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Papa John celebrates 1,000th student at chicken workshop

By Pippa Fisher



Papa John by his coop during his March 3 workshop Photo Pippa Fisher

Proving the impact one individual can have on a community, John Kiefer, better known in these parts as Papa John, clocked his 1,000th student at his March 3 chicken workshop. It could be said his impact is far from chicken feed.

Kiefer's classes are always well attended. He is a Lafayette icon and the undisputed authority on all things chicken in Lafayette. He has been running his free classes out of his home since 2010 when, prompted by public concern for sustainability and nutrition, he first introduced his chicken workshop, "How to Raise your own Chickens."

Kiefer says it all started on a small family farm in the countryside beyond Menlo Park where he grew up amidst organic vegetables, a fruit orchard, vineyard and a menagerie of poultry. Keeping company with his French immigrant grandma, he connected early with the natural world.

Kiefer moved to Lafayette with his young family in the mid-1960s. He says it wasn't long before his childhood on the farm came alive once again. First came chickens and then later rabbits and pigeons. "I still look forward to feeding fresh cut greens to the rabbits and chickens in the morning, and collecting yummy eggs in the evening," he says.

It was observations of the life cycle of jungle fowl (chickens) while traveling in South America that inspired him, in collaboration with the research of a Diablo Valley College teacher, to create his own original sustainable chicken coop.

"Refinements over time produced what is now the popular Kiefer Sustainable Coop, which has no smell and needs no cleaning," Kiefer explains.

His design keeps chickens on soft soil, rather than raised up on a floor in the way of traditional premade coops. Kiefer says that the chickens like to scratch in the dirt and, by keeping them on the soil they create healthy manure by effectively digging it in for themselves. And because in this natural environment the manure dries quickly, there is no odor and no cleaning is required.

Attendees at his workshops learn all about the sustainable coop and get to examine it close up. In fact Kiefer teaches the entire A-Z of chickens, from starting young chicks in a brooding box to moving them into the coop and maintaining laying hens.

And at the March 3 workshop the group had a special treat, as Kiefer cracked open the bubbly to celebrate the milestone 1,000th attendee.

This year once again both workshops are full so he has added a third one on March 24. For Kiefer, he says, "it's important to encourage sustainable living, and this is a way of paying back to the community for the gift of living here."

The workshops are free but require registration by contacting Kiefer directly via email at chickenspapajohn@gmail.com.

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[back](#)

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