



On April 20 my chickens will turn a year old. Of the sixteen chickens who started this journey with me, fourteen have lived to celebrate this momentous occasion and four more have joined us. Happy birthday!

In late March I started looking through veterinary supply catalogs to see if I could find tiny party hats for the big occasion. I asked Jane if she would help me get the chickens outfitted for a birthday picture and she somewhat reluctantly agreed. Alas! there were no party hats to be had! This seems a blatant oversight. One can readily purchase a rainbow assortment of individual claw covers for cats or sporty shoes and plaid jackets for dogs, but it is impossible to find festive hats for chicken birthday parties. Astonishing!

When I suggested that it would not be difficult to fashion party hats here at home, Jane came up with the brilliant idea that I use technology to provide the chickens with hats, and this picture is the outcome. All in all, I suppose this was the more rational course. Considering how adept the Gandhis have become at untying my shoes, I'm guessing they would not take long to figure out how to remove their hats.

Wherever you are on Wednesday, April 20, I hope you'll take a moment to honor the girls in your own unique way: take a dust bath, scratch in the dirt, sing the *I Just Laid an Egg Anthem*, peck at some seeds, flap your wings, or otherwise express your unmitigated enthusiasm for this fabulous life.

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## CHICKEN CELEBRATION

Today is the chickens' birthday and I had a very busy day on the ranch. I was forced to leave the making of their birthday cake until the very last minute. Luckily, our neighbor Mary contributed leftover breakfast cereal and some fruit and vegetable scraps. Since I had no time to look for a birthday cake recipe, I simply had to wing it. Chicken pun intended. I assembled a few other choice ingredients and prepared the festive fare. Here is the recipe, in case you ever have to cater a chicken birthday party:

### Quick & Easy No-Bake Four-Layer Birthday Cake

*Servings: 18 Preparation Time: 5 minutes*

4 C. assorted breakfast cereal, crushed

3 C. assorted fruit and vegetable scraps (green bean tips, potato peels, apples, asparagus, wilted greens)

1 C. fancy scratch

$\frac{1}{2}$  C. grated cheddar cheese

Layer ingredients in 9 X 13 pan. Serve.

Believe it or not, I actually scrounged up eighteen cake plates, although they didn't all match. I skipped the crepe paper and napkins on account of the wind. I doubted that the chickens would know the difference.

At about six o'clock I lined the plates up in the yard and served the cake. This generated a considerable amount of interest from the birthday girls, who were eagerly waiting to be let out for the party. When I shouted *Happy Birthday* and opened the gate, the first few moments were much like those at any party; nobody quite knew what to do or how to act. Right from the start, the tableware proved problematic. No one wanted to be the first to start eating, which is not normally an issue amongst the poultry crowd. Just as some of us are stymied by the dilemma of which fork to use at a fancy dinner, the chickens faced their own challenge: with the exception of Little Red, not a one had never eaten from a plate before. The guests milled around and commented on the lovely presentation. They mingled in little conversational groupings. The extroverts kept taking one step forward and one step back, giving the impression of a somewhat disorganized chicken line dance.



Finally, one of the Penzeys broke the ice by taking a first tentative bite. The others stood by and watched with curious anxiety. Her second bite was a delectable potato peel; she exited the party at a high rate of speed, pursued by five other chickens who coveted her spud. Meanwhile, seventeen full plates of cake sat neglected. Jane, our official chicken birthday photographer, lifted one quizzical eyebrow from behind her camera. Of what exactly, she was clearly wondering, was she supposed to be taking pictures. The chase scene? The plates at which no one was eating?

"This," I said, in oblique answer to Jane's unspoken question, "is one of the weirdest things I've ever done." And then I rolled on the ground and laughed until my belly ached.

One by one the savviest chickens began to figure out that the long line of strange and brightly colored disks contained the sorts of edible treasures with which Miss Penzey was running around the yard. The birthday honorees began to cluster around the food, sampling cake and keeping a sharp eye out to make sure there wasn't a choicer serving on the plates to left and right. There were a few party poopers, but not in the traditional sense of the term. The festivities were finally in full swing.

Jane was busy snapping pictures and I was congratulating myself on a successful party when the inevitable happened: someone stepped on the edge of a plate, the plate started to tip, and the chicken flew straight up in the air with a raucous squawk. As a general rule, chickens are a jumpy bunch, and the self-preservation code dictates that you fly first and ask questions later. So it was that when Miss Holiday catapulted off her plate, all the other happy cake-eaters instantly overreacted in a frenzy of feet, feathers, squawks and cackles—a real hullabaloo—which brought the party to a screeching halt, literally. At least no one was fussing about who was responsible for the dry-cleaning bill.

I finally relinquished my dream for a civilized chicken birthday party and began dumping cake straight onto the ground and gathering up the plates. Then, of course, the real party began.

If there's any advice to be offered for the success of future chicken birthday parties, I suppose it would be this: *let them eat cake, but skip the china.*

I guess I'd better go wash dishes. At least I had enough sense not to put out any forks.

