

Desperately Seeking Salem



In February, 2009, I started a little blog about life in Salem's underappreciated capital of Salem. Within a few months, it was Salem's favorite blog and was running as a column in the Salem Weekly alternative newspaper. Just a few months after that, it was picked up by the Statesman Journal, the newspaper of record in the Oregon capital. Here you can read the entire collection of stories from the Statesman Journal, which show what it is like to connect to a place many people call "a snooze." I have included notes at the end of each column explaining a little bit about the story or offering a new Easter egg for what was actually going on with me when I wrote the piece. You can still read the entirety of the blog at <http://desperatelyseekingsalem.wordpress.com/>

Thanks for reading!

Emily

On Making a Salem Bucket List, January 2011

For weeks now I have been seeing the same taunting link every time I open my Facebook page: Salem Bucket List.

You know the Bucket List: the urgent gathering of must-do activities that you absolutely have to accomplish before the last dying breath ekes out of your dry-lipped mouth. You can't feel okay kicking the bucket until you've done everything on that list.

Bucket Lists are a kind of New Year's resolution made for the global life. They are inherently innocuous, a way to put into words and moments your own life's goals, especially the ones that get pushed aside as you go about your daily grind.

If you're already a list-maker, you know that lists make things happen. You start writing those numbers, and by the magic of intention, the list takes over. You're just doing its bidding.

Think of it: a Salem Bucket List. Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous? Charming as things are here, my first assumption is that there aren't many world-class activities in this area that are bucket list-worthy.

But perhaps it is misguided to expect Machu Picchu in your own backyard. Bucket lists, at their very core, are about seeking out experiences that transcends the mundane. You don't need \$1,000+ airfare for that.

The thought grab held of me and wouldn't let go. A Salem Bucket List that transcends the mundane would have to include world-class activities of a personal scope that may or may not get you arrested or thrown out of your home, ways to *rage* RAGE against the dying of the light, within 10 miles or less of course.

Just how much drama does one need for a Bucket List? Do I really have to jump out of an airplane to shock myself out of my everyday existence?

The answer is no. Here are some options that came to me in a matter of minutes.

1. **Go on a date with the man, the myth, Jim Bernau, owner of Willamette Valley Vineyards.**
Problem: my husband. Solution: push forward under the guise of networking with the valley's grand poohbah of pinot.
2. **Take a hot-air balloon ride over the Valley.** Preferably during the Tulip Festival. In other words, use hot air to escape hot air.
3. **Throw a gala event in Reed Opera House's Trinity Ballroom.** I'm looking for sponsors! Great branding opportunity!
4. **See Salem through Eric Earley's eyes.** The lead singer of Blitzen Trapper spent his childhood here, and I hear he is writing a memoir about it. Perhaps he's up for a walking tour.
5. **Hold a mass picnic on the State Hospital lawn.** Salemites used to do this en masse, why shouldn't I be the first one to resurrect it?
6. **Have my own urban goat from which I make my own cheese.** If a Bucket List item involves changing city code, consider scratching it.
7. **End hunger in the valley.** Sigh. Sometimes the world's inescapable needs eclipse your quest for fun.
8. **Finally visit Deepwood Estates.** There is no good reason why a woman who dragged her husband to 5 historic homes on their honeymoon and who donned a hoop skirt to lead tours through James Buchanan's Wheatland as a child hasn't toured Deepwood yet.
9. **Run a local 5K.** Find a local doppelganger prepared to take the baton when I wimp out at 1.5 miles.
10. **Mingle with the Fender's Blue Butterflies at Baskett Slough.** Every bucket list should have an item celebrating the beauty of the ephemeral—or in this case, a chance to get cuted out by a mating chase.

That's my list, for now. They seem to fall into things I've always wanted to do, things I've never gotten around to doing, and things I'm not currently in a position to do. Between the bullet points is where you find the doable meeting the improbable, the ridiculous thumbing its nose at the possible.

The taunt of the Salem Bucket List link on Facebook finally wore me down, though.

I clicked on the link.

The one with the tiny, maudlin, JPEG of a sunset.

And was led to a site called LivingSocial, a daily coupon site much like Groupon that emails deals to your inbox.

Okay, so what happens you invite someone else to suggest items for your Bucket List?

Among other great "Things to Do," you get a deal for 88% off six sessions of hair removal "for one area" (your mind naturally wanders towards your hairiest parts). Basically, you invite spam into your life with arms wide open. Portland spam, since LivingSocial isn't actually working with any businesses in Salem, yet.

I shall not go gently into that good night driving to Portland to rage against that strangely hirsute spot on my left leg. Even if living means dying a little more every second, any Bucket List I pursue will be my own.

**Jim Bernau sent me a dozen red roses after reading the column, which I can tell you was the highlight of my Salem life up until that point. We never did go on that date, though we did share a really awkward hug at a press event later that year.*

Falling for the Third Wave of Coffee, February 2011

It is a truth universally acknowledged that an up-and-coming city neighborhood with a rising claim to coolness must be in want of a decent coffee shop.

Whether you call that funky strip emerging north of city center the "Broadway District," the "Jason Lee Quarter," "Salem's Little Italy," or my personal favorite, the industrially chic "Carpet District," the area was primed for the arrival of Broadway Coffee, the first Salem coffeehouse to embrace third-wave coffee culture.

This is the level of coffee connoisseurship where the drinker approaches coffee drinking much as a wine lover sips pinot. In other words, maxing on Maxwell House? You're a first-waver. Still stoked by Starbucks? You're second wave. But if your turn to the dark side includes a growing interest in single-origin coffees shipped from individual farms, coffees named after the farmer who tends the beans, then you've reached the third wave.

Long before I began drinking coffee I understood there was something special about the drink when my mother would come home, brew herself a cup and enforce our home's single most consistent rule:

"Don't talk to me when I'm holding this coffee cup."

