



Chickens FOR RENT

Text and photographs by Daniel Stainer

RENT THE CHICKEN STARTED NINE YEARS AGO after Philip Tompkins and his wife, Jenn, conducted a Google search for “crazy business ideas.”

In 2013, Phil was an information technology professional, and Jenn’s job with a motorcycle research program was ending. They were moving from the city to the country, where they both decided they’d be happier working from home—long before it was a trendy thing.

Their Google search brought them to a Small Business Administration website that suggested starting a chicken-rental service—an idea that wasn’t so odd given the couple’s experience raising backyard chickens.

The Tompkins knew this unorthodox idea was worth pursuing after getting feedback from friends and family, many of whom had tried raising their own backyard chickens but lacked the equipment and knowledge.

So they did what any sane couple would do with a zany business idea: They ran with it. Working out of their cute suburban farmhouse near Pittsburgh, the husband-and-wife team figured out how

Raising backyard chickens can be a challenge when you don’t know what to do. The Tompkins offer a temporary solution to the homesteading urge: short-term rental of the hens and the coop—with a built-in return option.

This couple hatched a crazy idea... and now their business ‘egg’cels

to leverage an off-the-wall idea into “Rent the Chicken,” the largest chicken and hatching rental operation in the world. Eight years and thousands of rentals later, the Tompkins—affectionately known to customers as Homestead Phil and Homestead Jenn—say they have no regrets.

“Over the years, we’ve rented chickens to NASCAR Cup Series winners, famous musicians, NFL head coaches and even bigwig executives from the television industry,” Jenn says. “Everyone wants to try something different, and people love the fact that our service is completely turnkey. We basically show up with a coop, supplies and chickens that are ready to lay eggs—and poof! You’re a backyard chicken farmer.”

A Community Affair

FOR THE TOMPKINS, HOWEVER, their rental company is about much more than chickens and farm-fresh eggs. It’s about bringing meaning to people’s lives. Homestead Jenn’s eyes tear up as she recalls the time they rented to a family with a severely autistic son.

“One of the hens laid an egg while we were setting up, and the son displayed a perfectly proper

emotional response, recalling specific details and showing excitement,” she says. “The child’s mom even commented that we could have taken back the chickens, and the experience would have still been considered an overwhelming success.”

The Tompkins say every family has a connection story about how the chickens got their names, the funny things they’ve done and the rewards that come from raising these curious and friendly animals.

A few miles outside of downtown Pittsburgh in the quaint neighborhood of Point Breeze, three families gather in Dan Scheid’s backyard to say goodbye to Esther and Tanner, who will be heading back to the Tompkins’ homestead for end-of-season wintering. For the past few years, these families have been taking turns raising the chickens, with each household dividing their time in eight-week increments.

If you ask why they chose to rent, they would tell you that they not only love the idea of being close to a sustainable food source but also enjoy the sense of community that renting can foster.

“Point Breeze is a neighborhood where kids are running in and out of each other’s





backyards,” neighbor Rebecca Walter-Toews says. “Having chickens around gives people something to talk about—and hearing them in the morning is almost therapeutic.”

Raising chickens is a real community affair. Even the neighborhood pets get in on the action—from the mesmerized cats that watch the chickens to the dogs that engage in playful banter alongside the children.

Kids in the neighborhood describe the chickens as cute, fun and fluffy. For par-

ents, raising chickens allows their children to experience an empathetic connection to the cycle of life—to understand where the eggs come from and to learn from the ritual of taking care of animals that are dependent on them for their well-being.

Taking care of the chickens only requires a few minutes per day: You move and clean the portable coop, make sure the chickens have food, provide water and collect the eggs. Many renters also love giving their birds supervised outdoor free-range time while keeping a watch-

ful eye out for predators, such as hawks and foxes.

Across town in Fox Chapel, Brooke Kerschbaumer and her daughter have rented chickens for two years and think of their four birds as family. Sonny, Ruffles, Rosy and Ginger give them eggs, and Kerschbaumer and her daughter provide love in return.

“The eggs are mind-blowingly delicious,” Kerschbaumer says. “Even if you went to the store and purchased a pasture-raised, cage-free, organic egg, it



wouldn't taste the same. They also bake much better, resulting in a softer, fluffier texture."

How It Works

THE TOMPKINS HAVE MADE it easy for anyone to get started with the Rent the Chicken program. With nationwide coverage available through their extensive network of highly trained affiliates, they are proud to report that there are few places in the United States that can't be serviced.

Reservations can be taken via phone



The kit comes with a coop, supplies and two or four chickens, so renters can begin right away with checking for eggs each morning. (above) Rent the Chicken owners Phil and Jen Tompkins have found themselves without a surplus of chickens at the end of the season, as returning chickens find new homes, and others are adopted by their caretakers.

or on the Rent the Chicken website, rentthechicken.com. The customer support team contacts a nearby affiliate to schedule delivery of a portable Amish-built or other handcrafted coop along with all the supplies and two to four healthy young hens that are already laying eggs. Affiliate partners are typically full-fledged farmers, hobby farmers or homesteaders like Phil and Jenn who are looking for supplemental income.

Affiliate partners pay a network subscription fee, which gives them access to a dedicated sales and support call center, specialized entrepreneurial training backed by proven concepts, marketing material and custom attire, and vehicle branding. There's even a yearly conference where affiliates from across the nation get together for two days to discuss chickens.

Rental periods typically last five or six months, depending on location, and are extremely affordable—with a standard package costing \$475. When the rental period ends, affiliates pick everything up with no hassles.

Renters looking to continue with their

backyard chicken farming journey also have the option to adopt the chickens at the end of the season for a small fee. Homestead Phil and Homestead Jenn typically don't end up with a lot of chickens that don't have homes; returned chickens often either go to new renters or get adopted. The Tompkins like to joke that they don't hold a big BBQ at the end of the season.

CHICKEN STATS BY THE NUMBERS

1,000: number of baby chicks that are hatched each year in the incubator program in the Pittsburgh region

80: the number of ticks a chicken can eat per hour

70: percent of rentals to individuals; the rest are delivered to schools, daycare centers, etc.

1/3: the reduction in cholesterol in eggs from rented chickens

4-5: number of eggs typically produced by a rented chicken per week

0: number of laying chickens that are typically eaten (They have a different taste than chickens raised for meat.)



Families often find themselves attached to their new charges, and end-of-season goodbyes can be difficult. Ingrid Lund, age 11 (at left) blows a kiss to Esther, who is held by her friend, Clare Scheid, also 11 years old.

In addition to the chicken rentals, the company also offers a five-week hatching rental program, which is popular with schools, education programs, senior care facilities and families wanting to rent a

heated incubator to raise baby chicks at home from scratch.

The types of people who are looking to rent chickens can't be pigeonholed—they truly come from all walks of life, from families, celebrities and urban dwellers to empty-nesters, summer camps and senior-care facilities. The Tompkins have clearly tapped into something universal.

For some people, it's about bringing a bit

of the country to the city. For others, it's a way to connect with the community or teach a child the value of sustainable living.

What started with a crazy Google search has clearly evolved into a successful home-based business—one that continues to bring joy, connection and meaning into people's lives. Maybe it's not such a crazy idea after all. ♥

—Daniel Stainer writes from Slippery Rock.