

TASTE

Fresh from the Farm | *Second in an occasional series featuring products from the area*



From left, Sierra Crisher, 11, Erica, David, 14 months, Dave and their pet Jack, a one year old Cochon Bantam rooster, share their Carrollton home with several animals including peacocks, chickens, doves, dogs and cats.

Fowl play

Carrollton couple raises chickens for pets, food and profit

BY PRUE SALASKY
psalasky@dailypress.com | 247-4784

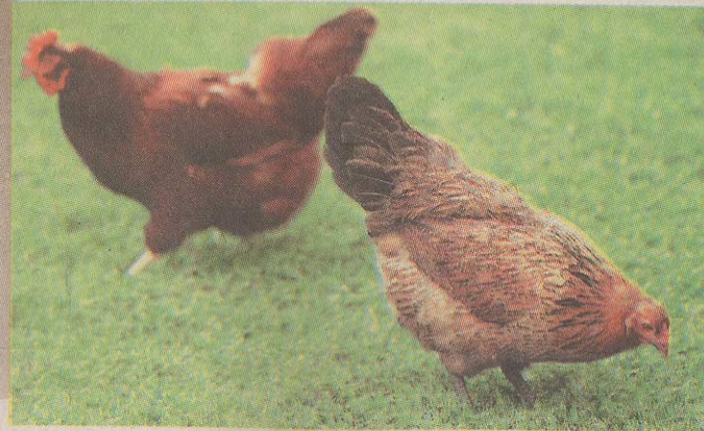
Erica Crisher hoists 14-month-old David on her hip, extends a restraining arm to Copper, a rambunctious beagle, and shoos chickens out of her path. A flock of mismatched fowl scatter and regroup, peck and preen, crow and carry on as she looks for eggs in the nesting boxes in the converted garden shed. It's a daily chore that Crisher, a computer programmer for NASA, shares with her husband, Dave. He's an avionics technician for E-2 Hawkeye planes and an instructor at

Norfolk Naval Base. They gather a dozen or so brown and blue eggs each day.

The familiar brown eggs are from the Rhode Island Reds and Hubbard Isa Browns. The mystifyingly blue-green eggs are from the South American Araucana hens, the most recent addition to the Crishers' fowl collection. The couple makes no distinction between the different-colored eggs, packaging them together randomly for sale at the weekly market in Smithfield each Saturday. "They taste the same," says Erica. "We sold nine dozen in 15 minutes the first week."

Please see FOWL/F2

A Rhode Island Red rooster, left, and Araucana hen search for bugs to eat outside the chicken coop on the Crisher's property.



Araucanas lay blue eggs while the Rhode Island Reds lay brown eggs, but despite the color difference they taste and look the same on the inside.

Dr. Dolittle-style menagerie started in 2002

From a peak of 20 dozen eggs a week, their flock's yield is down to about six dozen currently. Coyotes have taken some of their hens, and those from the original stock are now past their egg-laying prime. Chickens typically lay an egg a day between the ages of 6 and 18 months, and then they start to taper off until they stop laying by 2 years.

It has been two years since the couple moved from Hampton to Hidden Acre Farm, a 1-acre smallholding just yards away from Route 17 in Carrollton. "We decided we wanted a couple of chickens," says Erica, who grew up in Pittsburgh, "but you have to order a minimum of 25 chicks for shipping purposes — so they stay warm."

And that's how their Dr. Dolittle-style menagerie began in the spring of 2002 with an order of 25 mixed male and female Rhode Island Reds from Townline Hatchery in Zeeland, Mich. Dave grew up in Michigan, where his father raised and kept several hundred chickens from the same hatchery.

The energetic couple — she's 27, he's 31 — then added the Isa Browns. Next came ringneck doves and an aviary to house them. (Dave also makes and markets birdhouses.) Somehow two gloriously showy peacocks joined the mix. Last summer it was Muscovy ducks and African goslings that Dave hand-raised before coyotes took eight of the 10. This year's additions include the blue-egg laying Araucanas; the white rooster has the classic Y-shape of an ornament, while the hens have the rich brown coloring of pheasants. Now Pilgrim goslings, the country's only



Erica Crisher feeds her chickens in the chicken coop that currently houses about 25 hens that she cares for with her husband Dave in Carrollton. PHOTO BY HEATHER S. HUGHES/DAILY PRESS

native geese, Rouen ducklings and a Cayuga duck have joined the motley group.