I've since moved with the market through the waves, cycling through Maxwell House vanilla flavored pre-ground, lattes and cappuccinos from Starbucks and Peet's and everything in between, before finally seeing the light in Stumptown Coffee Roasters.

Until recently, third wavers like me told tales of driving all the way to Portland for the kind of coffee you could rhapsodize about, but with the arrival of Stumptown Coffee Roasters at three locations in Salem – Salem's Latte, Clockworks Café and Cultural Center, and now, Broadway Coffeehouse – there is really no reason left for a coffee addict to leave town.

I've watched Broadway Coffee since it opened. In the beginning, it catered to a clientele of church-goers from next door, but the business has since been setting itself apart not through couches and décor and latte art (they do a strangely compelling foam Indian chief) but through an almost religious attention to the finer points of coffee brewing. As word has gotten out, I've had to fight for room on its sofas with families, retirees, displaced hipsters, the Corban University crowd and, yes, quite a few of those former day-trippers to Portland.

"Salem could use a new approach to coffee," Broadway's barista and assistant manager Jesse Hayes tells me as he prepares his grounds for one of his regular tastings at Broadway Coffee.

It is 1:00 on a Sunday afternoon, and the crowd is descending on the coffee counter. We gather around Hayes's new drip pouring station, a two-tiered, four-cone apparatus that just came on the market.

It can take as long as four to five minutes to brew an individual cup of coffee using the drip pour method, but as a process, it doesn't get more pared-down.

"It's simple and straight-forward and allows us to control all of the brew methods," Hayes says, handing porcelain demitasses to the group.

Hayes measures out exactly 23 grams/8 oz. of beans on a tiny scale of Stumptown's newest varietal, a bean grown by a 70-year-old Columbian farmer named Antonio Zuñiga. He sends some beans through his burr grinder to season the machine and heats his water to a temperature between 195 to 205 degrees Fahrenheit. Then he runs some water through the filter, and pours the grounds in and invites the crowd to sniff them.

"Smell that? It's fragrance," Hayes explains. "When it is brewed, it becomes aroma."

With a twirl of his wrist, Hayes pours a spiral of steaming water onto the grounds, making sure to moisten the grounds evenly. The act creates the brewing process's "bloom," the point at which the coffee gets extracted from the beans.

The coffee brewed from this particular varietal is said to have notes of cocoa, apple, black currant and plum. In fact, it tastes a little like your coffee has been walked through a sunbathed orchard and served in a vestal virgin's cupped hands.

(Classic third waver hyperbole).

Hayes pours another varietal, this time the Ethiopian Yirgacheffe Adado, and invites comparisons. Do they like it? What does it taste like? Can you taste the Meyer lemon notes?

Some blank stares. Some smiles. For most people, coffee just tastes good. Or not good. You like it, or you don't like it.

This act, which requires translating sensory experiences to language, is never easy. Education of a palate can take a generation, the pairing of words to sensation, a lifetime.

His coffee palate may be developed, but even a tastemaker like Hayes isn't sure what to call those flavors emerging in Salem's neighborhood to the north.

Me, either. But I know I'm tasting ripeness, blossoming, more than just a hint of zest.

**I still drink my coffee at Broadway Coffeehouse every time I am in the capital; in McMinnville, I've fallen for Chrysalis Coffee, which has pretty much ruined me for all other coffee, forever.*

Desperately Seeking Scent in the State Capital, March 2011

A few weeks ago, I discovered that I had lost my sense of smell. The scent of onions sizzling in a skillet? Complete emptiness. My toddler's freshly washed hair? Nothing. Hyacinths and daffodils popping out of the front beds? Oblivion.

Call it collateral damage of an uncommon common cold, but after three weeks, I had convinced myself that my sense of smell was never coming back. Never one to wallow, I began cataloguing all of the things in life that are not even worth living if you can't smell them, a list that includes pretty much everything.

At one point, it hit me: Time will always march forward without signposts and way stations because I will never, ever experience the changing of the seasons through the transformation of the natural world.

I'll never smell a cherry tree again.

The house I grew up in had two cherry trees growing in its backyard, male and female – gnarly, stolid things bearing fruit that was stolen away by birds before we could ever taste it. I used those trees as goalposts for soccer games and barely gave them a second thought.

Cherries changed for me when I moved to Washington, D.C., where we love our cherry trees to death – literally. There, come April every year, a million people crowd under a canopy of pink and white blossoms blooming in quiet hurrah around the Tidal Basin. The visitors stomp, shuffle and trample their way through the trees’ root systems, packing the soil around them tight and destroying them in a slow, claustrophobic embrace.

Then there’s the people – oh the people! Even tiny, aging women with mighty elbows and cameras as large as their heads see no problem in pushing you out of their way in the nation’s capital to get a glimpse of bigger, pinker, fluffier trees than the one they are standing next to.

If I ever see that grandma again, she’s going down!

Once you understand this, it is practically impossible to descend upon the trees in D.C.’s Tidal Basin without any feeling other than dread. But as with everything in this world, even education and experience cannot destroy the urge to get closer to something beautiful. I went every year anyway, tiptoeing through the tourists to get my taste of spring’s rah rah rarest moment.

My experience of cherry trees in Salem is – dare I say it? – better. Yes, people in the Cherry City are excited about the blossoming of the cherry trees at our capitol’s mini-Mall, but not squash-your-neighbor excited. They draw crowds, yes, but not madding ones.

“This is a state park, not just the grounds around the state government,” explains Jim Bader, park manager for the State Capitol State Park. “The landscape of our Mall is designed to replicate Washington, D.C., but we’ve got a long, linear, open space flanked by cherries.”

