It's not uncommon, in Yountville, California, to see a chicken cross the road in front of you as you walk or drive through town. It is a gentle reminder of the town's history, of the strong agrarian roots upon which Yountville and the Napa Valley were built. I often host my neighbor Diane Bartholomew's chickens in my front yard, and they always bring a smile to my face as they represent so much of what we find special about living here. No one understands that better than Diane herself.

–THOMAS KELLER

"I TALK TO THEM—
WELL, NOT REAL PERSONAL STUFF,"
SHE BELTS OUT A LAUGH THEN ADDS,
"YOU KNOW, THEY PROBABLY
GOSSIP."

AT 78, ARTIST AND PAINTER DIANE BARTHOLOMEW has all the gusto of an early pioneer and a vitality that belies her years.

We are sitting in what she calls her "habitat" on a leafy side street in Yountville. The habitat comprises a collection of outbuildings around a citrus-filled garden that includes her studio, living room, plein-air kitchen, airstream, chicken coop and more. Over the years, Diane has embellished the buildings with salvaged finds, rendering them part-art installation, to wit: stairs to nowhere, a boarded-up window and a zinc façade that has turned one shed into what now looks like a Thai temple. Installations abound, and Diane is forever tweaking the space. One constant, however, aside from her large paintings of Yountville's Longhorn cattle and the grim reaper (a stuffed figure—with head backward—on wheels, which Diane strategically moves around the compound), are her chickens. Diane has had chickens for as long as she can remember, and in many ways, the whole habitat serves as one big coop with the chickens roaming freely around the grounds and in and out of the various structures. As she tells me, "We all live together. It's like Doctor Doolittle. I talk to them—well, not real personal stuff." She belts out a laugh then adds, "You know, they probably gossip."

The chicken-friendly set-up means straw on the ground and bales covered in Hudson Bay blankets that serve as seating (both for chickens and humans alike). The large coop that Diane built herself is both thoughtful and wonky. A narrow tree trunk leads up to the sleeping quarters where wooden wine boxes are nailed to the wall. I learn that chickens feel safer when higher, and when I note that there are only seven boxes, she laughs and says they like to bunk with each other.

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