In all, four roosters strut among the two dozen hens. To keep their numbers down, the Crishers butcher the roosters and the older hens for meat. "The ones with names are pets, they're separate," explains Dave, indicating Jack, a one-eyed black Cochinchina bantam that he recently took on an outing to Petsmart. Also spared from the table are all the geese and Barry White, the duck with "the smoother, deeper quack."

Straightforward, and with a practical bent, Erica says, "Free-range chickens are really lean, really good and juicy without a lot of fat." She concedes

that her mother, unlike her, has a hard time eating chicken at her house. Erica learned how to dress a fresh bird by helping her grandmother on a succession of Thanksgiving Days. "I have small hands, which really helps," she says.

The free-roaming fowl, secured in their coop at night, live on grass and bugs supplemented by grain feed from Southern States Farmer Supply Co. "They're also great mousers, and you should see them with frogs," says Erica. "We try to keep them as organic as possible." A sign by the vine-covered entrance arch declares the farm as a "backyard wildlife habitat," certified by the National Wildlife Federation

The hens don't receive any additional calcium or grit for the shells, whose color is determined genetically and not affected by their feed.

Reactions to the blues vary. Most think they're cool, though one potential customer asked Dave if he had some "monster robins." Others are more tentative about the natural, fertilized free-range nature of the eggs.

"One person at work, I had to convince them to eat it. They didn't trust it. 'If I get a little chicken in there, I'll never eat eggs again,'" Dave recalls. The Crishers eat the eggs regularly themselves. They don't keep a count on how many they consume.

"When we want them, we

About the chickens and the Crishers

The Araucana hen is known for its blue-green eggs. The South American Import is also known for being "rumpless," or having no tail. The blue shell is a genetically dominant trait that continues with interbreeding; it does not affect the color or taste of the egg itself. Originally marketed as being lower in cholesterol than white or brown eggs, there are no scientific studies to support the claim.

The hens at Hidden Acre Farm are free-range but they lay their eggs in nesting boxes, and the Crishers collect them daily. They wash the eggs in warm water and allow them to soak in bleach for 5 to 10 minutes to sterilize them before storing in the refrigerator. Their eggs will keep for up to 4 months in the refrigerator.

Their current production is at about a dozen a day, or 6 dozen a week. The Crishers do not separate the Araucanas' blue eggs from the brown eggs that their Rhode Island Reds and Hubbard Isa Browns lay.

Hens typically start laying eggs at

between 4 and 5 months old and are at their peak, laying one egg per day, from 6 months to 18 months, before tapering off. If allowed to "brood" a nest, hens stop laying until their chicks are 2 months old. It takes 21 days for eggs to hatch but hens modulate the temperature so that all the eggs in a single nest will hatch at the same time.

Hidden Acre Farm, 15028 N and N Brown Way, Carrollton
Phone: 238-8553; 332-0681 (cell); hiddenacrefarm@charter.net
Owners: Dave and Erica Crisher
For sale: Brown and blue eggs (\$2 a dozen, \$1 half dozen); figs (\$2 bag); soap (\$2); cedar birdhouses (\$10); ringneck doves (\$20 each, \$30 pair).

To purchase: Call or visit the farm in the evening or on weekends. The Crishers also have a stall at the Old Town Curb Market in Smithfield. The market hours are from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturdays during the season. For information, call 357-3902. ■

just go out and get them," says Dave. He likes the eggs fried over-easy and in omelets. His daughter, Sierra, 11, prefers them scrambled with cheese, while Erica favors them poached.

The hens lay year round, unaffected by the weather. So, in the fall and winter, when the market is closed, the Crishers trade their surplus eggs with neighbors for other goods or give them to colleagues at work.

They also let some of the hens "brood" a nest, thereby allowing the eggs to hatch. Inside the house, where Dave is finishing installing hardwood floors and crown molding in the living room, two cats watch an incubator hatching another generation of egg-layers.

With David asleep on her shoulder, Erica distracts the cats with dinner, takes Copper, the beagle, outside, and grabs some feed to toss to the flock. ■