This space arrangement seems to make all of the difference, for the cherries, and for me. Where once I crowded in around them, now, I have room to walk among them. Instead of a steady blitz of seizure-inducing camera flashes, I’ve got sunlight peaking in a brilliant flash from behind the clouds and then hiding itself, again and again. Instead of learning to hate people while growing to love a cherry tree, come spring every year, I find myself laying down on the grass on the Capitol Mall with my head propped up on my elbow just watching people do their own falling in love. Even the trees themselves seem better – healthier, fluffier, pinker.

Lately, I’ve been driving by the capital nearly every day in anticipation. In the first weeks of my life without scent, I held back a sob and turned my head away as I turned onto Marion Street. As March progressed, I willed myself to look any time I drove east on Center Street and saw buds showing a pinkie tip of color. Just this week, I felt that vernal popping that signals sprung sprang springing and I opened my car window to feel the wind on my arm. And today, as I felt the great moment of arrival just around the corner, my sense of smell returned.

I won’t tell you what I smelled first. There are a lot of scents, many of them unpleasant, which come before you can take time to smell the flowers. But you can guess how I am going to welcome it back.

All of life’s pleasures are local. I’m talking right under your nose.

**Scent continues to be vitally important to my life. Right now, I am writing a memoir about connecting to place through scent, called Pioneer Perfume.*

Desperately Seeking Animal Husbandry, 2011

On a sprawling four-acre southeast Salem property just outside of city limits and inside the urban growth boundary, a topaz-eyed goat named Tess is bleating in time to Mozart as I try to squeeze milk from her left teat.

It's not going well.

Typing does not prepare one's hands for milking, it turns out. Neither does squeezing stressor balls, playing Atari or pulling the shades open with vigor. But I am keeping at it for good measure and telling myself that beginner's ineptitude is common anytime you try something outside your comfort zone.

If you announce your wistful dream of urban goat farming and home cheese making in a public forum and sigh, also publically, about the legal impossibility of that endeavor, you are sure to find out it is already happening. Right here in Salem. Not long after this paper published my Salem Bucket list I heard from Sarah Thompson, of Classical Goats, who is raising goats and making goat cheese at an urban farm just four miles from my house.

The area where these goats reside are what local backyard chicken boosters might call the No Peep Zone, since it is now the only place we Salemites are legally prevented from keeping backyard hens. Now, before you call in the Goat Gestapo, let me be clear about the uniqueness of Sarah's sweet setup. Her family owns a property grandfathered in for agricultural use.

For Sarah and her goats, this land is heaven sent. For everyone else here in Salem, goats are verboten, as are all ungulates, or cloven-hoofed mammals. But that doesn't stop people like me, and other regrettably modernized city dwellers who spend too much time at the computer, from dreaming of our own Nigerian dwarf goats.

I'm not the only one. I've been following the stories of Seattle's Goat Justice League and Portland's urban goat scene with a wandering eye and have been waiting for the moment when goats butt heads with Salem. Down in Eugene, a movement is already afoot to allow them.

If chickens are so 2008, 2011, in case you didn't know, is the year of the goat. Meat purveyors are noticing that goat meat comprises 63% of red meat sales in the world. Here in the United States, goat producers cannot keep up with demand, for meat or for milk. Meanwhile, goat milk advocates are becoming increasingly vocal about its many nutritional advantages over cow's milk, including increased digestibility. Even the lactose intolerant toddler at my child's daycare drinks fresh goat's milk.

But goats are not chickens. For one, you need at least two to keep them happy, and they had better be females, since males really stink. Goats are natural enemies of dogs, making them questionable in tightly

knit suburbs. Want milk from them? You might have to breed them every year. Don't expect them to trim your lawn for you, by the way. Do expect them to go all Edward Scissormouths on your shrubbery.

A little education is enough to convince most would-be goat owners that a farm stay or petting zoo might be more of what the doctor ordered than goat ownership. But they really are darling creatures, aren't they? Sarah's goats nuzzle and nip, they play, they follow you around. Like many goats, they are inordinately sociable and sometimes succumb to ennui. Yes, they will eat anything, but I like to see their indiscrimination as a heroic antipole to our diet-obsessed culture.

Tess and I worked at it for a while, or rather, I worked on her, but I never got more than a drop from her. No technique, this one. Also, after hearing about the goats' twice-a-day milking schedule it became clear to me that the soothing rhythms of farm life might be too much responsibility, and too much added routine, for a syncopated city girl like me.

Later, Sarah pours me a tall glass of chilled goat's milk – delicious! – and shows me the process of making goat cheese ricotta. She sends me home with plain, dill and garlic ricotta, as well as an invitation to come back again soon.

You could say I failed at goat farming, or that one day on a goat farm does not a goat farmer make, both of which are true, but I took something much more meaningful from this visit. The Thompsons invited me, a stranger, to their farm, simply because I announced it was a dream of mine. They said, over the newspaper, we can make that happen for her.

Maybe it's like with vacation homes. What's better than owning a goat? Having friends that own goats.

**So I've long since stopped thinking I'm a farm girl. I'm more of a weekend farm stay girl, and I'm fine with that.*

Desperately Seeking New Maps of Salem, May 2011

Lately, I have been obsessing over how a personal map begins to take over the plotted city grid the longer you live in a place.

Maps are about creative editing. Mapmakers take the world as it is and, through a process of elimination, reduce the world to its bare essentials based on specific filters. Looking at a map of Salem before I moved here took something like an act of imagination, with my mind filling in the gaps between blue streets and red dots and all of those open spaces of possibility.

Now that I've been living in Salem for two plus years – and have gone from traveler to resident – a most personal map has been invading my consciousness slowly and inexorably, replacing the existing street

grid with entwined experience and memory until my mind has built nothing less than the topography of a life.

