her children a deep appreciation of food: where it comes from, how it's prepared and how both affect the nutritional content. The family also tends a vegetable garden on the property. Each child is assigned a certain section and responsible for its production. "Food is always a constant conversation in our house," says Amy.

I ask delicately what they'll do with the chickens in a year or two when they no longer lay eggs. "That's going to be a family decision when it comes time," says Amy. "The kids know where their food comes from though," she says, confident that her children are becoming more aware of the realities of eating meat and animal products.

Knowing the chickens that produced their morning eggs allows for the Archambaults to appreciate their meals more. "You feel like you need to make something special with those eggs," says Amy. "It nurtures us and brings us together as a family."

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