When the personal map begins to take over, the printed maps stop mattering as much. But the process is not as simple as knowing how to get from Point A to Point B. Given enough time, my mind begins a **Great Map Replacement Project** in which streets and avenues are displaced by alternative signposts. The filters get more odd, more piquant.

Instead of avenues to get where you're going, and fast, your mind begins to accumulate **Must-Photograph Intersections**, places to seek out where Church actually meets State, where you can go looking for the Superior High, where the command to Court Liberty finds its greatest messenger, where the theater geek in you can get Front and Center, and where encountering Kale might actually find you at Happy.

Instead of dots plotted for must-visit museums, your mind might go to the **Salem's Best Front-Yard Art**, with a star awarded to that guy on D Street with the sculpture garden on his front lawn.

Rather than remembering directions to the zoo, your thoughts might race to a **Dusky Digs Map** – an illustrated map of Dusky Canada Geese stomping grounds, where great honk-a-lonks always drown out The Black Keys on your Ipod.

Or your memory might linger on secret maps you'd never share, such as your personal **Salem for Urban Foragers** map.

On a sad day, your inner GPS might take you to your very own **Cultural Cemetery Map of Salem** – with gravestones marking the Space, Tigress Books, and other places of worship now long gone.

If a particular civic anger has taken over, you could think about publishing a truly interactive map, **The Famous Potholes of Salem** – with Hawthorne Avenue expected to get a big boost by tourism.

Instead of skirting rivers and lakes, you find yourself traveling **The Great Commercial Water Features of Salem Tour**, with special stop-off at Dutch Bros.

When mom comes to visit, you might pull out your **Most Beautifully Landscaped Yards of Salem Map** and drive only those streets.

If your inner demons most regrettable moments are constantly being mapped out on your memory's grid as mine are, you create something like the **Places Emily is Most Likely to Run a Red Light Map** – with one dot at 12th and State Street.

Or, if you're my husband, you have an inner compass guiding you towards a **Numbered Map of Salem Donut Shops**, annotated in decreasing numbers of importance.

Naturally, each person creates his own personal map. Some might prefer one that only features city parks, or just the street with five Starbucks, or the best places to avoid train crossings.

Are these maps worth the paper it would take to print and distribute to the world? For the most part, no (though the Urban Foraging Map is one whose time has probably come). But together they make up the map my mind is constantly making of Salem.

But the truth is, I no longer understand Salem from a bird's eye, map-lover's view, as a city straddling the Willamette, a wheel with spokes heading out in every direction, a blotchy Rorschach of ninja star landing between two mountain chains. The grand feat of imagination I enacted when first pinpointing Salem on my AAA guide to Oregon and hitting the road has been filled in by the changing constancy of place.

The traveler and map lover in me would surely cringe at the realization that I don't really need a map anymore to navigate Salem.

Yeah, right. I need, like, hundreds of maps!

**After three years living there, I have the Salem map down.*

Desperately Seeking Food Carts, July 2011

The delicate rivalry began in parking lots facing each other along the stretch of Silverton Road between I-5 and Lancaster Avenue, with all of my friends keeping score. First came the trucks themselves. Next came folding street signs heralding menu items such as tacos, whole chickens and ceviche. Then: dueling picnic tables, awnings, port-o-potties.

Soon, Salem's online community was buzzing with prophetic visions of food pods cropping up like mushrooms in the city's dingiest underused parking lots. Who knows? I thought whenever I drove by. Before long, perhaps our family-friendly city would have the Shangri-la of street food: a pod of clustered food trucks, where mom could get the pad thai, dad could go for the barbecued beef, the kid could chow down on hazelnut Marionberry PBJ and we would all be blissfully full of food, fresh air and vitamin D.

Or not. As you've probably guessed by now, this is not how the Salem food truck scene has rolled over the past year. Instead, Salem's food trucks have turned out to be maddeningly sporadic. Yes, it takes a driving tour of many miles to track down the dozen or so trucks that have rolled into town over the past year with a mission and a menu, but that hasn't stopped me from trying to eat at them all, throwing out my pedestrian creed and using far too much gas in the process just to find out the food truck I'm chasing down... isn't... even... there.

If 90% of life is showing up, the Salem food truck scene is earning a solid 63%. But I've found quite a few reliable food trucks worth the trip. For starters, I can think of no greater place of respite from the hubbub and traffic of Commercial Avenue than the locavore's dream at **Farm Food**, the new farm stand food cart project by Minto Island Growers. The lunch crowd descends around 11:30 for its "Blue Boats"

of romaine carrying precious cargo of blue cheese dressing and roasted hazelnuts, Salad Nicoise, sandwiches and iced tea made from tea leaves grown on the farm.

You have to check Twitter or Facebook to locate **KarnaVor Gourmet BBQ**, the Salem food truck with the most literal following and the largest claim to mobile dining. During the week, Don Charpilloz drives his self-fashioned truck to several locations around town, parking it in front of Speedy glass on 12th street, in the Union Gospel Mission gift store parking lot, pretty much the front yard of whoever will have him. Lately, he has taken to Friday night sojourns in front of the f/stop, a hotspot for Salem nightlife.

Salem has one major area where it trumps its neighbor to the north in the food truck department: Mexican food. A number of them can be found on Portland Road NE, the purview of the \$1 taco, but the one that aspires to much more parks in front of Gavin's food market on Silverton Road, **Mariscos Playa Azul/Pollo Feli**. Your best bet is to ask the owners which of the meats just came off the wood-fired roasting oven on-site: rabbit, chicken or beef.

Hobby barbecue buffs hoping to get a jump on their game should visit Ken Pickett of Smokin' **Swine BBQ**. Most days you can find Pickett at his truck-cum-smoking pit on Silverton Road smoking succulent North Carolina-style pork barbecue and frying hushpuppies and dill pickles. Pickett is being courted by a food pod in Portland's trendy Belmont area, but for now, he's staying put.

For a sweet something I like to visit James Cloyd of **Downtown Waffles** fame, who shows up with a smile and line of waffle toppings Tuesday through Saturday at his self-proclaimed "Waffle Corner," where Chemeketa meets Liberty Street.

These are all great destinations, but sadly, there is no Salem food pod, and there are reasons for that. Though the requirements to get a food truck moving in Salem are actually a lot more lax than in cities such as Portland and Los Angeles, home to the nation's most famous moveable feasts, there are a few items in the city's Revised Code keeping Salem from having a food pod of one's own.

Salem makes a distinction between street vendors and mobile food units. Only two licensed street vendors may sell food from any one street corner. Mobile food units, including food trucks, can only operate for six months in the same location during one calendar year. Laws like these leave us not with destination food trucks rather than pods.

That's too bad, because a food pod might be the answer to a couple of the problems of the Salem food scene – variety, price and freshness. First, food trucks encourage innovation and diversification by allowing passionate people to specialize in just a few menu items. Because of the low overhead for truck and street vendors, they can offer what is sometimes a superior food product for a price cheaper than a brick-and-mortar restaurant. And since most items are made fresh daily – some within hours, or even minutes of being ordered, the trucks represent a desirable alternative to chain restaurants. You would think that putting them all in one spot would create competition among the food truck owners, but that has not happened in other cities. Instead, what often emerges is a community of like-minded business owners who benefit from a shared mission.

I haven't given up hope that one day someone will step up with a walkable pod in Salem. Food pods, after all, are a party in a parking lot. Beats another used car dealership any day.

**Quite honestly, I'm done with food carts. I have no time to seek them out and unless I'm in Portland, I'm not likely to go on any food cart adventures. Except for one thing: Anne Amie's annual Counter Culture event – a food cart event at the vineyard. You MUST go to this sometime.*

Desperately Seeking Golden Retriever Moments, August 2011

In the future, when morose homebodies like me can go to Melancholics Anonymous and pair up with sponsors who guide them on their paths to happiness, I want Michelle Darr to be my sponsor.

For two years now, Darr has been running Salem's first pedi-cab business, biking people around the area in a modern-day rickshaw and showing them the parts of the city they've been too busy to notice. The rides are free. Yes, free, as in, they cost nothing. No, I'm not kidding. Yes, I mean that same woman you have seen at every Salem event this summer carting the rickshaw behind her and looking like she likes it. With the help of sponsor business such as Venti's, Mama's Fire, Life Source, and the Bike Peddler, Darr has found a way to spread joy and send a strong message of conviviality to the world and charge nothing but tips in the process.

My husband and I celebrated our five-year anniversary last week and to kick the day up a notch we asked Darr to take us on a tour combining Secret Slices of Salem with Salem for Romantics. These aren't actual tour names – she keeps her own origami map of the city in her head and the tours there, too – but she can put together pretty much any kind of tour you could want. I'm always lusting after the connected alleys and hidden gardens, so we met her in the Court-Chemeketa Historic District and headed out in the back of a Main Street pedi-cab outfitted with a Shimano 21-speed drive train with a rear axle differential and indexed, grip-shifting.

Darr showed us spots of Salem we've never encountered and took us down paths we didn't even know existed. We burst onto the Willamette campus, resplendent in summer blooms, stopping at the Martha Springer Botanical Garden for a quick peek at its native plants and its many unchampioned make-out spots. We sat for a spell in the university's Zen garden.

We rolled under main city arteries, feeling the rumble of the cars above us. I've never been sick enough to go to Salem Hospital, but I've now whizzed on a path around its periphery and sped through Pringle Creek Park. We took only the alleyways of the historic city centre. We drank ice water shielded from the sun and I stole a kiss right on High Street. We traced the edge of the riverfront at the pace of the Willamette. Once, with a flick of Darr's wrist, we crossed three lanes of city traffic.

I thought the fun in taking a human cab might be the immense schadenfreude of seeing others buzz by on their way to work as you leisurely glide ahead of them at the next traffic light. Or maybe I'd utter a deep inner guffaw at the many – many – strange glances from pedestrians and drivers who are

sheltered in their vehicles or blinded by their singular purposes from enjoying the everyday vacation I'm having right in front of them. The better part of me was worried it might feel awkward to be carted around by another human being. But that is absolutely not how this turned out.

Traveling by pedi-cab feels a lot like taking Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. There is little inherent danger in the activity, but the scale of the vehicle combined with the complete lack of control on the part of its passengers ensures that even the most mundane turn down a sidewalk feel nothing less than exhilarating.

Riding in a pedi-cab means rediscovering the pleasure you had feeling the earth push up against you when you road up over a curb on a Big Wheel. It doesn't mean taking the road less taken, it means taking the road you've never, ever taken and letting someone else do the steering. My husband would generally rather be biking himself, but even he liked how he could look at the trees without worrying about traffic.

The pace of the ride and the comfort of being able to look in any direction make it a real break from the doldrums, a true high water mark of summer. At times, during our ride, I was so happy I wanted to break into "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top," but thankfully, I don't know all of the words. I did wish the ride would never stop, though, until I realized my face had been smiling for so long my cheeks hurt.

As for the guilt of traveling by the sweat of someone else's brow, that quickly waned when I got a chance to bike the cab myself. It doesn't exactly provide the thrill of a V8 engine, but it felt mighty powerful to carry such a load with minimal effort. It felt even better to go for what amounts to a Sunday drive without wasting any gas on the view.

At the end of our ride, Michelle Darr looked like she could easily have done another couple of hours. I tipped her \$20, though she probably deserved more.

**This is one of my absolute favorite memories of Salem. It didn't hurt that Michelle Darr is the woman who went on a hunger strike in front of the Capitol Building to protest the Iraq War. She is a poster child for living your own dream and values.*

Desperately Seeking Spirits, September 2011

Of all the Willamette Valley produce I have encountered since moving here, the type of produce I identify with most is the cider apple. They harbor a particular affinity for colder, wetter climes, and are more than a little bite-y, but given the right environment and the generous attention of the right people, they can transform themselves into something complex, surprising, and layered.

The past few years have seen a welcome revival in the process of cider-making from heirloom apples as regional apple orchardists perfect the millennia-old process of fermenting the world's most recognizable fruit. The Northwest Cider Association now lists 13 independent cider houses, two of them very close

the home. Wandering Aengus Cider Works, which has been making cider since 2006, is opening a new cider house and tasting room on Fairview Industrial Boulevard at the beginning of October. E.Z. Orchards, the family farm with the destination farm stand market just brought its second apple cider vintage to market.

I harbor no disillusions that my taste buds are the final arbiters of anything, so I invited a group of my writer friends over on a weekday night for a tasting of nine types of cider produced by the two local cider makers. Mind you, this was not a blind tasting, just a merry gathering of wordy Salemites with a weakness for adjectival pairings.

We were all tired from the workday and bemoaning the end of summer, relishing a bit in the crispness of the air this week and feeling the seasonal turn from slow months to busy days. My friend, Willamette poetry professor Mike Chasar, the active word player among us, is prone to frequent challenges to pun and be made pun of. His wife, Meridith Brand, is the most enigmatic of the group, known to interject surprising bon mots. My husband, Adam, collector of both useful and arcane trivia, is very much into process (Fact: He can taste the carbonyl groupings in some ciders). My friend, Jenie Skoy, a fellow travel writer, doesn't drink, but can take us to other places with descriptions of fumes alone.

Now, a good cider maker can discern what qualities of the fruit will be imparted into the drink just by taking a big bite. But the most interesting ciders tend to incorporate a variety of apple varieties, including those grumpy cider apples. For their part, cider apples contribute the wizened charm of the sour and astringent, the hardened, bitter characteristics that make your mouth pucker. They impart body and a dry finish to cider, much like the tannins of grape skin do to wine, and come with names like Roxbury Russet, Yarlington Mill and Marie Menard.

As any orchardist will tell you, apples are like people in that no two trees are entirely alike. The combinations for cider are therefore infinite. The Salem-area cider makers are taking to these possibilities to refining specific blends into drink that little resembles any cider you've had before.

Mike opened the gathering by pulling out his Iphone for a rousing reading of W.B. Yeats' "Song of Wandering Aengus," and we opened a bottle of Wandering Aengus Dry, a spicy, oaky cider that reminded some of us of pinot grigio.

Several of us preferred Wandering Aengus Anthem Hops, a heavily floral, hoppy drink with a light color that Mike described as "beerfume" and which Jenie thought smelled like a field of wildflowers near Independence. It gives a wet mouth feel, juicy with notes of nectar and peaches.

We moved on to the Wandering Aengus Wickson, something of an aggressive wandering minstrel of a cider with a tart, strong, sour apple taste. I don't know who this Wickson is, but he he tastes like a scad from a Jane Austen novel and made my friend Meridith want to "go jump on a hayride."

Wandering Aengus also puts out a cider called Anthem, available on draft at Venti's. The bitterest tasters among us found its super sweet, melon notes a tad sweet, but I sucked it down and was struck by a strange urge to go biking.

The cider maker's Apple Pear mix was a real crowd-pleaser, a straightforward, juicy blend with a clear taste of apples and pears, while the Anthem Cherry, with its gorgeous garnet color, came across as slightly syrupy.

The real winner of the night was the Wandering Aengus Bloom, a rosy, clear cider high in tannins that finishes tart and warm with notes of passion fruit and honey. No one could decide whether it had a tropical rosiness or a rosy tropicality -- or what the difference was.

The last pours of the evening was given over to E.Z. Orchards 2009 and 2010, the first one a lovely inaugural attempt from orchardist Kevin Zielinski. He is going for something entirely different than what most of us understand as cider, a French style incorporating juice from ten different types of traditional cider apples from France, England and heirloom early American varieties.

I used to make apple cider with my grandfather and have fond memories of combing the grass of fallen, half-rotten, oddball apples which we pressed into a delightfully murky sludge with a hand-cranked press. Dear reader, this is not how things work at E.Z. Orchards. There, ten different varieties of apples are plucked at the height of their ripeness and washed and inspected by hand, milled and then pressed before being fermented in stainless steel fermentation tanks for three to five months before being bottled.

This thing we were drinking was harvested in the fall of 2009, frozen in juice and fermented in January and bottled a few months later in early 2010. As we took our last sips, it struck me that we gather not necessarily to drink but to see what emerges, the new and exciting things that bubble out of us when we let ourselves pass time in a room together. Also, this beats popping champagne as a way to celebrate sending the kids off to school for the year.

I know -- apples are a small consolation to the end of summer. But this time of year I am feeling very much like a cider apple indeed: slightly crabby, but mellowing with age and good companionship.

**Funny thing, but the people I mentioned in this column are the people I have kept in closest contact with since leaving Salem.*

Desperately Seeking Distraction, October 2011

Everybody needs something when the rain comes. For me, that used to be snuggling up with a book and a cup of coffee, but after three years of living in a temperate rainforest and two as a new mom, it sometimes feels like every cell in my body has turned over. Instead of consuming words, I have developed this primal urge to go all Christo and Jeanne Claude and cover everything, and everyone, with fabric.

Yes, Salem has made me a crazy quilter.

You might be a crazy quilter, too, if you sneak away to Greenbaum's Quilted Forest at every free chance just to run your hands across the quilt cottons. This could be you if you've got a growing stash of fat quarters (a yard cut in half and then in half again vertically) in every stripe of the rainbow and are curating it like an obsessive collector. You might see yourself in these descriptions if the idea of Quiltopia, starting this weekend, is your Burning Man. Perhaps you understand this lunacy if you know someone who looks out the window every day and sees the world as an ingenious piecing of batiks and cotton prints.

Imagine me, just four months ago, walking into my first quilting class at Greenbaum's. By that evening I had already spent four hours picking out fabric for a Log Cabin design, an easy beginner's project and the quintessential American quilt design. I joined a packed room of other mamas and grandmas and our instructor, Janae King, the fabric whisperer.

Janae handles fabrics with the reverence of a believer touching the Shroud of Turin. The fabric, for its part, seems to melt under pressure from her hands. She didn't even flinch when I asked her how to turn my own sewing machine on. Instead, she was a gentle mentor, neither carrot nor stick, hovering over us with benevolence as we learned to cut with a rotary cutter, piece fabric and press it with an iron.

The next few weeks disappeared in a flurry of activity as I spent every free moment pushing fabric under the foot of a sewing machine. I set up a little quilting space in one corner of our bedroom and I lost myself in intense work for hours on end slicing fabrics, getting to know my machine's quirks and piecing together a quilt of red batik, purple plum pattern, theatrical golds and gentle greens. It was like watching a picture emerge pixel by pixel.

I have heard some beginners tend to bow out once they have completed the pieced tops of their quilts, but I didn't need the class to keep me going. The more I quilted, the more I wanted to quilt. As the finish drew near, the urge towards completion grew frenetic and I, a great self-starter and terrible closer, moved captivated by the flow of creation and the unbending drive of obsession towards the last stitch.

I hope you don't think I'm being too hyperbolic when I say the moment I finished this first quilt encompassed the same kind of euphoria and adrenaline I remember from giving birth. I was high for days as I readjusted it, folded it, took pictures of it, smoothed it out, crumpled it out and wrapped it around my body like swaddling clothes. As I snipped the last stray threads from my quilt, birds sang in every chamber of my heart.

I've decided that gift quilts need a certain amount of seasoning, so I also took a couple of naps with it on my sofa, ran with it like a cape outside, let my toddler do a monkey dance on it for good measure. Then I kissed it, stuffed it into a USPS package and shipped it off to my friend Katharina in Munich, Germany.

I've started to believe that "hobby" is much too frivolous a word to apply to quilting. It satisfies a deep urge for connection and creation and gives a physical voice to those urges in a way that can be shared easily with others. After all, quilts are like people. They're stitched together and coming apart at the seams, they fray at the edges, they're soft in the middle. But take a look at them as a whole and their beauty will just take your breath away.

In four months, I've moved onto a baby quilt inspired by Oregon's natural wonders (think cherries and umbrellas and mushrooms) and a pink, purple and grey wonky block quilt for a favorite little girl in my life. But after three quilts in four months, I'm not sure I can sustain the level of quilting activity I've been pursuing. Mama's gotta rest, too, right?

But now that I've caught the bug I can say I totally get it – the intense pleasure of storytelling through fabric, this ache to run your fingers over every inch of something and send it to someone you love far, far away.

**I am still a crazy quilter; just started another Chevron baby quilt for a friend.*

Desperately Seeking Perfect Mailman, November 2011

Some neighborhoods battle over barking and hedge height, chickens and perpetual garage sales, tree limbs and noise control. But we here in west and east Englewood have been waging a quiet battle of pleasantries, a subtle but drawn-out war over one single heart and mind: that of our postman, Paul Lunde.

Here's the back-story of the conflict: Until recently, Paul used to do a route over in east Englewood. He walked those streets and yards of what residents are calling NoMaSoFa (North of Market South of Fairgrounds) with impunity, doing all of those things mailmen do when their customers are away from home. Sure, he delivered the mail. But he also called in a house fire in an empty home. He checked up on older residents who hadn't been picking up their bills and letters. Once, he even chased a thief across half a dozen backyards, resulting in an arrest. He became, as really great mailmen do, the true connector across fences, the guy in blue who communicates what is really going on in a neighborhood.

That's where Paul was working when I met him at my friend Mike's annual State Fair Party, so I got to know him first as a friend, then as a father of two boys, a husband to a lovely wife, as the kilt-wearing, pony-tailed drummer of the Matthew Price Band, and lastly, yes, as their mailman.

Then, in a stroke of luck I still can't ever be thankful enough for, we got him. We won. He was ours, and we were his. We moved, the USPS moved him, and I knew for the first time what it can be to have one of those core experiences of being an American.

The postman doesn't always ring twice. He knocks softly because he knows it is 1:32 p.m. and my baby is napping.

Paul has been a great source of information in times of want and a great friend in times of need. He's shared toddler care tricks and restaurant tips and oh yes, he also delivers the mail. Once, he called my cell while we were on vacation to let us know where he was dropping off our package.

I'm not sure how he ever gets through his route, because he'll stop and chat with people like me who are stuck at home all day working remotely and caring for the wee ones and yearning for some real face-to-face interaction.

There is a reason writer David Brin made the hero of his post-apocalyptic novel a postman. Real estate, shmeal estate – don't forget to ask what kind of postman you're going to get.

Indignity – I feel it at the very core of my body when Paul is not delivering the mail. When Paul is gone for the day, stacks of letters falls harder through the slot and land with a thud on the floor, packages get left on the front stoop, the mail comes at the wrong time of the day, the door has no need to open, the center cannot hold.

Call me Andy Rooney in skinny jeans, but I just about blew a gasket when I heard the postal service might get shut down. I'm having moments like this all the time, when you realize your parents really did have many things better, when you feel like things are changing so fast the world you grew up in will seem barely recognizable by the time your kids get to school. I've even developed a type of anticipatory nostalgia for things that might not exist but haven't been taken away yet. It's like holding a book and wondering when you'll have to plug it in again.

People talk a lot about the values of community. Increasingly, the communities that get talked about are online, where you either like something or you're not even connected to it. I've moved often in those worlds and I'm here to say that there are no links or likes or fan pages or comment reply buttons that can replace the real joy of knowing what is going on with the people in your actual living, breathing life.

All of my schadenfreude at winning Paul fell away completely the other day when I learned, from a third party, Paul had put in a request to transfer to another neighborhood. You can imagine my shock, the quiet wrath, the instant heartbreak.

"So I heard you asked to switch routes," I said to Paul, staring at the ground and rubbing my foot against the grass.

"That's not going to happen," he said.

In cases like this, because we know each other so well now, Paul's loss is not really my gain. Paul really wants to deliver to his own neighborhood, to be his own neighbors' hero, to walk up to his own stoop and be able to drop of his own kids' packages.

I'll be happy for him if that transfer ever comes through. But in the meantime, I'm going to go send a couple of letters and seal them with a kiss.

**My new place in McMinnville, though it is in a "good neighborhood," has one of those communal mailboxes you have to walk 100 yards to get to. My postman doesn't even know my name. In other words, miss you, Paul!*

Desperately Seeking A Way To Say Goodbye, December 2011

Three years ago, my husband and I came to Salem on a cold, drizzly Wednesday and decided we could imagine ourselves living here. We left family and friends, old jobs and old lives and went West in the name of pioneer spirit and new beginnings. From the start, we knew it would be difficult re-establishing ourselves in a place where we knew nobody and nothing - not the urban myths, not the strange forces that make a city come alive, not the characters who inhabit it.

But I have always refused to live my life with anything less than arms wide open, so I set out to chronicle our adventures getting to know Salem on a blog. The premise was simple: I'm going to figure this place out.

With media, and blogs especially, people tend to congregate around opinions they already agree with. Generally, I think that's a shame, but in the case of Desperately Seeking Salem, putting some positive energy out there about Salem has only brought me positive energy in return. Within days of launching my blog, I was meeting people who were locked in what media scientists call the Spiral of Silence -- they really, kinda, loved Salem and they rarely felt comfortable saying it out in the open. Or even better: they thought there was something special about Salem and this very special Salemness, in all of its forms, was worth exploring. What emerged on the blog was a shared sense of guarded optimism about Salem in the form of comments and reader interactions.

I wish I could give each and every one of you a behind-the-scenes look at the back end of my blog, where there is much truth about Salem lurking. I wish you could read the hundreds of mini essays people have written to me about their own moves to Salem, their own search for life here in the Mid-Valley. I wish you could pore over the emails from people who are doing as I have done, albeit less publicly, going out every day in search of something new to love. The spirit of desperate searching -- to find a place for yourself in a community and to feel settled far from your ancestral home -- is not a something I have experienced by myself. According to my inbox there are hundreds of people bringing their new, vibrant energy to Salem with their own moves all the time. By and large, they think that old write-off about Salem being a snooze is a bunch of bunk.

I have felt truly honored to be many newcomers' first point of contact with Salem, but the danger in engaging with a place like I have comes when you find your compass turned in a different direction. That's where my family finds itself now. My husband has a new job opportunity (he's given me full permission to blame him) and we, too, are becoming those people who skip town for greener(ish) pastures. Within a month, we will have packed up all of our belongings and moved our own family circus somewhere else. As you can imagine, my head is spinning from how quickly it has all happened. At least it's not Portland, ha ha... sniff... right? Making yourself a poster child for Salem means having to start every goodbye with an apology.

Still, In my mind, I have been taking stock of the crazy and wonderful and amazing things to happen here in just a few years. For one, the Salem blogging community became explosive and cohesive, adding vibrancy, authenticity and enthusiasm to a media landscape ready for change. But digital revolution is

thing without on-the-ground transformation, and I have seen it happening everywhere. I could list the great new businesses that have opened in Salem -- Clockworks, Trader Joe's, Word of Mouth Bistro, Andaluz, the Crooked House Bistro, Wandering Aengus Ciderworks, the new Gilgamesh tap house, Where the Sidewalk Ends, Salem Cinema's new digs and the F-Stop are just the first that come to mind. Everywhere I look there are pockets of life showing the city evolving in ways people can get behind. Just last week, Salem's new literary magazine, the Gold Man Review, hit the stands. I'd rather walk across the Union Street Bridge than do almost anything. And have I told you the myriad ways Border's closing has benefited the Book Bin? From here on out, it is someone else's job to seek out the stories behind our places.

As I go about these last few weeks in Salem packing and planning, saying goodbye and wishing all the wonderful people I have met here the best, I am trying really hard to cut some of the strings connecting me to my favorite places. Everywhere I go there is a constant narrator speaking in my left ear, with the ominous tug of Ian McShane's voice, by the way, announcing: "This is the last time you're going to shop at E.Z. Orchard for chanterelles. This is quite possibly the last time you'll go running past the State Hospital. This is definitely the last time you'll see a flock of dusky geese alighting from a patch of mud near the State Fairgrounds. This is your son's last swing around the Riverfront Carousel."

Oh come on, who am I kidding? Let's not be overly dramatic here. I'm moving to McMinnville, for Pete's sake, that's like a half-hour drive. Besides, even if they say you can't take it with you, I assure you, I'm taking every last bit of it.

**When I wrote this I remember feeling how false it felt. I felt just awful moving, awful leaving the column, like my time hadn't come yet. But I realize now just how right I was, even in this public goodbye, about the things I cared about, the changes I saw and the true feeling of moving on. I was just trying to write about it before I had time to reflect. That's really hard to do – to capture what you might feel like later in the moment. Might my last column have been better if I had decided to write how I was really feeling? Confused? Angry? Out of control? Scared? Most definitely.*